

Last Moments: A short story

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a

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by

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Sunday Evening

BLAM!

The sound reverberated through the forest, snapping Danjuma out of his reverie. It was real. All of it. And the men were close. Without really thinking, he grabbed Aisha's hand and tore through the trees. Large green leaves and little brown twigs whipped his face and arms, drawing blood and smearing it on his grimy skin as he and his wife hurtled downhill.

A cacophony of angry yells erupted behind them.

'They are over there!'

'Get them before they escape!'

The forest was filled with sudden crashing noises as the men tore after them. More gunshots boomed through the trees. A few paces ahead of Danjuma, a neat round hole appeared in a tree branch.

He squeezed his wife's hand. 'Hurry, woman!' he urged in Hausa.

'Abdullahi! And Usman!' was all she said in reply, but Danjuma clearly understood what she meant.

Moments before the herdsmen attacked, Danjuma and his wife had been heading home from the farm with their neighbours. He had been annoyed that his ten-year-old sons had not come out to relieve their parents of their plentiful harvests. He had only begun to yell their names when his friend Chukwuma raised the alarm. A split second later, Chukwuma had collapsed to the ground, smoke issuing from a hole in his skull.

Everyone had panicked. The other neighbours had scattered in all directions. Aisha and Danjuma had turned and fled across their farm into the forest, forgetting all about their children in their panic.

All that had happened about an hour ago.

'We will find them,' he breathed. He was not sure Aisha could even hear him. 'I swear that we will.'

As they ran, he glanced about and saw the bodies of their friends suspended from thick tree branches on ropes, their eyes bulging and unseeing, their limbs bent awkwardly, their bodies peppered with bullet holes and patches of dried blood. He had seen these bodies before. The herdsmen had hung them here after killing them. If he looked carefully, he could identify the corpses of Chukwuma, Babajide, Barakat, and a few dozen other farmers whose only crime had been to own a farmland. What if Abdullahi and Usman were also –?

No. He pushed the thought aside. His children had to be alive. Surely these men who had murdered their friends could not have been so ruthless and cowardly that they would aim their rifles a few feet lower.

Blam! Blam! Blam!

The men were gaining on them!

A barrage of bullets embedded themselves into a tree trunk, east of Danjuma. Silently thanking Allah for protecting them in that moment, he dug his feet into the ground and darted to

the left, pulling his wife behind him. He thought he could hear her crying, but he couldn't be sure.

Until the day before, government troops had been deployed to a few states including Nasarawa to suppress insurgent groups and stop clashes between farmers and herdsmen.

Danjuma found it quite ironic that the herdsmen had struck the day after the government's troops disbanded and left Nasarawa. The herdsmen had waited until the day when the people felt assured of safety.

April fools.

One question kept pounding in Danjuma's head: How had a horde of illiterate herdsmen gained possession of firearms? Had they stolen them? Or had the weapons been...supplied? Was this a conspiracy to assert tribal dominance?

He brushed that thought aside, too. He wasn't supposed to think like that. He and Aisha were, after all, Hausa, and closely linked with the Fulani tribe.

So why were the herdsmen shooting at them?

This was all wrong! If the government's troops had been prevented from disbanding, perhaps the herdsmen would not have struck. Chukwuma and the others would not be hanging from tree branches. Danjuma and Aisha would not be running for their lives.

Was the government blind? The herdsmen were not only after pastures; they also wanted power.

The government had labelled the Niger Delta rebels terrorists, but in the case of the herdsmen, the government had, in Babajide's words, 'stuck its ears inside its anus' and gone ahead to transfer land for 'pasture'. It was the people who viewed the herdsmen as terrorists. But as usual, the majority's views didn't really matter. The government did what the government wanted.

Power to the people.

Democracy? Ignorance? Conspiracy?

He remembered something Chukwuma had told him a few days earlier, during their lunch break: 'We live in a democracy, my good man – or at least, what is supposed to be one. Majority rule. But if the majority are really powerful, why are we unhappy? Why look to the government for help that we may never get?'

Danjuma had asked, with growing interest, 'Do you think we should take matters into our hands, being the majority?'

'No.' Chukwuma had shaken his head vehemently. 'Never. You see, we are humans; that is our major flaw. The second we got rid of our common enemy, we would most definitely turn against one another. And then we would all be terrorists!' A laugh. 'The fact that we see ourselves as intelligent beings is hilarious. An age-old joke. A delusion. Intelligent beings do not kill their own kind without good reason. They think about the consequences of their actions.'

Chukwuma was dead in a tree.

Danjuma felt a surge of rage, but he managed to suppress it. Getting angry right now would do him and Aisha no good. They had to get out of the forest, create as much space between themselves and the herdsmen as possible. Perhaps, if the sun set more quickly, they might be able to escape easily.

Assuming there weren't more herdsmen waiting for them at the foot of the forest.

Allah help us.

Blam! The ground at his feet suddenly erupted. Dirt flew into the air and entered his shoes. He veered to the right.

Danjuma was thankful for the steep hill. True, running downhill was dangerous, but it also made movement much quicker. As long as he and Aisha didn't trip up on a tree root or get knocked down by a low branch, they were fine.

And they had the element of surprise.

But they should not be running at all. Movement made it easier for the herdsmen to find them than standing still. Unless...

As if his protector had read his mind, the ground suddenly rumbled. Danjuma's first reaction was that an earthquake was occurring. But earthquakes didn't happen in his country. He glanced over his shoulder and spotted a few dozen quadrupeds barrelling downhill, about ten feet to his left. Babajide's animals. Donkeys, cows and rams sped through the thicket as if something was after them.

A stampede. These animals, frightened by the gunshots, were stampeding about.

He stopped so suddenly, Aisha nearly slammed into him, shrieking with surprise. He spun around and pressed a finger to her lips to silence her. Sliding one arm around her waist, he darted to his right and stood with his back to a tree, hugging her close to him.

The animals bounded past, dirt flying in their wake.

Aisha looked up at him, her eyes wide with fright and confusion. Her brown hijab was torn in many places; she must have caught it on several twigs. Her face shone with tears. 'Danjuma, what are you -?'

'Shhhh.'

The animals must have been a gift from Allah, Danjuma figured. The creatures' rapid movements, combined with the fact that their prints had created a whole new trail for the herdsmen to follow, would most likely throw the murderers off their scent.

He and Aisha waited in silence for a few agonising seconds. Sure enough, there was a gunshot and a thundering of feet as their pursuers ran past them.

'They went that way!' one man yelled in Fulani, which Danjuma clearly understood.

'Those bastards, they are just wasting our time!'

In seconds, they were gone.

Danjuma rested his chin on his wife's forehead and closed his eyes briefly, muttering, 'Allahu Akbar.'

'Allahu Akbar,' Aisha agreed.

And then the corpses dropped out of the tree.

THINKING QUICKLY, Danjuma clamped a hand over his wife's mouth to keep her from screaming out loud. It was all he could do to keep from bawling his heart out to the entire forest himself.

Lying on the floor were the riddled bodies of two boys no more than ten years old. The bodies were covered in blood, the heads almost completely severed. Circling their necks, like cowrie necklaces many sizes too small, were frayed ropes.

They had found their children.

Aisha tore her mouth free and yanked off her hijab, convulsing with horror. 'Abdullahi! Usman!' she wailed, leaning against her husband for support. Fat tears leaked out of the corners of her eyes. 'Oh, Allah will never forgive those rogues!'

Fearing that the herdsmen might hear her cries and come running in their direction, Danjuma covered his wife's mouth again and put a trembling arm across her shoulders. 'Yes, He will. But we must hurry.' Aisha didn't move. 'Look, Aisha -'

Bang! A bullet whizzed past his left ear and pierced a hole in a tree trunk behind Aisha.

The couple froze.

Someone had found them.

Danjuma gave himself a mental kick. Of *course* there were others. Not all the herdsmen had run after Babajide's animals.

No gunshots sounded again; the herdsman who had discovered them must be waiting for them to come out into the open. O perhaps he was stalking them. Whatever the case, there was no doubt he would open fire once he had them in his sight.

Danjuma couldn't allow that to happen. He had lost his friends and children already; he wasn't going to lose his wife and his life, too.

He scanned the ground until his eyes locked on the closest thing to a weapon: a fallen branch with twigs and leaves on it. He gave Aisha a look that said: *Stay behind me* and picked up the branch cautiously, raising it over his shoulder like a baseball bat.

He heard leaves rustling. The herdsman *was* stalking them, he realised. But he couldn't tell exactly how close the man was, or whether he wouldn't just leap in front of him and pull the trigger. Behind him, Aisha let out a low whimper. Danjuma shut her up with a quick look and gripped his tree branch harder.

The rustling stopped. The forest was so quiet he could hear his heart slamming against his ribcage. He feared the man might hear his blaring thoughts and pinpoint them.

Four things happened in quick succession.

To his left, a twig snapped.

Aisha let out a squeal.

The herdsman charged forward with a triumphant cry.

And Danjuma swung the branch.

He didn't believe a tree branch could do so much damage. With a sickening *crack*, the stick slammed into the herdsman's face and sent him crashing to the forest floor, screaming and clutching at his face, his rifle clattering to the ground beside him. When he removed his hands from his face, Danjuma saw that there was a twig in the assailant's eye.

He suppressed a shout of glee. *Allah, forgive me.*

The herdsman stopped screaming and promptly became still.

Aisha started sobbing again.

Danjuma ignored her. He hunkered down and examined the bodies on the ground. The herdsman, barefooted and clad in patchwork clothing, looked no older than twenty or twenty-one. A man this young shouldn't be running around killing people.

His sons lay side by side, looking almost gracious in the glow of the sunset. The sight of them filled Danjuma with more emotions than he could count.

An hour ago he had been ready to flay them alive. Now he would do anything to see them breathe.

It suddenly occurred to him that he could no longer hear Aisha's sobs. He whirled about, expecting to find his wife mopping her eyes with her hijab, but she was nowhere in sight.

Danjuma shot to his feet, cursing in Hausa. 'Aisha? Aisha!'

No answer. Had she wandered off on her own? No, that was impossible. Aisha wasn't foolish enough to do that at a time like this. No, she must have been *taken*.

'Aisha!' he called again, panic rising in his chest.

This time there was a reply from somewhere uphill. 'Danjuma!'

His heart did a somersault. She was alive! Probably in captivity, but alive. Danjuma fleetingly wondered why the herdsman who had taken her had left him breathing.

A gunshot filled the air, followed by a shrill scream. They had not killed her yet. But what they might do to her before deciding to kill her was much, much worse than death.

He glanced at the rifle on the ground. Should he go and try to rescue her at the risk of his life? Or should he run away and get help?

Chukwuma had said, 'Almost every human believes that they were created by a superior power. Maybe it was Chineke. Maybe it was Allah. Maybe it was Amadioha. We do not know for sure. But do you think our Creator would like to see us kill one another? My good friend, there is

a reason we are on one planet, as the man from the sea calls it. Not two planets. Not three. Not four. *One*. One means unity. We must embrace that if we are to survive.'

Those words meant nothing now. Aisha was his wife. He would do anything, kill anyone, to save her.

And Chukwuma was dead in a tree.

Danjuma looked at the herdsman on the ground, then at his children, then at the rifle.

He would kill those foul beasts and get his wife to safety, *insallah*.

He snatched up the rifle and tore uphill, scanning the forest for the herdsmen.

HE FOUND THEM sitting in a clearing at the top of the hill, waiting in silence. Standing at the edge of the clearing, he could see hundreds of cattle grazing on the farm, nearly two hundred feet away. The moment the men spotted him, they shot to their feet and trained their guns on his chest, their faces contorted into ugly sneers. Three children in oversize clothes ran and hid behind a tree, peeking at him. On the ground in the centre of the clearing lay a mangled body in torn clothes.

One of the men, probably the leader, took a step towards him, adjusting his straw hat. Unlike the others, he was weaponless. 'I knew you would show up.'

Immediately, two things clicked in Danjuma's head.

He had walked straight into a trap.

The body on the ground was his wife's.

He tasted bile. With a scream of rage, he surged forward, raising his rifle. 'You bastards! Cowards! Filth!'

Hands grabbed at his arms, but he shook himself free easily. Leaping over Aisha's body, he slammed the butt of his gun into the nearest man's jaw and sent him spinning to the ground. He was just about reaching the leader when a loud *bang* filled the clearing. Danjuma hit the ground hard, letting go of his rifle. Pain flared in his right thigh.

He screamed until his throat was raw.

While the other men formed a circle around him, the leader reached down and calmly picked up Danjuma's rifle. 'All of you in this country are foolish, do you know that? When we take over, we will spare only a few of you. The rest –' He drew his index finger across his throat. An image of Danjuma's sons' severed throats flashed in his mind.

He opened his mouth to speak, but no sound came out.

'What?' the man asked in Fulani. 'Were you going to talk about how powerful your country is and how the government cannot be taken over? Foolishness is a weakness. The government responded relatively fiercely when the Boko Haram rebels abducted school children. But it was slower to react when we herdsmen started killing farmers – which is quite ironic, because agriculture is supposed to be one of the major emblems of this...*nation*.'

From the way the other men snickered, Danjuma figured the last word was probably meant to be a joke. His thigh throbbed madly. He gritted his teeth to keep from howling in agony.

'You killed my family!' he spat. 'You damn beast! Why not kill me too, eh? Are you too much of a coward to repeat your crime? Are you?'

The man stepped forward. Danjuma scrambled backwards on his elbows and feet, letting out a low whimper when he reached Aisha's bloody corpse. The men around him burst into guffaws.

The leader grinned maliciously. 'I did not want to kill you. But since you want death so much...'

He raised his rifle. All Danjuma registered was an explosion of light. And then everything went dark.