THE LEKKI HEADMASTER

KABIR ALABI GARBA

BC
BASMALLAH
COMUNICTIONS
LIMITED

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to all teachers committed to the cause of sound education. You are truly the real builders of the nation!

One

Dusk...

SOMETHING seemed unusual in the way the principal walked to the podium from the back of the assembly. He moved his tall frame rather ponderously. He was not as smart as he used to be. The trademark morning smile was not forthcoming. He took the microphone from Angel, the chapel prefect, and held it, saying nothing. This was in spite of the fact that the morning's pep talk was over, and everyone was excited. All waited for the principal to speak. But the man looked blankly above the students' heads, instead of compellingly into their eyes, the way he used to. He made an attempt to talk; yet words did not come. His head dropped over his broad shoulders as he began to stare at the colourful tiles on the floor.

There was a heavy silence. The principal, again, attempted to speak. Tears! Everyone saw them. Tears trickled out of his eyes. He made yet another attempt to produce words. This time, the microphone dropped on the floor, sending a vexatious clatter out of the twin sound boxes at the assembly. More tears streamed from both eyes, competitively rolling down his sunken cheeks. Dozens of perplexed eyes—students' and staff's—fixed on him. There was nowhere to hide from the puzzled looks. Then Mr. Bepo Adewale hid in the only available space. He brought his palms together, like a supplicant, and shielded his face.

The first person who found a voice was the Vice Principal, Mrs. Grace Apeh. "What is the matter, principal?" she asked, moving to his side. Four other members of staff joined her. But the principal said nothing. Instead, he sobbed freely. The school nurse, Mrs. Titi, fetched a handkerchief and offered it to the weeper.

"Please, conclude the assembly and let the students go into their classes immediately," the VP instructed the Chemistry teacher, Mr. Justus Anabel. Mrs. Apeh, the nurse, and Mr. Oyelana, the CRK teacher, started walking the principal back to his office, his face still buried in his palms, sobbing, even more agitatedly.

"Sir, what is the matter," Mrs. Titi – or Nurse Titi, as she was fondly called- asked, as they helped Bepo to his chair in the office. "Is anything the matter?" she asked again. Bepo did not utter a word. The tears did not stop flowing either. At 8:05am, more teachers arrived to console the sobbing principal or possibly lend a helping hand. But the VP advised they go to their classes, exempting the guidance counsellor, Mrs. Beke Egbin.

Consolations and questions resumed. For over 30 minutes, they petted Bepo. All the while, he sobbed. Occasionally, he would shake his head. He would look at the ceiling and at the faces before him, as though he had just returned from a dreamy wonderland. Then he would plunge further in tears. The VP's phone, meanwhile, had been ringing. Information had already reached some parents. They were anxious to know what had happened to the beloved principal. One parent 'learnt' he was weeping uncontrollably and rolling on the floor. Another parent 'heard' that he kept muttering, '*Oluwa gba mi o!*' Save me, O God! At this point, Mrs. Apeh realised the best she could do was to call the Managing Director, Mrs. Ibidun Gloss, popularly called MD, who—but for a function she had to attend that morning—ought to have been in school.

But the morning assembly had not begun on a tearful note. Since the management of Stardom Schools came up with a shrewd incentive of lowering its boarding fees, the headache it used to have, trying to tame lateness, had reduced greatly. From N250,000 per session, the fee climbed down to N165,000. The result was instant: more than 80 per cent of the parents moved their children to the boarding house, which was a haven of modest comfort enjoyed by elite students. Almost all the students began to turn up at 7:45am for the assembly.

That was far from the case before the policy change. Many of the learners came from different parts of Lagos, where the fear of heavy traffic was the beginning of wisdom. Interestingly, not many parents complained when the school, almost immediately, raised the fee for 'Excursion and Other Items' by N93,000. Some staff gossiped about this, especially Mr. Audu, the Fine Arts teacher, who was a bunch of biting humour. He cleared his throat, pushed a finger into his mouth, drew it out, and pointed skywards: "In matters of economics," he quipped, "I swear, the MD is 'a witch' and wizard rolled into one!" Audu and his naughty grammar!

The assembly had commenced early. The A-List school, located in the posh heart of Lekki, as usual began the ritual with a short prayer, in the form of a recitation of the second stanza of Nigeria's National Anthem: "Oh God of creation, direct our noble cause..." Stardom did this on Tuesdays and Thursdays, while normal Christian and Muslim prayers were said on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, alongside the National Anthem (first stanza). On Tuesdays and Thursdays, the assembly adopted the second stanza as prayer. It did not bother to recite the first but simply went straight to the school's anthem.

Angel announced it was time for the pep talk. The principal had introduced this, seven years earlier. It involved the presentation of a speech by a student. It was spontaneous, at times. At other times, topics were given ahead. Today's talk was, however, different: the way it, sometimes, happened. Ikenna Egbu, an SSS

1 student, mounted the podium to narrate his experience. He was part of a group of Stardom students that had just returned from an excursion to Jos, Plateau State.

"I saw Nigeria in its acrobatic beauty," he began, awakening cheers and applause. "My fellow students, if you have not been to Jos..." Ikenna paused and browsed their excited faces, as though he wanted to be sure they were really ready for the discoveries he was about to log into. He continued: "You might have been to London, you might have been to New York. But if you have not been to Jos, you MUST be in that brilliantly beautiful city in YOUR lifetime!" Yells and an applause greeted the narrative.

"One of the most memorable attributes of Jos is its very lovely weather," Ikenna said. "Although we are in the dry season, Jos welcomed us with very cool arms. So chilly is Jos that I felt like sleeping every second of the two days we spent there. I can also not forget its acrobatic landscape. Not in any negative sense, but with rocks that sit in artistic layers and, at times, in dramatic postures. You could see a rock carrying three other rocks on its head. You could find a small rock confidently backing another, big enough to give birth to it."

Another round of ovation. The narrator paused. He continued: "Dearest Stars of Stardom, some of our hosts said Jos used to be more beautiful than what we saw, and that some violent crises had affected it. Notwithstanding, I can still confidently say it remains the leading tourism city in this country. No wonder, many important white men were said to have lived there during the colonial period."

Ikenna named some of the places the group visited, such as the Lamingo Dam, the University of Jos, the Shere Hills, Wase Rocks and the Solomon Lar Amusement Park." If I have the opportunity in future, I will like to settle down in Jos, instead of Japa-ing to Canada or London!" A mixed, yet fun-filled round of clapping and hollering filled everywhere as Ikenna returned and joined his classmates on the line.

The chapel prefect then called for decorum and orderliness, inviting the principal for his address and announcement. Although Ikenna was a science student, he was, equally, a respected poet. His mum, a broadcaster, was an award-winning poet too. Following the young boy's captivating account, many students and staff expected a great comment from the principal, who had been an inspiring pillar at Stardom for 24 years. His impact had been so remarkable that his employers, parents and other stakeholders regarded him as a school builder. He gave the students his all, with an ever-burning passion to see them grow in all ramifications.

On a day like this, he would be on top of the world. He would regard

Ikenna's outing as evidence of the good education Stardom offered, and which, he believed, every Nigerian child deserved. The students also expected him to highlight some terms Ikenna might not have articulated so well. They were eager to hear something special from the tall, light-skinned principal, nicknamed The Lekki Headmaster, because of the way he used to imitate characters in the old TV drama, *Village Headmaster*, when he was Headmaster at Stardom Kiddies. It was his funny way of amusing the pupils. Sometimes, Stardom students called him 'Principo', because he never got tired of saying the pronunciation of 'principal' should not end with 'pa'. It's "PrinciPL", Bepo would emphasise.

But, of course, Mr. Bepo, this morning, was not on top of the world: he was under the world of tears.

At her office on the second floor of the Admin Building, the MD aimlessly removed her glasses and aimlessly dropped them on a tea stool by her right. She never envisaged the frustration fast beclouding what, ordinarily, should have been a pleasant morning. She had driven down to school hurriedly, after the VP raised the alarm about the principal's strange behaviour.

Only the previous day, the school had celebrated its over 90 percent success in the last West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE). The event ought to have held earlier, but it was postponed because the management could not immediately decide on the star prizes it wished to give. The school surprised all members of staff with snacks, bottles of wine, and N20,000 each for all SSS 3 teachers. Those who handled subjects where candidates scored distinctions, however, took home N30,000 each. The only teachers who had questions to answer were Mr. Obong Ukaku and Miss Taye Kareem, in whose subjects—Chemistry and Geography, respectively—two candidates had Ds. But all the teachers escaped real trouble as no candidate scored F9. At Stardom, consider yourself sacked if any of the students you presented for WASSCE or NECO recorded F9. The previous year, not even a cousin of the MD, Mr. Funso Daniels, was spared an abrupt exit.

Following her arrival at about 9:30am, the MD had invited Bepo to her office, asking what the problem was. Thirty-something minutes later, he had yet to state any reason for his distraught disposition. Instead, he kept muttering: "Thank you. I will be all right."

"Mr. Bepo, you keep saying you will be alright, but you are not saying what the problem is. You are aware that, given your position in this school and the excellent performance you have always put up, you are central to everything that goes on. You are supposed to be the embodiment of sanity, the balm to troubled nerves. In many cases, these are what you have been. But why would you suddenly turn the source of our anxiety?"

"Madam, I..." the principal managed to say, then broke down again.

The MD became more agitated. She picked one of the three handsets on her table. She made a call, which, three minutes later, produced the Physics teacher, Mr. Ope Wande, who was also a pastor.

"I am here, ma," Wande said as he walked in. He had missed the morning assembly, and besides the gists gathered from colleagues, he was only seeing Bepo for the first time in the day. "Principal, I hope all is well," he asked.

"Not really. And that is why I invited you," the MD said. Wande stooped beside the principal and began to speak to him in a subdued voice. He asked what the real matter was, and assured he would keep secret whatever information Mr. Bepo gave concerning his plight. Just like the MD had done, the pastor-teacher also reminded Bepo of his cardinal position in the school, and the fact that news of the matter had already begun swirling, miles away from the premises.

Wande spoke to the upset principal for close to 10 minutes. Realising he might have been talking to a brick wall, he turned back to the MD and said, "Ma, have we called Mr. Bepo's wife? I think we need to. And urgently too." Mrs. Ibidun Gloss did not object to the advice. She asked the principal for his wife's phone number. This, Mr. Bepo wrote on the back of a card fetched from the breast pocket of his grey suit. The MD studied the card, hesitatingly, before dialling. It was an international number.

"Principal's wife now lives in London, ma," Wande affirmed.

"I should know. I wonder if he is not missing her badly," the MD said. The comment was supposed to be a joke. Yet, it elicited no laughter. None of the two lines the MD dialled rang. "Pastor, please, accompany the principal to his office. I think he has to go home, really," she said.

"I understand," Pastor Wande said. "But I think there is a little problem with that. It might not be a very good idea if he is left to go alone in this circumstance."

The MD understood the sentiment in the teacher's fear. But she felt pressed to move the drama away from the school as soon as possible. What would the parents think if they learnt the principal was weeping like a child? The school, an impatient spirit told her, *was not a rehabilitation centre but a place for learning and earning money*.

"Please, guide him to his office and arrange to take him home," she said, emphatically, adding: "I learnt that the guidance counsellor was with him earlier. Perhaps, he can go with him. He might also visit the clinic ASAP."

Two

The Enticement

AFTER five days of interrogation and frustration, Mr. Bepo opened up. He was leaving Nigeria for the United Kingdom. He could no longer withstand the pressure to relocate, as his foot-dragging over the matter had pushed his marriage to the brink. He very much loved Stardom Schools, especially his students. He cared about them, wanted to continually be part of their growth. He found no sense in leaving them behind in a developing nation and joining the crowd working to further advance the United Kingdom: a developed country. But family was also keen on his mind. In the war to win him over, his wife had conscripted Nike and Kike, their two children, who, all the while, had been with her. He just had to quit and join them. Fortunately, he had already secured a teaching job in the UK.

Of the two decades plus Bepo spent at Stardom Schools, he was Headmaster at Stardom Kiddies—the nursery/primary arm—for four years. The foundation school remained constant in his professional history especially because of the nickname it bequeathed to him—The Lekki Headmaster.

Apart from the fact that he sometimes mimicked the Village Headmaster in the old TV drama series, once upon a time, some of the teachers under him became so quarrelsome. Hardly would two weeks pass without a conflict being brought to his office for resolution. Given his humanistic and empathetic disposition, he often accommodated their agitation and even pettiness and resolved the issues. One day, during a staff meeting to resolve another quarrel, the clownish teacher, Mr. Audu, joked about Bepo's disposition. "The way the headmaster masterly resolves these fights reminds me of the way King Oloja, in *Village Headmaster*, resolved all the *roforofos* brought by his chiefs and villagers. So, as they had their own *Village Headmaster*, we also have our own Lekki Headmaster. "Expectedly, laughter ensued. But there was more. A label stuck, which the many years that would eventually roll did not change. Even after Bepo became the principal at the secondary school, many still loved to call him 'The Lekki Headmaster'.

A good number of Mr. Bepo's colleagues at Stardom found his reaction concerning the impending relocation funny: extremely funny. Of course, what they really had in mind was that it was stupid. How could one have such a

golden opportunity and yet be sad and reluctant considering that thousands of people were sacrificing everything they had to travel overseas? His case was even enviable, they thought. He did not have to borrow or steal money to make the journey. He did not have to present a fake wife at the embassy. And, in the UK, he would not have to look for menial job—wouldn't have to clean 'dishes', as folks uncharitably say about washing corpses.

His wife, Seri, was a nurse. Rumour had it that she could be earning up to £10,000 per month (a whooping *gbemu* of more than N17m, they swiftly multiplied). The teaching job Mr. Bepo got promised about £3,600 and other entitlements. As principal, his salary at Stardom was about N400,000. Which was bigger: 400,000 feeble naira or almost 4,000 heavy British pounds? They converted the latter to about N6 million – at about N1,700 for a pound. Why then would any rational being develop cold feet towards such a life-changing offer?

"But let us not forget that he will not spend the wage in naira o. He will spend it in pounds. This is one factor many of us fail to take into consideration," said Mr. Oyelana during a gossip session. But Mr. Audu had a contrary view.

"Dump that argument!" he exclaimed. "No matter how much of it he spends in pounds, he will still have a lot to send to Nigeria." The Fine Arts teacher explained: "Just imagine, if he sends £1,000 to *Naija* every month, that is over N1.7m. You want to compare Bepo that saves N1.7m monthly to the one that earns N400,000 as salary? Are they on the same level? The principal knows all of these and still insists he is not leaving. I think Stardom's management has *jazzed* (bewitched) him. This is unnatural. I have to find his wife's home address."

"And what will you do if you find it?" Oyelana asked, bemused. "I will beg her to adopt me as husband. I am leaving for the airport RIGHT NOW!" Audu said.

He stood up immediately, picked a few books off his table, pushed them under his armpit, and walked out of the staffroom, declaring: "I am heading to the airport for the next flight."

His colleagues roared with laughter. Of course, everyone heard the bell.

Mr. Audu was already late for his next class.

Bepo's plan was to retire from Stardoms at the age of 55. That was still four years away. He had been thinking seriously about life in retirement. He had begun attending seminars on entrepreneurship: this was what he wanted to spend the remaining slice of his days on. He loved the freedom and confidence successful businessmen enjoyed, in spite of the fact that business enterprise harbours peculiar challenges. Bepo also loved to develop fellow men and his country. He pictured himself in a position where he also could employ workers,

no matter how modestly, and give people opportunity to earn a living and pay tax to government. It was one of the tips he learnt at seminars. According to one of his coaches, no employee should dream big about comfort or bank on job security either. Only a business owner could afford to do so, especially when the business had become successful.

Bepo would also not mind establishing his own school; after all, he had garnered a lot of experience about teaching and school management. Besides, he was a trained teacher, having studied English/History Education at the University of Benin. This projection would give him an opportunity to push his passion for moulding the young. His only reservation: he wondered if he would have enough capital to float a standard school, given the taste he had already imbibed at Stardom. He recalled that a major principle of entrepreneurship is starting small. He did not object to this, but experience had taught him a lesson: it is better for the facility to be in an area where parents are able to pay for the kind of education he wanted to provide. He could not forget in a hurry how a neighbourhood school—Fruitful Future—which he established alongside a friend, shortly after his National Youth Service, crumbled due to socio-economic challenges in the location. Of course, he knew his wife would not fund any project that would hold him down in Nigeria.

Bepo considered farming, food, and sachet (pure) or bottled water businesses. But he also had substantial inclination towards commercial transportation. He believed it was a business someone with minimal capital could begin with. An option he could readily chew over was buying a bus or a cab and leasing it to a driver. A fact about transportation, he knew, was that you begin to make money from the first day the vehicle is purchased. It is not like farming, where you had to wait till the end of a season or cycle before your seeds or animals begin to yield. It is not like retail or distribution business either, where, after getting a shop, you have to wait for customers to show up—customers who already have their preferred clients before you arrived. Besides, in many cases, buyers need to earn trust before patronising you. But in running a cab or bus, passengers have no loyalty to any driver or vehicle. As a matter of fact, Bepo knew: the newer your cab, the more attractive it is to commuters.

The problem with transportation, he learnt, was that many commercial drivers one would have loved to engage lacked enlightened business practices. They were not trustworthy, and often ended up ruining the dream. At least, three members of staff at Stardom ventured into it but ended up with regrets. The drivers frustrated the idea, defaulted in payment, and often told lies that the autos broke down. On some occasions, they colluded with mechanics to defraud the vehicle owners. In spite of these sour details, Bepo kept the option open. He

believed there could still be a way out. There were, for instance, people who bought vehicles and let them out to drivers, who, in turn, paid instalments. He also felt that if big transport companies, such as ABC and God is Good Motors, could operate successfully, there must be a way around the challenges.

For now, however, he needed not worry again about those dreams. He was set to renew his teaching career in a new environment, a new country where he, definitely, would earn more and share a new life with Seri, Nike and Kike. He knew life, anywhere, is not a bed of roses, and every place harboured its challenges. He read the story of a Nigerian teacher who got rattled the first day he walked into a class in a UK school. One of the students was said to have asked: "Are you an idiot?" Yet, Bepo knew that such an incident, if true, must be isolated. And a good teacher should be able to handle that diplomatically.

Three

Migration Tales

AFTER Bepo had finally made up his mind to relocate to the UK, he decided to pay attention to tales emanating from foreign lands—especially Canada, United Kingdom and the United States of America. In terms of remuneration, he always knew that payment there could be hourly, daily, weekly or monthly; unlike Nigeria where one-time salaries were a feature of white collar jobs. He liked the idea of hourly remuneration: it would make job schedules flexible, offering the employee an opportunity to change the job as often as he could. On the part of the employer, he would be able to closely monitor the worker. It neutralised the Yoruba proverb that says *oga ta, oga o ta, owo alaaru a pe*: that is whether an employer records gain or not, the employee will yet take home his full pay. The pragmatic wage system, he thought, must be one of the ideals contributing to continued growth of the developed world.

A friend of his who lived in the USA told him one could earn between $150 and $250 per day, depending on the nature of the job and the location. He learnt that one could work up to four days a week. If that happened, Bepo and many others who dreamt about Japa could earn up to $2,400 a month. They would quickly multiply that by about the prevailing N1,600 rate, and arrive at what became a comparatively big sum of money. What such people often forget, however, was the fact that they would live and spend in dollars in the US or pounds in the UK paying rents, taxes, maintenance and others—in the hard currencies they earned. Yet, they felt whatever remained, if sent back home, still translated to good sums, which many Nigerians could not afford to save.

Also, Bepo gathered, there were people who earned far more than $150 or even $250 daily. This suggests there would be more to remit home or exchange to naira later. He was told that cab drivers earned better than people who worked in stores or toilets. He found instructive the story of a Nigerian who switched from driving to maintenance. The guy knew a bit of carpentry and was eventually invited for a maintenance job in the US. He earned $500 daily. Bepo marvelled at the thought of converting the sum to naira. That meant earning up to N800,000 daily!

His survey further revealed that skilled work was among the best options for anyone in any of the countries of choice. What could be more inspiring than receiving, say, $100 per head, if you were a barber? As a result, those who understood the trends often advised intending immigrants to learn a skill before leaving Nigeria. Bepo also

had learnt painting during his last break.

The relocation bug had caught on in the country in the past few years. Nurses, doctors and other health workers, said to be enviably remunerated, had been migrating at an alarming rate. Even the government conceded that up to 1,000 of the country's 3,000 doctors were migrating annually. Besides these, other people were leaving from all walks of life. Many graduates were fleeing, especially under the pretext of pursuing Master's degrees. The fact that the education visa largely allowed students to travel with their spouses and children made such people became desperate. Guys sold all they could to pay for accommodation, fees and sundry requirements. These included houses, land, cars, as well as office and home furniture. There were, indeed, cases of some who sold what did not belong to them, so that they could rightly be called the criminals they were. Some took loans from various sources and fled before full repayment. Others paid back later from the countries they secretly relocated to. Yet, there were some that never even bothered to look back. Classical rogues!

Bepo could attest to some of these crooked practices from his experience at Stardom. There was the celebrated case of Mr. Nku, who took a N2 million loan from the school's cooperative and, two days after, disappeared into the *Japa* wind. Also, one of the school's drivers, who attempted to steal the bus in his custody, confessed to the police: he wanted to sell it and use the proceeds to send his son to college abroad.

Bepo credited Sola, another young Nigerian in the diaspora, for giving him a fresh perspective on life in the UK. About six months earlier, Sola was the Home Economics teacher at Stardom. She was on a 'sick leave' when she and her husband landed in the UK. She had called Bepo, a day after they arrived in London, and confided in him. They were a little close. Bepo had helped her when she faced sacking for setting up a creche in the vicinity of Stardom Schools. He led the investigation. Knowing how effective she was in class, and the fact that she had just had her first child, he convinced the management that the creche was merely casual. Sola only faced a three-month working suspension without pay. However, monitoring by the school, while she served the punishment, revealed that she continued to work committedly. Eventually, all her entitlements were paid.

"Your kind of relocation is the most convenient, sir," she reassured Bepo during one of their phone conversations. "Since your wife is here already, working as a nurse, you will have little or no stress settling down. I do not know her cadre or where she works, but nurses and other health workers are generally well paid in the UK. Also, you will not be burdened with having to work to pay your wife's school fees, as many spouses do here. In many cases, the husbands work while the wives go to school. As for me, I am working while my husband is pursuing his Master's. He also works for some hours, anyway. You will work but not under much pressure. That is, hoping Madam cooperate with you. Another thing that makes your coming easier is that you

are not borrowing your way through. Or are you?"

Bepo replied in the negative, revealing he had actually found a teaching job in the UK.

"That is what I'm saying," Sola added. "My husband and I sold everything, and we still had to borrow about N4 million. But I don't have any regret. We have just been about six months here in the UK, and I have changed jobs more than three times. The one I just got is more promising; it will fetch me up to £200 daily. And, lest I forget, you won't have any challenge concerning what to do in the next two years—unlike spouses that are here for schooling. Finding the opportunity for continued stay is not a child's play. We all are just trying out our luck."

Sola said because she and her husband could not afford up to £1,500 or £1,000 monthly rent in London, they had to stay in Manchester where they rented a non-furnished two-bedroom apartment for £650 monthly. According to her, the space was not quite comfortable, but it solved their immediate needs.

"Happily, here is not like Nigeria where a landlord will insist you pay for a year or more in advance. We pay as we live. Gradually, we have also been equipping our home, beginning with a mattress and a small TV. The bigger the gadgets you get, the bigger your tax here," Sola said, adding that travel by rail from Manchester to London was about 30 minutes.

Two major factors convince many who, ordinarily, would not want to relocate. These are great infrastructure and the opportunity for their children to enjoy quality education. They are some of the qualities that principally define developed countries, compared to what obtains in many parts of Africa—with Nigeria being a notorious example. Bepo knew much about this, having benefited indirectly. His children, Nike and Kike, enjoyed free primary and secondary education, like most other children in the UK. It was when Nike went to university that she began to pay fees. Kike was still in High School. His wife did wonderfully in this wise as she paid the bulk of the fees. In the UK, there were also education loans and scholarships for those who could not afford fees. These were the ideals many Nigerians sacrificed for, wanting their kids to benefit from a system that has a solid plan for children.

"My children are already in school," Sola told him. "And they don't pay fees. Imagine what some of the supposedly privileged parents at Stardom go through to pay the millions charged."

Bepo knew she spoke the truth. A good number of Stardom's pupils were from well-to-do homes. Some parents even complained that fees were too low. They felt the population became quite large on account of the 'paltry' fees and did not want their children mixing with folks from low society. But there were other parents who struggled unimaginably hard to cope. Some pupils hardly fed well during fee-paying seasons. Many parents had to withdraw their children during recessions. And, in certain cases, the death of fathers ended the sojourn of their children and wards.

The case of Chief Waliem, a popular rich man, highlighted the intricacies of

private school education in the country. One day, the chief, who had lived so comfortably that he bankrolled most social programmes at Stardom, slumped and died. His three children could not complete the following term because the family could not pay their fees. To everyone's surprise, banks immediately swooped on Waliem's assets because he was heavily indebted to them.

Sola had a wonderful testimony to share with Bepo as far as UK healthcare was concerned. Besides the fact that her children had begun enjoying free healthcare services, they, like other children, must go for two medical check-ups every month—including a dental check. If a child failed to do so, the parent answered for it. The most memorable of Sola's testimony had to do with her second child, Betty, who was asthmatic.

The three-year-old had a seizure and Sola called the emergency line—911. Two ambulances and another car arrived at her home in less than five minutes! While the baby was conveyed to the hospital in one of the ambulances, Sola went in the car. The care the girl received was so impressive that the mother could not help shedding tears of joy. Betty was lucky too. Her birthday came while she was still in the hospital. The mum told Bepo: "You needed to see how doctors, nurses and everyone showered Betty with gifts. My daughter admitted she never had such a birthday before."

But there were feelers that neither London nor Toronto is a bed of roses. There were stories of fellows who became stranded in the otherwise posh cities. While some could not find any reasonable job, others that did could not cope with demands. Jare, a young chap who abandoned his banking job, recounted how he burst into tears when the stark reality of caring for an old couple in London dawned on him.

Also, plans by some of the couples who migrated together sometimes crumbled like a house of cards. Such was the case of Hope, an accountant. He applied for, and secured admission for a Master's. His wife joined him in the UK to work and earn the money that would see him through; the way Sola and her husband did. But barely four months after they landed in London—and Hope began studying—the wife stopped providing for him. She complained that the demands of her job made it impracticable to keep sponsoring him. All pleas by Hope fell on deaf ears. He contacted his wife's parents in Nigeria. But they replied point-blank that she had explained her situation to them and they quite understood her position.

Of course, life is never a straitjacket, Bepo thought. Home or abroad, people have always had different results from life's intriguing tests. He recalled how an Idoma, Benue man, a former co-tenant of his, used to say: *Owo noya cloleche no chelo longea, owoloma yaclaho-olo noihonoa*, indicating how the sugar cane and the bitter leaf got different tastes from the same rain that nurtured them.

In one of the recent migration tales, Riike, a woman who arrived in the United States, in less than three years, was able to buy two houses in Ibadan, Nigeria. But a man—an academic—who had been in the US for over 20 years, returned to Ikole, in Ekiti State, empty handed! The sad return was, however, linked to divorce from his

wife. The woman, also a Nigerian, was said to have legally stripped him of all he had, after he was found guilty of bigamy.

"I will not be paying a dime as school fee for my children till 2027. That is when my first son will go to a university. But, for now, all three of them are in foundation schools where qualitative and free education is guaranteed," Riike declared. She also invited two of her sisters to the US. But for the visa problems Wemimo—her brother and parents' last born—faced, he would also have joined them in God's Own Country. She hoped to invite him as soon as he overcame the hurdles.

But compare Riike's case with Akindele's, who would not invite even his daughter. Seven years earlier, he migrated to the US, aged 55. He was invited by a US citizen he met at a media company where he once worked in Lagos. He and his wife, married for 18 years, hadjust divorced. They had three children, aged between 16 and 10. Akindele eventually got permanent residency in America living thereafter with his new woman. His first job was freight loading, followed by correctional service. He said the latter job was relatively less hectic than offloading large packets from trucks. Yet, he added that being a correction centre official was not a tea party either.

"Imagine sitting down, alert, for 12 straight hours!" Akindele told Ige, a friend who was also dreaming to *Japa*. "There is no easy job in America o! *Oyinbo man* does not want to know whether you are young or old. You will work for every dime. You get dollars per second, and you do the work per second. I always pity some older Nigerians here. Did you know that some of our people, who retired at various senior levels, including as permanent secretaries, still come here to work? I have seen 70-year-olds who migrated from Nigeria, ending up as casual workers in America. You would find an elderly man shaking like a leaf tossed by the wind as he tries to sort mails or whatever he does. That does not concern the *Oyinbo man*. You want to earn the dollar? You must be prepared to work for the cents."

Akindele said he could not yet invite any member of his family, especially his children, because he needed time to finetune the plan with his wife, who was his host. He added that there was also the need to fir solidify one's financial base before bringing in dependents.

Four

A Case of Visa Denied

IN his room at Adeniyi Jones, Ikeja, Lagos, Bepo was about to say his night prayer when the phone rang. He was undecided, momentarily, whether to answer or proceed with the prayer. He looked at the screen to see who was calling. "Haba!" he exclaimed. "Why will this woman be calling so late?" It was Mrs. Ignatius, the parent of a student. She was one of those whom, Bepo believed, was abusing the friendliness he permitted. Some—and many, indeed—kept the relationship as official as possible. They limited discussions to matters pertaining to fees, books, discipline, punctuality etc. But in Mrs. Ignatius' case, she overstretched the cordiality, discussing even her marital affairs with him. Bepo racked his brain, trying to recall how it all started. He wondered how he could have allowed such personal dealings with any parent.

How could she call him in the dead of night? "He has come again o!" Mrs. Ignatius cried.

"Who, Madam?" Bepo asked, anger bottled within. And before she could respond, he added: "Madam, check your watch. 11:55am! Is it not too late for this?"

"I'm sorry, Principal. But did you know that Ibe is not yet home?" Bepo launched a silence that he knew would not be palatable to her. "For God's sake, is it a crime to be a principal?" he asked as he momentarily pushed the phone away from the range of his mouth, then shut his robust eyes as if the answer to the question lay in the dark.

Banking on his six-footer height and prominent eyeballs, he always jovially told the students that he was created to be a principal. According to him, once he was present in any class or hall, no act of cheating could go uncaught. "If you beat my height, you can't beat my eyes," he would declare whenever he was supervising any exam.

The fact was that the man seemed to have every trait maximally—if not in excess. His complexion, for instance, was as fair as that of the yellow ant that the Yoruba called salamo, while his was a voice that hardly needed a loudspeaker no matter the size of the crowd he was addressing. Bepo yet had another tale that the students often branded *'tori'*: "When I was growing up in the village and my family was working on my father's farm, salamo used to bite my brothers and sisters especially when we were harvesting kola nut whose trees one had to often climb. But salamo never bit me because my skin bore the same colour as theirs."

That was the extent to which Bepo could be down to earth in the school, though he combined humour and compassion with seriousness wherever required. What he, however, hated was being taken for granted or overstretched as, he believed. Mrs

Ignatius was now doing. He had told her that she needed to have a lot of patience to let the wound heal. She had wronged the man, he believed. She had terribly wronged him and the man had cause to be upset. As a matter of fact, he thought, only very few men would still allow the marriage to hold in whatever form.

A year earlier, the family had been planning to relocate to London. Mr. Ibe was a manager in an oil firm, earning what a 'bloody' teacher like Bepo would call an 'armed robber's salary'. But he became fed up with the system and bought into the *Japa* philosophy, vowing he was ready to sacrifice all because of his children.

"My children won't grow up here. They won't end up here," Ibe Ignatius had insisted. "I want them to grow up in a sane environment. I don't want other children that are being trained outside the country now to return and lord things over my own children. Youths are leaders of tomorrow. Not all youths. Many of the ones getting Western exposure will become the leaders. I work in an international organization; so, I know what I'm saying."

Apart from the sentiment in favour of the children, the economic advantage which relocation promised made it an adventure more and more people were willing to explore. It was all about dollars and pounds! All you needed to do was work in any place—for many people, just any place—earn the hard currencies and be able to send home, even $1,000 per month. Then, your life would not remain the same again. With a dollar exchanging for as much as N1,600 in the black market, it meant you were automatically saving N1,600,000, a month. How many people in the country were able to do that? How many earned N1,600,000—or half or even a quarter? How many, in a country where lawyers could earn as low as N15,000 monthly and some teachers were being paid the same or less as salary?

Mrs. Ignatius greatly loved the *Japa* idea. She had learnt tailoring and hairdressing, including the traditional Yoruba *irun didi*, having understood that the crafts fetched a lot of money in the UK. From the information she gathered, you could earn up to $100 braiding for a client. That, changed to Nigeria's currency, was some N160,000. For just crafting *suku* or any other Yoruba braid like *kojusoko* and *onile gogoro*! While suku teased the sky with its cone-like weaving, the *kojusoko* braid pointed its tip towards the direction of the husband. *Onilegogoro's* cone was so extroverted that it threatened to kiss the sky. While preparing for a hairdressing career in Canada, Mrs. Ignatius had learnt the bridal art a year earlier, before pulling out of her job as a clerical officer. The husband also had wound down his clearing and forwarding side business, preparatory to relocation. But something happened that scattered the plan.

When the visa processing reached an advanced stage, a DNA test conducted on their three children showed that Ignatius was not the father of one of the kids—Favour, a 15-year-old SS2 girl at Stardom. The family never remained the same again.

"What is the matter now?" Bepo asked, after his long silence, which the woman felt lasted 100 years.

"He still doesn't believe I did not cheat on him. He is now saying Favour and I have to go."

"Go where?"

"He says we should go and stay with Favour's father."

"Has Favour learnt of the entire saga? Does she know about the paternity crisis?"

"No. I don't think so. But there is a kind of suspicion on the part of Iyi, her brother. He has been asking some disturbing questions lately. He says there must be a reason, a key reason, the embassy turned round and denied us the visas. I think he has read up why families may have visa issues."

"So, is he suspecting a DNA crisis?"

"Honestly, I can't say."

There was a stretch of silence. Then, she added: "Ibe left home two hours ago, as we were discussing the matter. Principal, don't you think he might never come back?"

Bepo had no answer. He was equally set for his own relocation, believing he would soon have respite from the Ignatius' saga.

Experience taught Bepo several lessons about running an elite school like Stardom. He hoped some of these would be relevant in his next station. He knew culture and policies differ from one country to another. But no experience was a waste. Every parent wants respect, and many seek to keep their pride. Some are rich, considerate and humble; some are rich, selfish and nasty. While all these traits reflect in the behaviour of the children, they kept the management on its toes as it pushed to achieve goals.

Bepo reminisced on some of the major incidents that defined his stay at Stardom. He hoped that, some day, he would detail these in a book. He prayed his job in the UK would give him enough time to work on his professional biography. Among the memorable stories he would love to share was the sacking of Mr. Ayesoro, the Government teacher.

At her GRA, Lagos, home, Mrs. Mary Ladele relaxed on a sofa, watching a movie. It was a Nollywood stuff, the type she liked—a romance. Some five months ago, she had been a devotee at Zee World, savouring Indian soaps that dripped with love scenes and intrigues. But recent visits to the cinema, where she saw about five Nollywood productions, rekindled her love for Nigerian films.

It was around 1:00pm. Her three children had all gone to bed. She was the only person in the sitting room. Her husband, Dele, was away in Abuja, where he worked as a senior civil servant. The kids could turn naughty and cook up excuses to hang around the medium-size Plasma TV, but she had mandated them to always go to bed at 10:00pm. The youngest, Bibi, was particularly notorious for wanting to flout the order, especially when her father was around. When you thought she had disappeared into the bosom of sleep, you looked in the direction of the sitting room door and saw her mischievous eyes peeping through the blinds. Then a mild battle would start between mother and daughter. It was Dele who, at times, pleaded for her

or fought on her side so that she could stay awake till 11:00pm. On such nights, the mother would insist Dele wake Bibi up in the morning, knowing how tough it could be to get her on her feet.

In the movie, a female physician, Dr Ajayi, was about to conduct a Caesarean Section on Bimbo, a bosom friend of hers. It was a task the doctor was quite happy to undertake, aided by three other colleagues. Two of these were invited from a General Hospital nearby because of their expertise and experience. The third worked at Legacy Memorial Hospital, a private establishment.

Many people had reservations about government hospitals. They dreaded them because of the large crowds they attracted, which usually left doctors overwhelmed. They were also often bogged down by inefficiency and corruption. Nevertheless, government hospitals were still famed for having some of the best consultants in the country. Therefore, regarding CS matters, many patients preferred taking the operation in public hospitals. And when they had to do so in private establishments, they opted for doctors from public hospitals on the team.

It was this synthetic arrangement Dr. Ajayi had with Bimbo. For Mrs Ladele, who had had the CS experience, watching the scene in the movie was an engaging treat. It was also good that the filmmakers chose to show the operation live. But what made the scene most captivating for Mrs. Ladele was an imminent bubble burst. Unknown to Dr. Ajayi, her husband was responsible for Bimbo's pregnancy. As the truth was about to hit the doctor, Mrs. Ladele, enthralled and caring little about her falling wrapper, inched closer to the TV set to see how the painful truth would unfold. Just then, she heard a scream. It was Bibi.

She rushed into the room and found the girl trembling, seated on the edge of the bed.

"Mummy!" Bibi cried, as she saw her mother. Her brother and sister—Tim and Love—had also been rudely awakened from sleep, looking bewildered.

"Bibi, what is the matter?" the mother asked, as she carried the girl and cradled her in her arms.

"It's Mr Wala!"

"Mr What? Who is Mr Wala?"

"Our Government teacher! He appeared to me in my dream!

With his tribal marks!"

Tim stepped in to clear the confusion. Bibi actually meant Mr. Ayesoro, popular in the school for the deep tribal marks he flaunted. So prominent were the incisions that students nicknamed him *Mr. Owala*, a derogatory Yoruba appellation for a person with wild facial marks.

Every time Bibi saw Ayesoro in school, she became scared. They met at the basketball court the previous week, when Blue House -- to which she belonged—held its maiden practice, ahead of the upcoming inter-house sports competition. Bibi screamed with fright as Ayesoro, who was one of the Blue House officers, arrived at

the venue. Every effort by Mr Ayesoro to allay the girl's fear was unsuccessful. Eventually, Bibi had to be reassigned to Green House, where Tim belonged.

None of the Ladeles slept again that night. Twice, Bibi's mum tried to pet the girl into sleeping; twice the girl dreamt, crying out about Mr Wala. Mrs Ladele could hardly wait for daybreak to launch a complaint at Stardm

Worried that it could lose Bibi and her siblings to another private school, the management transferred Mr Ayesoro to Stardom Hub, the property wing of Stardom Group of Companies.

Five

Snake in the Roof

LONG BREAK. Joyful sounds of pupils at every corridor. At the primary and secondary sections, the children never missed the opportunity to play despite the fact that it was time to eat. It was also a time when Principal Bepo and Teachers on Duty moved round to ensure there was no dangerous play, as one or two students had had an arm or the other broken in the past. Mrs. Ibidun Gloss had just uploaded her lunch. She escaped into a room in her spacious office for a little rest. This get away was a top secret very few people knew in the academic community of about 1,500 folks, comprising students and staff. Yet, if the privileged few knew she had time out in any room, none really understood why. They never knew the health condition that plagued her buttocks, leaving her with a peppery pain whenever she sat for long. She had been to doctors within and outside the country. She had, in the course of over 30 years living with the condition, explored spiritual and traditional interventions: all to no avail. She, therefore, learned to live with it, especially as it did not immobilise her.

Minutes after, she chose to alter her schedule a little by taking a walk around the surrounding. And she, in the end, thanked her stars that she did.

The MD decided, a little instinctively, to exploit the opportunity to inspect a piece of land that Stardom acquired two years before. That was some five minutes away from the back gate of the school. As she approached the gate, the two security men manning it stood at attention, with one hurriedly opening it as she gestured them to do. Both made a move to accompany her out, but she asked one of them to remain at their duty post.

On getting to her destination, she found out that, although the property remained fenced as the management had left it, about a half of the three plots were filled with cars of different brands. They were not new, but it was obvious to the Stardom's big woman that they were in use, and that some people were using the place as a park.

"Our staff park here, Ma," the guard, Jombo, said to save the MD from puzzle.

"Which staff?" She asked as she could not hide her shock. "

"Our teachers and other staff."

She was confused the more because she knew there was a staff's car park in the

school and she, like almost everyone else, knew who had cars and who did not.

"Ma, it is not everyone that brings their cars into the school," Jombo said in a tone that meant more than he uttered.

The MD took time to inspect the rides, wanting to know who owned them. Jombo was right because many of the cars bore Stardom Schools' stickers. So, many of her staff were hiding their cars from management, she thought. She saw different brands and models, including Toyota, Hyundai, Venza and Mazda. She even saw the big Toyota some drivers called Muscle. The MD skipped a breath and shook her head self-pityingly. There were even two buses at the far right of the park. One was white, while the other wore the ubiquitous Lagos' yellow colour. Were some people cheating on her by engaging in public transportation? She felt more anger mixed with fear run through her system. She summoned the principal and school accountant via a phone call.

Too bad for her and too bad for the school, she thought. Something must be wrong. The school's purse must be leaking. How were the teachers getting money to buy those kinds of cars? She further thought as she surveyed the park again.

"Afternoon, Madam," the accountant said as he arrived. "Accountant, what is happening in this school?" the MD asked.

"Great things, Madam... "

"Accountant, I didn't call you for a motivational speech. What is happening? How safe is this school? How safe is our money?"

Before the accountant, who could no more hide his confusion, could say anything further, the MD added: "Where are all these monies coming from? Where are teachers and storekeepers and every gardener getting the money to buy these cars? When did this happen? How did this happen to us?"

Jeremi Amos – the accountant – now understood his boss' fear. She thought people were stealing to buy cars. He and the principal, who had also arrived at the scene, exchanged glances. It was an understanding that the latter should speak. Mr. Bepo, therefore, first ordered Jombo to go back to school.

By this time, the fear was quite palpable all over the MD's face.
For the first time in a long while, she sweated profusely. "Ma, please let's go to the office." Bepo said.

In the MD's office, the accountant and the principal assured her that the school's finances were intact. He noted that while some of the teachers had raised money for their cars through various personal means, including loans, the main source of financial strength for about half of those who owned the 17 vehicles was the school cooperative. According to the two principal officers, a good number of the members of staff were taking loans, which they had also been duly paying back; after all, the

loans were being deducted from source.

Yet, if the information did calm the MD down, it also raised another major question. How fat was the cooperative's purse that it guaranteed those she saw as every Tom, Dick and Harry a choice car?

And, perhaps inadvertently, that was the way she asked the question.

"How much is in the account of the Stardom Cooperative Society that it could buy every fool the car of his or her choice?"

The word 'fool' hit the two men like a thunderbolt. They did not find it funny at all. They again exchanged glances but managed to maintain their cool. Bepo was happy that neither the VP nor the Physics Teacher was at the meeting. Neither might have been able to stay so mute in the circumstance based on their extroverted profiles.

The following day, she called a meeting of the board of directors—all members of the same family: the chairman, Chief Mrs. Solape Bayo, who was the MD's mother; Martins Bayo, a non-executive director; and Oye Bayo, the last born, who was the board's secretary. Not willing to take any chances, the MD asked for details of the cooperative society's account from the accountant and the principal. In the purse was N95 million, while over N50 million had been loaned out.

"It's like hanging a snake in the roof and going to bed," Chief Bayo said. "What if the staff rebel and jointly establish their own school with the money? They would have stolen our brand ideals and every other thing about us."

The board weighed the threat and unanimously reached a decision, which guided the cooperative ever since: no staff member could borrow more than N250,000. Also, all loan requests had to be approved by the MD, and the management must be duly informed about the cooperative's elections.

Six

Ade as Well as Jide
COMES vs. COME

OPEN Days were very important at Stardom Schools. For the management, it was an opportunity to update parents on academic activities. A staff meeting was held prior to each edition. It needed no reminder: teachers and non-academic members of staff knew it was a day when they had to look their best, especially because they would have personal encounters with parents. Generally, Stardom encouraged—and in some cases, compelled—its teachers to look presentable. Some had even been fired for flouting dress code instructions. At the end of a session, the best-dressed teacher was identified and presented with an award.

The event was a promising moment for many teachers too, including the principal. It proved that the reward of teachers did not have to wait till they got to heaven. Some parents came with gifts, in cash and kind, for specific staff, especially class teachers. The Gbayi family was outstanding. Smart Gbayi's mum, Mrs. Nike, would gift the school several packets of beverages. Her husband worked in one of the leading beverages companies. But Open Day was also dreaded by teachers because parents often came with trailer-loads of complaints. Any teacher who had 'offended' any pupil, genuinely or otherwise, deliberately or inadvertently, could receive packets of bottled anger.

Mr. Bepo recalled an episode. Mrs. Ibidun Gloss had sent for him, asking him to appear in her office urgently. With her was a parent, Mr. Guta, seated in a chair in front of the MD's desk. Bepo greeted the duo as he walked in. But the MD indicated she did not need any pleasantries. "Where is Fafore, the one that calls himself an English teacher?" she asked.

"In the staff room or in the class," the principal replied [illegible] trouble.

"Wherever [illegible] to Ilunu" [illegible] school [illegible] in his office [illegible] it within the next 30 minutes," the MD bellowed.

Shocked, the principal looked Mr. Guta in the eye, searching frantically for a clue. He saw none. Not in Mrs. Gloss' face either. The parent did not betray any sympathy for the teacher about to be flung out of a job. Rather, he looked calm, reassured and pacified by the sack order.

If there was an instruction Bepo hated, it was issuing a sack letter. He had done so a number of times. The management rarely sacked anyone directly. It executed what he considered the dirty job through his office. He always felt pained when anyone had to lose a job, especially for issues he felt were not grave. There were times when no one could really help matters: such as in the case of the teacher who, the previous term, was caught altering a student's result for a fee. Some had been sacked for perennial incompetence and child abuse, suspected or proven. Mr. Bepo remembered that the management, through his office, had also booted out some whom, he believed, were either not seriously guilty or not guilty at all—just hapless victims of circumstance or even conspiracy. Whatever the offence or its magnitude, Bepo always felt a void in his heart every time a colleague lost his or her job. Perhaps, that was because he had experienced joblessness before. He understood what it meant for a family man like Fafore.

What Mr. Bepo considered the most embarrassing moment of his life happened while he was out of job. An ugly situation had forced him out of a school where he worked. He had no savings, and no new employment was in sight. At the height of the financial drought, he 'ate' the N2,500 electricity tariff he collected on behalf of tenants in the crowded *face-me-I-face-you* house, where he lived in Iyana Ipaja, also in Lagos. To cover up the deed, he lied that he had remitted the cash.

But as the Hausa say, *kullum ta ɓarawo, rana daya ta mai kaya*: every day is for the thief, one day for the owner. One day, NEPA (electricity) men arrived and disconnected the power cable. Then truth dawned on everyone. The furious tenants rained insults, curses and mockery on *Oga Tisa*, as he was called. The most aggressive complainant, that God- forsaken day, was Iya Mathew, the no-nonsense wife of Mr. Adio, a co-tenant. The short devil grabbed a full bowl of *elubo*, cassava powder. Since her hand could not reach the headquarters of his skull, she jumped, rocketing her stumpy frame off the ground, and dunked the bowl on the teacher's head. Immediately, Mr. Bepo became a 'white' man. And as though the cassava flour baptism was not enough, Iya Mathew spontaneously burst into singing:

> Oga Tisa, ole! O na owo ina!
> Oga Tisa, ole! O na owo ina!
> (Mr. Teacher is a thief!
> He has spent the electricity
> tariff!)

"Madam, what is the matter with Fafore?" the principal asked the MD.

"Mr. Bepo, please, do what I asked you to, first, then come back later with a query. Or you *kuku* send the query to me electronically."

Rather than get to his office and send for Fatore, the principal went straight to the staff room. According to an Igbo proverb, *mmiri oku anaghi ano ogologo oge na ire*, warning that hot water does not stay too long on the tongue. The English teacher was not in the staff room; he was in the SSS 2 class. That meant Mr Bepo would have to do something he very much detested: stopping a lesson halfway.

"Good morning, class," the principal greeted, as he walked in. And without taking an excuse from Mr. Fatore, he addressed the students: "I need to urgently have a word with your teacher in my office. Be responsible while he is away." And before he could ask: "Am I making sense?" some students had, teasingly, helped him out, while others chorused, laughingly: "Yes!"

Fatore did not like the interruption, but he had to obey his boss. He thought about handing over his note to the class prefect, so that the students could copy it, while he attended to the principal. But this was no longer permitted at Stardom. The management stopped it, years back, after a parent sued the school.

The parent, an accountant with an oil company, learnt that his daughter, who was blessed with very good handwriting, was asked to scribble a note on the marker board, for others to copy. He had advanced counts bordering on exploitation, cheating, oppression, and visual exploitation. His lawyers further argued that the teacher was indirectly imposing a career on the girl. According to them, she might become influenced to become a teacher, whereas her parents wanted her to study Medicine. On the allegation of visual exploitation, the parent said the teacher subjected his daughter to corrosive eyes that might have sexually leered at her as she stood in front of the class.

The matter was eventually settled out of court, after a lot of pleas by the school. And while the student was compensated with one tuition-free term, the teacher was suspended without pay for three months. The English teacher remembered the case: the principal too did. Fafore decided to let sleeping dogs lie and even snore as they liked, by leaving the students to themselves.

"Mr. Fafore, what issue do you have with the management?" Bepo asked, earnestly, when both men got to the Principal's Office.

"The management...? I have no problem with anyone," Fafore answered.

"When did you get to school today?"

"7:30am."

"Did you flog any pupil?"

"No. I don't cane students."

"Did you have any argument with any parent or the management? Or when actually did you get to school today?"

"Principal, why these questions? Why would I argue with anyone? You know, I

hardly come late."

Candidly, the principal knew Fafore hardly arrived late to school. Although he lived quite far away, he planned his itinerary in such a way that he, rather, arrived very early. Like many other members of staff, he could not afford the rent charged in the Lekki area. A two-bedroom flat could cost more than two million naira, with most landlords demanding two-year rent upfront, besides other expensive charges. Successive governments had tried to compel landlords to charge less and give less stringent terms. Official declarations were made to that effect, but they were rarely enforced or were simply unenforceable. This led some critics to believe the authorities were not sincere. They argued that the same governments that claimed they wanted landlords to charge lower rents were fond of slamming high prices on their housing schemes. When a two-bedroom flat built by the government cost about N10 million, how would the masses benefit from it?

Despite being a graduate of 22 years, Mr. Fafore's salary remained N175,000. How could he afford a million naira rent per annum? How could he buy the government's flat, even when all he needed, as initial payment, was a 25 per cent deposit? Besides, residents knew there would be other unadvertised charges.

Fafore's first solution to the housing challenge was to rent a one-room apartment in Ijaye, near the boundary between Lagos and Ogun states, in the Iyana Ipaja axis. He paid N170,000 per annum. After he got married, he moved further away to Sango, where he rented a mini flat for N300,000 per annum. Three years later, he purchased half a plot of land in Ifo, a little deeper into Ogun State, where he built a two-bedroom apartment. He had barely completed building the facility when he moved in with his family. As a matter of fact, two years after, he had yet to plaster the house and had neither installed a bath nor a toilet. What mattered to him most was the joy that he was no more a tenant. He had become a landlord, a bona fide member of the community's landlord association. He paid rent no more. He lived no more in fear of landlords who often behaved like land gods. The only sacrifice he made daily, to guarantee punctuality at Stardom, was permanently maintain shorter nights at home. He woke up latest 4:00am and set out for school at 4:30am. Thus, he would get to the premises by 6:00am, rest his head on his desk, and snooze for about an hour before his colleagues arrived. There were about five teachers who ran a similar schedule, living in the Ifo, Ojo and Ofada axes of neighbouring Ogun State. The principal was aware of these and should, ordinarily, not have raised any query pertaining to lateness. Fafore had, indeed, twice won the Most Punctual Teacher Award.

"I am sorry, I have to bombard you with these questions," Bepo said, relaxing a bit. "But there is a problem, a major problem. The MD called me to her office. She is very angry. Livid. By the way, I wonder if you had any argument with Mr. Guta, the

father of Dorah in SSS 2 and Nicholas in JSS 2."

Fafore said he had no discussion with him, let alone an argument. "He came to the class. He checked his son's books and said nothing before he left. Well, it seemed he left abruptly. Perhaps, angrily too, given the way he stormed out. He did not have any word with his son or me..."

"Definitely, there is a problem. The MD says you have to go."

"Go? Go where?"

Fafore crashed into the sofa at the office. Sacked? How? Why? Questions raced through his mind. His thought flashed to his home, where his wife was heavily pregnant. He had also yet to complete the payment of his children's school fees. He had put the two of them in a school near his abode in Ifo. Apart from the long distance to Lagos, he could not afford Stardom's fees. The management gave teachers who had been in the school up to seven years the concession of paying only 50 per cent fee on any child. Other charges remained sacrosanct—like those for books, feeding, uniform etc. Yet, Fafore could not buy in. He would still have to pay up to N250,000 on each of the children if they had to school at Stardom.

When he returned to the staff room, he found some of his colleagues were already discussing his matter. He wondered how they knew. But, of course, at Stardom, information travelled faster than light.

"Fafoo, what happened?" Mrs. Ose, the Igbo Language teacher, asked.

Before he could answer, three more questions had jumped out of the mouths of other staff.

"Honestly, I don't know," Fafore said, as he began to sort personal items on his desk, indicating to his colleagues that the ordeal was real. The staff, visibly unhappy, wondered what went wrong. It was a lesson to them all: there was no job security in the establishment.

"What do you expect when you are working in a one-man business?" Audu asked, unusually serious. "I have always said that the job we have is the type of the wind can blow away any time, any day, depending on the mood of our employer. I think we shouldn't allow this matter to go on like this."

"What would you do? What power do you have to change anything? Do you want to fight your employer?" the Agric teacher, Mr. Obi, queried. Just then, a message came from the principal: all teachers were to congregate at the MD's office for an emergency meeting.

It was at the meeting that the still-enraged MD announced why Fafore had to quit, and why others could soon follow suit. But no sooner did she begin to speak than she stopped and winced, as pain fired her buttocks. She had sat down for hours during the day. Now, her bum had begun to revolt. She squirmed and readjusted her

backside on the chair. Her face reflected a mixture of two distinct troubles: Fafore's and her distressed bum. Everyone that saw her, however, believed her countenance was all about the embattled English teacher.

Armed with the double-barrelled frustration, the MD declared she was fed up with the embarrassment teachers were causing the school whenever they demonstrated incompetence, especially, in the presence of parents. "This school will no more tolerate incompetence," she dropped. "We employed you because you said you were professionals. Whether in Maths, Biology, Government or English—once you show that you are raw or more illiterate than the woman from whom you buy onions and pepper in Obalende, then, you have to go.

"I'm sure some of you must have learnt that Fafore, the so-called English teacher, is leaving this school today. And I think the principal too will, henceforth, have questions to answer. If you cannot monitor your teachers, if you do not check their notes, and parents have to uncover the abomination we ought to have eliminated internally, then you are bound for trouble. Imagine! A supposed English teacher! This is what a parent, who labours day and night to pay his children's fees, found in a note Fafore gave the students..."

Mrs. Ibidun Gloss collected five notebooks from the secretary, seated on her left. On the right was the principal. She had asked the secretary to randomly gather the notebooks from the class Fafore handled. The MD then opened a page and pointed out what she believed was a grammatical atrocity.

"Ade as well as Jide comes early," the MD read. She observed the staff, eager to see shock written all over their faces. "This was what the parent, Mr. Guta, saw and became so angry about that he threatened to withdraw his children from the school. What sort of an English teacher or any kind of a teacher would say, 'Ade as well as Jide comes', instead of 'Ade as well as Jide come'? Ladies and gentlemen, a teacher like Fafore—Mr. Ade-as-well-as-Jide- comes—has no place in this school," she submitted.

"Is this the reason we are sacking the man, ma?" the principal asked, with a chuckle.

"Is it not grievous enough?" the MD asked.

Some of the teachers murmured in her support or, at least, in mild protest against the way Bepo trivialised the matter. The principal's response infuriated the MD greatly. At once, she thought he also might not survive the scandal. "So, Bepo, 'Ade as well as Jide comes' is your position too, and your estimation of what represents the standard of this school?"

"There is nothing grievous about the statement," Bepo began, unruffled. "There

is no error whatsoever. It is a piece of Standard English. As a matter of fact, we have to quickly call Fafore back and update Mr. Guta too. I wish he had not left. More importantly, we have to call Fafore back. What he taught the students is correct. When you use 'and', the verb that follows is 'come'. But when you use 'as well as', 'together with' 'alongside' etc., we go for the singular verb with 's'. The clause is in the subjunctive mood and does not align with normal grammar rules."

Not impressed by the 'blasphemy' the principal was muttering, the MD directed everyone to bring out his or her smartphone and investigate the assertion online. Interestingly, all discovered that Fafore and the principal were right. Mr. Guta was wrong. The MD was wrong.

Silence. The MD had ranted publicly about an error that didn't exist. She had set in motion the sacking of a guiltless employee. She had embarrassed hardworking Fafore. Now, she felt deflated. Some teachers felt sorry for her. Others thought she could have been more discrete about the affair. No one knew exactly how to break the ice. But Mr. Audu was on hand to save the day.

He cleared his throat and confessed he had something "even more important" to add to the grammatical trial. Everyone waited to hear what that could be, especially as the English question had already been roundly resolved. "I just want to say that Mr. Fafore," he began, picking his words heavily, "as well as the principal," he continued, "is correct. And the MD, Mrs. Ibidun Gloss, is hereby pardoned, discharged and acquitted."

The room rocked with laughter. Audu had done what he knew best. He stood to his feet, smiling mischievously, and gave the already-amused Mrs. Ibidun Gloss a Japanese bow.

"Audu, if I lay my hands on you!" she returned. "Principal, give him the sack letter as soon as you collect it from my great teacher, Fafore." Everyone laughed again.

Seven

Ritualists

BEPO joined Stardom Schools after a stint at Beesway Group of School, located on the outskirts of Lagos. He wondered if he could ever forget the clash he had with the Beesway management regarding an error he spotted in the school's name. As the senior English teacher, he had pointed out that the name ought to be 'Beesway Group of Schools', not 'Group of School'. He noted that the phrase, 'group of', implies there were more than one school; therefore, the singular noun was incorrect.

"Sir, it is like saying, 'a group of man' when we mean 'a group of men'," he explained to the director, Mr. Egi Meko. "Or like saying, 'a collection of bag' or 'a bevy of bird' instead of 'a collection of bags' and a bevy of birds'."

"Which one is *bevy*?" Meko asked, as if that was the only aspect of Bepo's argument that interested him.

"It means a large group of people or things, like 'a herd of cows' and not 'a herd of cow'."

The director thanked the 'learned linguist' – as he often called him – for the observation. Then he asked what exactly the senior English teacher wanted him to do. He knew where Bepo was headed but he feigned ignorance. In the recess of his mind, Mr. Meko actually laughed derisively because he could not contemplate changing his school's name in any way. Firstly, he reasoned, that was the name on all the school's facilities and documents. Secondly, it was the name registered at the Corporate Affairs Commission and the Ministry of Education.

"The most important reason I cannot change the name of my school," Meko explained to Bepo, "is that the name was divinely inspired. If I would put it another way, I will say it has a spiritual undertone. I believe you understand, because you are not a kid. What has 'group of school' got to do with the quality education we impart here? Do you know how well my students have been performing in external exams, *talk less* of internal examinations? Group of school! Are students complaining? No. Are parents complaining? No. Are the external examiners complaining? No. Is the government complaining? No. So, Mr. Bepo, the *Englisher*, let's leave the matter as it is. I know there is no word like Englisher. Just joking with you."

"Ironically, there is, sir," Bepo struggled to correct his boss, even if he had to overlook the error in 'talk less'. He knew what the director ought to have said was 'let alone'.

"You don't *mean't*?" Meko exclaimed, ostentatiously, pronouncing 'mean it' in a

way he believed was super British or American.

"I do. It is even in the dictionaries. It refers to a person who translates from a foreign language into English."

"Wao! That means I am almost an Englisher too," the director said and added, "considering that I even used the word *off head*."

Bepo skipped a breath as the erroneous phrase, 'off head', struck him. But he did not think the atmosphere was right to begin another round of correction. Besides, he felt the first grammatical blunder, which the director ought to have accepted most readily, was being downplayed.

Bepo thought: what was the big deal in changing 'Group of School' to 'Group of Schools'? Firstly, the management could start by effecting the change on the school's signboards on the premises, then move on to all files, books, etc. It could then proceed to the Corporate Affairs Commission, the Ministry, and other relevant bodies.

After the unsuccessful encounter, Bepo again raised the matter with the boss a couple of times because the grammatical palaver was happening in his subject territory. It was particularly insulting of his pedigree as the Senior English Language Teacher in the school. But something happened that finally made Bepo shut his mouth.

During a meeting of the school's Parent-Teacher Association, a parent raised the matter, backed by some others. As she spoke, the director fixed his eyes on Bepo, who was sat in the front row. The look was fierce and furious. The director appeared to be asking: "So, you have taken your madness to this level?"

Immediately the meeting was over, the director summoned Bepo to his office and accused him of plotting to destroy the school through his 'too-know ' mentality. Bepo explained that he never did what the director had in mind. That is: tell the parent about the error in the school's name.

"*Elefo, o' o, ni ooo. O lefoo oun kii s' efo aatan. Ta ni ko mo'pe ara lo n fuu*?" the director said, referencing a Yoruba proverb about guilt. It told the story of a hawker of vegetables plucked from a filthy dumpsite. A buyer simply calls out to her, having no intention to probe the source of the product. But burdened with guilt, and seeking to assure the buyer of feigned quality, the hawker retorts: "These vegetables are not from any dumpsite."

Bepo did all he could to convince the director that he never discussed the matter with any parent. He even swore, touching the crucifix that hung from his neck. It was Bepo's characteristic way of declaring, 'I am saying the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.' Whenever he desperately needed to make a point, he reached for the object. While that was enough to make some people believe him, the director remained unconvinced. "You can choose between working here or criticising the name of the school that pays your salary," he said with a tone of finality.

Bepo's experience at Beesway was quite tumultuous but it was not on account of wanting to correct the 'Group of School' blunder that he left. He walked away

voluntarily because of a matter he considered ungodly. He was not a great churchgoer. All the same, he believed he was close to God. When his wife was still in Nigeria, she used to lure or coerce him to go to church on Sundays. He often left her behind at the auditorium as he had a habit of disappearing as soon as the service ended. Seri was a member of three groups in the church and often attended post-service meetings. Bepo was originally a Catholic, but the woman convinced him to join her Pentecostal Truth Tellers Mission. As soon as she relocated to the UK, however, he returned to his Catholic faith, where he felt at home.

It was 2:30am. The almost pin-drop silence in Ojikutu showed nature maintains a disciplined order, no matter the place or time. Here was a Lagos suburb, ever busy during the day and through the night. Now, it was calm, quiet; save for an occasional whistle by some security guards.

Bepo lay on his bed in his room at the Beesway Staff Quarters. He had forced himself to bed at 12:00am. But sleep just wouldn't kiss his eyes. He had slept lavishly in the afternoon, being a Sunday. Whenever he spent long hours in bed during the day, he was sure the night would find him miserable, searching elusively for a nap. He wondered what he must do to fall asleep. He thought about sedatives. Sadly, he had none in the room. He was aware doctors rarely encouraged their use. The drugs could, among other risks, lead to addiction. But at nights when the goddess of sleep became too miserly with her drowsy bosom, Bepo cared less what any doctor thought. He would toss a capsule or two down his throat. Moments afterwards, he would snore.

He rose from the bed and headed for the refrigerator in a corner of the room. He needed a cup of cold water. Perhaps, that might do the trick, he thought. He had switched off the light in the room. He barely needed it as rays from the floodlights positioned at different corners of the premises lit the room faintly. He peered through the window, his dry eyes viewing much of the large space that included the assembly ground. He moved closer and drew the blinds sideways. Suddenly, the floodlights went off. Every light at the length and breadth of the school premises was off. What happened? Yet, Bepo noticed that, two hundred meters or more away from the school, lights were still on.

As the puzzle lingered, Bepo thought he saw something move in the dark. It looked human. Then he saw another, and another, and yet another! What could they be? He studied the shapes intently. As the movements continued, it became clearer what the mystery was. Of course, they were not ghosts. They were humans. But who could they be? He stared harder through the darkness. His eyes were not betraying his mind. A torch flashed through the void. Bepo's confusion thickened. It was 2:51am. No student was expected to be out at such an unholy hour. No teacher either or resident.

As his eyes attuned to the darkness, Bepo picked out five men. He also made out a large whitish thing, moving alongside the men. It was a cow. Apparently, one of the

men was holding the leash. Bepo, glued to the spot, watched in amazement. The men stopped. Five minutes later, two other men appeared. It seemed, initially that they had literally walked out from Mother Earth. Not so. The duo had actually climbed out of a pit. There was a brief moment of inactivity.

What could they be doing? What could they be discussing? Two of the men moved to the rear of the 'whitish thing'. No sooner had they positioned themselves than the beast began to inch towards the pit. What is going on, Bepo thought, mystified! They certainly are not about to bury a cow, he thought, bewildered.

He turned swiftly from the window. He grabbed his crucifix, hung it on his neck. A T-shirt lay beside his pillow. He put it on; complementing the night trousers he wore. Bepo shoved his hand under the bed, retrieved a broad-headed double-edged machete and was soon descending the stairs.

"Who are you?" a voice out of the darkness questioned, as Bepo walked with resolve, yet cautiously towards the figures. If his ears did not play any pranks on him, he was sure the voice was familiar.

"I ask: who are you?" the voice repeated.

"Di...Di...Director!" Bepo exclaimed, astonished. Director, are you burying the cow alive?"

"What! Who is this?" one of the men barked. The indignation in the voice was unmistakable. "Will you keep your mouth shut!" another man ordered, simultaneously. "And get away from here, immediately, before we make you regret!" a third voice roared.

"You again...Mr. Bepo? What business brings you out at this hour? Is this the students' hostel you are supposed to be minding?" the boss asked. As the director spoke, the men quickly turned their attention away from the intruder. Resolutely, they hasted to finish the grim task, pushing, and pulling harder.

"No! Director, you can't! This is cruel! This is animalistic! Ungodly! You shouldn't bury that thing alive!" Bepo affirmed."

"Get lost! How is that your problem? Are we burying a human being?" the director fumed.

"Even if it is not human, it is living. Director, this is wickedness! Inhumanity!" A man, who all the while, had lurked in the dark, unseen, approached Bepo from behind, club in hand. He raised the weapon and brought it down hard on Bepo's right wrist. The machete fell to the ground as a sharp pain coursed through Bepo's limb. Two other men rushed towards him. There was a brief struggle. And soon, Bepo was on his back. Even in the darkness, he could make out the shape of the machete positioned menacingly above his head.

"Handle him gently! Gently!" the director ordered. "*Oga*, no, sir. I said no, sir!" one of the men replied defiantly, then added: "If he wants to go down with the cow, why should we stop him?"

Bepo recognised the voice. It was the man that had threatened: "Get away from

here immediately before we make you regret!"

He knew it was time he disappeared from the scene. The director pacified the angry accomplices and helped the Senior English Teacher back on his feet. He led Bepo back to the room from where, earlier, he had stormed out like a Crusader – then returned to finish up the dark assignment.

A million thoughts danced crazily in Bepo's head. The remaining hours before daybreak were unusually longer than he ever imagined. The live burial of a cow... the threat against his life... everything seemed like fiction. Did that really happen on the school ground? Was that actually the director he thought he had always known? What was the reason for the bizarre action? Why did they have to bury a cow alive? What did they hope to achieve?

He had heard tales of eerie rituals carried out by some school owners and patrons of other businesses. Shortly after he concluded the National Youth Service Corps scheme, he and a colleague set up a neighbourhood school. The colleague was a teacher in a public school. Since Bepo had yet to find an employment, they decided to start out small in the education sector. They rented a two-bedroom flat, and Fruitful Future School was born. The dream unfolded slowly but enrolment began to grow at the third session. They ensured fees were lower than what obtained in the area. They also tried to up their game, using marker boards at a time most of their competitors were hooked on chalkboards.

Bepo also introduced a business trick he learnt at the school in Warri, Delta State, where he observed his National Youths Service. Pupils were encouraged to teach their parents a topic when they returned home. The topic, of course, was among the ones they must have learnt during the school day. Parents particularly found it a novel idea. It reassured them that quality teaching was taking place at Fruitful Future. Thereafter, good news about the school spread. And before the end of the third session, the number of pupils had grown to over 70. The fees stayed minimal. Some parents defaulted, but Bepo and his colleague saw a great future for the school.

Mr Ogo, a parent, visited him in his office one Monday morning. The father had recently paid the third and final instalment of his boy's fees. The school permitted such mode of payment. As Mr Ogo walked in, Bepo, who was the HM (Headmaster), felt the man had something important to share with the management.

"I know you are trying hard. Many people are saying good things about your place," Mr Ogo said, as he muttered prayers for the HM and the school.

"Thank you," Bepo responded.

"Yes. But there is something else you need to do."

"Thanks. Like adverts?"

But Mr. Ogo was not thinking about adverts. Bepo could not believe the crux of the meeting: the parent had come, offering to perform a rite that would supernaturally flood the school with pupils in no time. What was the magic? He would sprinkle a few grains of corn at corners of the school, following which

unprecedented enrolment would follow.

"And what would happen to the grains afterward?" Bepo asked, not because he was keen about any ritual. He was simply inquisitive. "Nothing much. You need not mind them again. What is important is that the process will translate into abundant enrolment. Students will be trooping in from left and right," Mr. Ogo emphasised. The parent cum magician added that the money needed for the rite was not much: just N35,000.

Bepo and his colleague refused to buy in, even though the man persisted. Shortly afterwards, Mr. Ogo withdrew his child from the school. Bepo believed Fruitful Future would become great without ritualistic short cuts. He believed the same success would apply to many other good schools in the country. With experienced teachers who are well paid, an environment conducive to learning, and an inspiring curriculum, coupled with good school-parent relationship, any school would grow and prosper. He knew schools that were so committed; they even had Saturday lessons for students who cared to attend. He knew schools that engaged specialists to team up with their own teachers whenever WAEC and NECO examinations drew near. He knew schools that motivated their teachers so well with inspiring health, housing, and retirement packages. There was even the well-reported case of Heroes Haven, which offered a two-bedroom apartment to any teacher that spent up to 15 years in the school! So, why should he and his colleague delve into any ritual to build up Fruitful Future?

Sadly, the school did not last as anticipated as no sooner access roads in the area collapsed. Apart from prolonged neglect by state and local governments, a giant water pipe ruptured, making a mess of the environment. As time went on, frustrated residents began to move away, leaving the place to only the helpless who could not afford Fruitful Future's tuition, as low as the fees were. Even more unfortunately, the headmaster and his colleague could not raise any substantial fund to relocate from the area. The lofty dream thus ended as they were forced to close down the facility, while Bepo resumed at another school for his first professional teaching experience.

Ten years later, however, Bepo sat one evening watching the news, when the anchorman reported of a Mr Ogo who murdered a civil servant: a woman who had consulted him over her infertility. Having been married for seven years without a child, the woman approached Ogo for a spiritual solution. Over the course of a year's 'treatment', the spiritual doctor received N9 million as fee from the woman, promising the charms he gave would make her pregnant. However, nothing happened.

Disappointed, the woman insisted on a refund. When the children manufacturer was not forthcoming, she threatened to have him arrested. As the narrative went, the spiritualist, one afternoon, invited the her to his house, on the pretext that he was ready to make a part payment in cash. At this point, the news anchor man warned that some viewers might find the upcoming images disturbing.

The camera turned to the scene of the murder. It was a lush garden at the spiritual

doctor's backyard. He drugged the client and then ushered her unto a chair, which, unknown to the woman, was deviously placed atop a grave-sized pit. No sooner had she fallen in that two club-wielding accomplices appeared from their hideout and pounded her. She was still breathing when they sealed the pit.

Bepo thought the face of the suspect on TV struck a chord. Yes! He had seen that face before. But where? Just then, the cameraman zoomed point-blank on the alleged culprit. And there, flanked by armed policemen, with hands cuffed, looking like a fowl drenched in a rainstorm, was Mr. Ogo!

Bepo was depressed, confused. He contemplated reporting the Beesway director to the police. But was he ready to face the impending battle? Firstly, he wondered if he could muster enough resources to mobilise the police and probably some other law enforcement agencies. Did he have the money to 'push' the case all the way? He knew he could be asked to pay for the sheet of paper on which he would write his statement at the police station. He knew he might be asked to fuel the police vehicle with which officers would go and arrest the suspects. Did he have enough financial strength to withstand the director in protracted court cases?

It occurred to him that he could contact relevant agencies or non- governmental organisations, like those involved in animal rights. But did they exist in Nigeria? He was not sure. What about the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Education? Yea, that could be it. After all, the director was endangering the health of the pupils, Bepo thought. But was he ready to launch into the river? Was that the prime thing he wanted to do with his life? What if the big man became desperate and began to fight him in strange ways? By the way, what was the motive behind burying a cow alive in a school? Did he, Bepo, know? Was he sure?

He was still reviewing these thoughts when his phone rang at 9:07am. He had neither taken his bath nor performed any chore, let alone resume work. The phone rang twice again: it was the director. "Good morning, Mr. Bepo. You have not resumed at the office today. I asked the secretary to call you. Can you see me in the office, now?"

The call compounded Bepo's dilemma. He never said he would come to see him. He didn't say he would not either. But what could he do? He knew it was time to leave Beesway. Thus, before he showed up at the director's office, about two hours later, Bepo had moved his belongings, both in his room and at the staff room.

The director apologised for the assault Bepo suffered and explained that what the senior English teacher stumbled upon over the night was nothing dangerous or occultic. He said it was actually part of a special prayer for his late father, who had given him the land on which the school was built.

Bepo did not answer him a word.

Eight

Missions Unaccomplished

A Legal tussle between the families of two of his pupils stood out among matters Bepo would leave unresolved as he stepped out of the country. He wished the matter did not linger. What began as a child's play had lasted three years. It seemed like a joke stretched too far; an unbelievable bitterness left to fester publicly.

The school had launched the process of choosing a new set of prefects. As usual, it would be elective. The Stardom management believed it was important to introduce the learners to the democratic culture as early as possible. Even at the primary section, the emergence of class representatives was democratic. Pupils were encouraged to indicate interest and go through the process from start to finish. They bought forms at costs that depended on the offices they were vying for. Intent forms for the positions of Head Boy and Head Girl were sold for N50,000; their deputies, N40,000; and N25,000 for all other offices that included Chapel Prefect, Health Prefect, Social Prefect, Labour Prefect and Punctuality Prefect.

After purchasing the forms, the aspirants would be screened by a panel constituted by the management. The panel comprised both academic and non-academic staff as well as two observers drawn from the school's alumni association. At the screening stage, Stardom sought to ensure each intending prefect was above average academically. He or she must also have a good moral history, especially in school. The aspirant must have been in the school for up to two sessions and was not expected to owe fees. The debt-free condition was golden, as far as the management was concerned. For this, Mrs. Ibidun Gloss had a witty saying: "If you want a debtor to lead fee payers, ask a tenant to lead the landlord." It needed no explanation.

On the day the aspirants faced the five-man panel, each was expected to read out his or her Expression of Interest letter and speak to it in about three minutes. It was a way of gauging their power of communication. Once the screening hurdle was scaled, the list of candidates would be read at the assembly. This would enable the voters to know them and also raise any objections, via letters, to the panel, which, in turn, ensured it protected the identity of any petitioner. The list would be posted on the school's main notice board for two weeks, after which the candidates would address the students at the much-anticipated Speech Day. The election was held the following day.

Stardom Schools was sure it was following a cool process. But something happened which terribly hurt the arrangement that year and eventually got the democratic tradition suspended. On Speech Day, Banky, an SSS 2 student contesting the post of Social Prefect, became so emotional that he employed arguably a vulgar language on his key opponent, Tosh, also in SSS 2. At a point, in his presentation, Banky said: "Instead of voting for the son of an ex- convict, cast your vote for me. You will never regret."

The students cheered as he concluded the presentation, until the principal rose from the table where he sat with members of the officiating panel. He was disappointed at Banky's choice of words: calling the father of a fellow student an ex-convict. Before Bepo could talk sense into the contestant, Tosh had stood up from his seat and began stomping out of the hall. Three teachers rushed to pacify him and bring him back, but he was resolved, resisting violently as he hasted away.

"Banky, why would you call the father of your fellow student an ex-convict? That is morally bad," the principal reprimanded.

While a child may have all the strength to cut a tree in a forest, it's the elderly that can tell the direction the tree would fall. The managing director of Stardom Schools found this adage most apt. Besides the fact that protest greeted Tosh's exit—his fans calling for outright cancellation of the speech-making event until he was brought back—the rivalry between him and Banky predated the programme. It ran deeper than what played out because it involved parents of the duo.

When they—Banky and Toss—were in JSS 3, they clashed in the Best Dancer category at the end-of-year party. Both were finalists in the hip-hop category and competed fiercely for victory. So outstanding were their performances that the audience was sharply divided on who carried the day. The judges also were stunned. Eventually, they crowned Banky on a 3-2 vote. But Tosh's mum, who was in the crowd (like Banky's mother too), felt slighted and complained bitterly against the decision. She and her husband later wrote an official letter, protesting that their son was robbed of victory.

The parents even threatened a lawsuit and swore they would withdraw Tosh and his younger brother. Months after, the mothers again clashed during the PTA election, where Banky's mum beat the latter to become the treasurer. Perhaps, what escalated the rivalry was the fact that the fathers of both boys were politicians and belonged to either of the two leading and belligerent political parties—Progressives All Congress and Democratic People's Party.

Tosh's father, Chief Didi Ogba, was not an ex-convict. Although years back, he spent 36 months in detention, facing trial for alleged misappropriation of a N2.5 billion government contract sum. The trial dragged for five years. But he was later

released while his company was ordered to refund the sum. The court ruled that he was not directly guilty of the offence.

The school initiated peace moves but Chief Ogba, also a top lawyer, insisted Banky and his parents write separate letters of apology to him and Tosh. He also insisted the letters be published conspicuously in the school magazine. Banky's parents, however, rejected the ultimatum. First, they requested the video of their son's alleged offensive speech, which their lawyer studied and came up with the conclusion that Banky never mentioned the name 'Ogba'. Besides, they affirmed that Chief Ogba's demand amounted to victimisation of their son.

Bepo was close to both families and hoped he would be able to pacify the aggrieved parties. But his moves were futile. Now, as he planned to relocate, the legal action instituted by Ogba was nearing conclusion. He believed there was still room for an out-of-court settlement, having persuaded the management to explore alternative dispute resolution.

Bepo was also upset that he would miss the Invention Club. He was particularly worried about the fate that would befall the five- year-old Breath Project—the club's phone-making initiative, using recycled panels and chips. He was an active patron of the club, despite the fact that he was not a scientist. Bepo always argued that invention was not necessarily limited by discipline. The project had attracted media and government interest, with the school and an NGO, called Life Grid, committing funds to its development. Bepo anticipated the day his students would conclude research and production, so that the school would announce to the world that it had manufactured a phone. He feared that if he left Nigeria, the project could derail. But if it cruised to completion, Bepo swore he would do everything possible to fly in from London and be part of the launch.

Nine

Laughing Waterfalls

STARDOM Schools had been on an excursion to Badagry before. In the past 10 years, it must have travelled there about three times. That included when the school organised a retreat for teachers, lodging them at the Whispering Palms Resort. On the part of the students, they visited renowned and iconic sites in the historical town. JSS 1 students also went on an excursion as part of their Welcome to Stardom package, visiting the city of white sand and coconuts.

While teachers, some staff and parents might have complaints about the school management, they could not deny it well deserved credit for giving students great exposure and making learning fun. Apart from never lagging behind in the celebration of special days—Children's Day, Mother's Day and Teachers' Day—it organised parties, concerts and lectures that featured experts from different fields. Some of these programmes even took the pupils out of Lagos.

During his two decades plus with the school, Bepo successfully sold to the management the idea of an excursion per term, to a place of attraction within the country, and an annual international excursion. There were few occasions when the management could not keep to the yearly schedule. Nevertheless, it kept the idea running over 70 per cent of the time. Bepo wanted the students to have a thorough grasp of their country. He was aware many of them came from elite families that would eventually send them abroad after secondary education. He believed the knowledge the learners gained about the country while in foundation schools would enhance their intimacy with the fatherland in the future, because many would never come back.

Based on this philosophy, students of the school visited quintessential places like the Ikogosi Warm Springs in Ekiti State, Erin Ijesha Waterfalls in Osun State and the Owu Waterfalls in Kwara which is the highest in West Africa, measuring 120 meters above water level and cascading 330 feet down an escarpment. The students also went to the Gurara Falls in Niger State.

A symbol of Nigeria's rich tourist attractions, the waterfalls exude a gripping natural ambience and wondrous allure. And while they boast ever gurgling waters splashing against joyous ribs of lucky rocks, some of them radiate very interesting stories. For instance, the Ikogosi was, in 1852, discovered by Rev. John S. McGee, from his mission base in nearby Igede-Ekiti. He had defied warning by the natives that visiting the springs could be fatal, invoking the wrath of supernatural forces. McGee,

however, conquered the myth and wrote:

"After seeing it, I felt it could be used for a good purpose. I discussed the possible use of it with some of the Mission and (Nigerian Baptist) Convention friends. With the growing interest of Royal Ambassador work, and youth work, we felt that it could best be used by building a Youth Camp. I took it up with the Ekiti Association and we decided to build a camp for our R.A.s and G.A.s. The land was secured through the Convention."

The state government eventually took over the site and developed it for tourism purposes.

The Gurara was said to have been discovered by a Gwari hunter, called Buba, in 1745; almost two centuries before some Europeans chanced upon it in 1925. The Erin-Ijesha Waterfalls—also known as *Olumirin*—was discovered in 1140 AD by one of the daughters of Oduduwa, forebear of the Yoruba. One source, however, notes that hunters discovered it in 1140 AD. Another, yet, says the site was discovered by a woman called Akinla, the founder of Erin-Ijesha town and a granddaughter of Oduduwa, during the migration of Ife people to Erin-Ijęsha.

To show that Stardom meant business, it listed other waterfalls it planned to visit as the years rolled by. These included the Kwa Falls in Anegeje, Calabar; Assop in Plateau; Karu in Nasarawa; and Barup in Gembu, Taraba State. Also, on Bepo's personally researched list were the Awhum Waterfalls in Enugu, Owerre Ezukuka in Anambra, and Agbokim in Cross River State. Others on the to-visit list were the Farin Ruwa Waterfalls in Nasarawa State and the Matsirga in Kafanchan, Kaduna State. Bepo recalled sadly that the students, when they visited Ikogosi Warm Springs, did not have enough time to see the Arinta Waterfalls nearby. He hoped that even after he might have left Stardom, the school would, one day, be on the road to Arinta, a waterfall surrounded by mini rocks, uniquely flaunting seven distinct steps.

Stardom had also been to the Yankari Games Reserve in Bauchi, the National War Museum in Umuahia, Abia State; the Hanging Lake in Ado Awaye, Oyo State; the amazing Kano Palace in Kano State and multi-layered and culture-imbued Ooni of Ife Palace in Ile-Ife. Bepo recalled that the students also explored the site of the tall Oranmiyan Staff (by which Oduduwa, the forebear of the Yoruba, was said to have descended from heaven) as well as the elegant ambience of Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, where Mrs. Ibidun Gloss graduated with a Law degree.

At national festivals too, Stardom sometimes stood to be counted. Its students had been part of the Calabar Carnival, Osun Osogbo Festival, Argungu Festival in Kebbi, and the Ofala Festival in Onitsha. Bepo believed *ile la tii kesoo r'ode*—a Yoruba proverb meaning charity begins at home. Thus, Stardom students and graduands should have Lagos tourism etched on their memory. It was why the pupils regularly visited the National Theatre, Iganmu, Surulere; the National Museum, the MUSON Centre and City Mall—all in Onikan. They had been to the Epe Fish Market, Ijede Warm Spring in the Ikorodu area as well as the Sungbo Eredo in Epe- Ijebu, described

as a system of defensive ditches built in 800-1000 AD, in honour of the Ijebu matriarch, Bilikisu Sungbo.

Other places they toured in Lagos included the University of Lagos, Akoka; the Lagos State University, Ojo; Lagos State Broadcasting Station, Agidingbi; the NTA station on Victoria Island and African Independent Television station in Alagbado. They had also been to the headquarters of several big companies such as Chevron, Lekki; Shell, at Broadstreet; UBA, First Bank and ConOil Towers in Marina; Globacom on Victoria Island, MTN in Ikoyi and 9Mobile on Banana Island. To show the students that life is a potpourri of opposites, the students visited high-class environments like Banana Island, Snake Island and Magodo; and largely derided zones like Mushin, Ajegunle and Ijora. They also visited the SOS Village in Isolo and other charity homes.

"Being born in a place like this does not condemn one to a life of penury," Bepo told the students the day they visited Ajegunle. "If you are determined, committed to education, make the best use of your talent, time will move you from slum to limelight. You will be surprised to learn that many of those you see on Banana Island started off in slums somewhere in the country. Life is about movement; it is ever ready to move upward folks who make the best use of their talents, money and opportunities."

He reminded them that music and soccer stars such as Odion Ighalo and Victor Osimhen grew up in the low ends of Lagos.

Under Bepo's supervision and insatiable appetite for education-by-adventure, Stardom had been to the Iju Waterworks in Adiyan, the Yaba Psychiatric Hospital, where the students were addressed on the evils of hard drugs; the OYASAF Foundation House in Maryland, which has over 7,000 artworks collected privately by Prince Yemisi Adedoyin; and Lagos Blue Rail mega station in CMS. But in the spirit of World Slavery Day, they were back in Badagry, where the excursion, led personally by Bepo, would have implication for his proposed relocation.

Badagry is a significant town in Lagos State and in Nigeria because of its pioneering contact with Atlantic slave traders. It is home to monuments such as the First Storey Building in the country, built by Henry Townsend in 1846 and where Ajayi Crowther stayed and made the first translation of the Yoruba Bible. Badagry is the base of the Agiya Tree under which Christianity was first preached in Nigeria, the Mobee Royal Family Slave Relics Museum, which houses chains, padlocks, rods etc., used on the slaves kept there, enroute to the Point of No Return; and the Seriki Abass Slave Museum, originally built by an ex-slave-turned slave trader.

During the last excursion, the first port of call for the Stardom team, which comprised 40 students from SSS 1 to SSS 3, was the palace of the Akran of Badagry. The king hosted the pupils and served them some refreshment. The monarch explained to the students how Badagry was founded in the late 1720s by Popo refugees from wars with the Fon people of Dahomey. Its contact with white explorers and slave dealers made the town a harbour from which slaves were exported to the

Americas.

"But the story of our industry is far bigger than that of the unfortunate slave trade," the king had said. "We are strategically big in business, in agriculture and tourism. As far back as the 1820s, a British trading post was established here. We actually developed as a palm-oil port, just as we were big in the importation of cloths. While the return of freed slaves in the 1830s also enriched our history, culture and business, coconut plantations had been established here by the 1880s."

There was a comic interlude when one of the students asked Kabiyesi if it was true that the name, 'Badagry', was derived from *Agbadarigi*. The monarch affirmed the story.

Then the trip continued with a visit to the First Storey Building, where the students spotted the first copy of the translated Bible. They moved to the first primary school in Nigeria—the Anglican Nursery and Primary School, formerly Nursery of Infant Church, located in the Tapo area of Badagry. It was established in 1843. They were also at the Point of No Return, where natives captured as slaves were thrown into ships that took them to Western countries. These slaves were, thereafter, resold abroad and taken to the farms of white masters.

At the Black Heritage Museum, Bepo was emotionally moved by the memory of the ugly experiences the enslaved went through. This was after he had seen relics and listened to a narration by the museum officer. He felt Africans had always been targets of barbarity and embarrassment. That was what happened during the trans-Atlantic Slave Trade between 1500 and 1900.

But the principal had more questions. How, for instance, would anyone explain what had become the vogue? That is: Africans themselves, especially Nigerians, in *Japa fit*, voluntarily and desperately walking into the workforce of who seemed to be the yester masters. The new slavery, as he saw it, was what many were now dying to be part of. They were having sleepless nights, praying and fasting to get visas. They were selling all they had to pay fare. They are abandoning families, schools, work, businesses and professions they built over the years, just to escape the harsh environment at home and collect high-valued dollars, pounds and euros abroad. In the process, many took up all the oddest jobs and became the ever-weeping race, accursedly rushing into enslavement after centuries of the Trans-Atlantic. The sentiment and resentment swelled through Bepo as he pictured himself also on the streets of Europe.

Ten

Passport Pains

BECAUSE Bepo had not been keen on relocating abroad, he did not bother to renew his passport duly. The document expired two years earlier. Initially, he weighed the possibility of calling a contact at the immigration office in Lagos, Ikoyi. He wanted to put the staff on notice. But he did not do so in time. Then COVID-19 set in. This made renewal impossible. Even after the pandemic had lost its war against humanity, Bepo was not one of the first persons at the passport office. At a point, he developed a phobia for the renewal, having heard tales of new rules, hassles applicants were experiencing, and non-availability of booklets.

By the first quarter of 2022, when Bepo realised he could no longer resist pressure to travel from his family, getting the passport renewed had become an emergency somewhat. Besides the anticipated stress at the immigration office, the *Japa* syndrome had greatly swelled the number of heads turning up. The maddening rush at every passport office, especially in Lagos, scared Bepo. Since he could not afford to waste time or sleep on the veranda of some pot-bellied passport official, out of desperation for a renewal, he had to explore other options.

One of such was to prepare an amount larger than the normal fees, collude with an agent, or find an officer that could be bribed. He was told he would need up to N200,000 or N250,000 to have the passport renewed within a month or less. He could even have it in fewer days if he was ready to drop more cash. Another alternative was to travel to the Immigration Service in any of the neighbouring states, such as Ogun, Oyo, Osun and Kwara. In these places, there would be less crowds than in Ikoyi or Ikeja.

Bepo eventually settled for Ibadan, the Oyo State capital, where he found the contact of an agent that could hasten the process. The government as well as the immigration leadership had repeatedly announced that the process could be done online or manually without bribing anyone. The use of middlemen had been outlawed, with a threat that anyone found interfering illegally would be prosecuted. But, as the agent in Ibadan told Bepo, the law existed only on paper. Making an attempt online could be very slow or erratic: many people abandoned it halfway and returned to the passport office. Some even suspected that the glitch was caused deliberately to frustrate folks who would have no other option than pursue their applications in-person. As Bepo found out, the so-called agents were actually

working hand in glove with officials of the Immigration Service.

Bepo spoke, firstly, with the agent on the phone. The man, called Tai, asked him to pay N100,000 for a 10-year renewal (64 pages), instead of the official N70,000. The pushed-up charge was to expedite action the two major initial processes that included data capturing. "After capturing, you could pay N20,000 to make the collection faster," Tai had explained.

On a Tuesday afternoon, Bepo set out for Ibadan, hoping to keep an early Wednesday appointment at the immigration office. He planned to spend the night in the ancient city and be at the Agodi-Gate passport office as early as 7:00am – the time fixed by Tai. He decided he would not go in his car: it had been long since he travelled on the Lagos-Ibadan route. Besides, he was worried about security issues.

At the Ibadan end of the road, there had, around the time, been few cases of kidnapping, fuelling the fear that bandits had relocated to the area. The country was just beginning to have some respite, security-wise, following renewed assault by the military on insurgents and bandits in the North. The numerical strength of the criminals was getting depleted. They appeared to be seeking less risky grounds, raising concerns that they were finding a new footing in the South-West. Bepo felt he had better travel by a public bus. He knew that no vehicle type was immune to onslaught by the scoundrels, but he was satisfied the commercial drivers understood the area better.

He boarded a six-passenger Toyota Sienna car at the Ojota park. Unlike days when people faced heavy traffic on the popular road, the trip was entirely stress-free. This was, especially, the case between the infamous Ojota and Berger-Kara stretch, up to OPIC, where the road led to Isheri Estate – the headquarters of Channels Television.

The biggest surprise that awaited Bepo was that barely 50 minutes after, he and the other passengers would be touching down in Ibadan, thanks to the nearly completed reconstruction the Federal Government was carrying out on the road. The last time Bepo was on the route was 10 years earlier, when he led Stardom students on an excursion to Ile-Ife, Osun State. At the time, the expressway was terribly damaged: the journey, which now lasted less than an hour, had dragged on for over two hours. The road was now wider on both sides – at least, three lanes each.

The bus left OPIC ESTATE at 5:00pm. As a result, Bepo could still, before nightfall, observe developments on the expressway, described as the 'most important' in the country. He wondered whether pundits arbitrarily arrived at the ranking. What yardstick did they use? Bepo chuckled at the thought of the question. It was the main road that led to Lagos, the country's commercial nerve centre and biggest melting pot. Some had also claimed that up to 250,000 vehicles plied it daily. Bepo believed the figure would very likely have increased. Perhaps, the number of vehicles plying the Lagos-Ibadan Expressway was growing in tandem with the country's petrol subsidy. Bepo smiled at his mischievous thought.

The subsidy scheme was designed to make petrol affordable for citizens. But with every passing year, the ever-growing billions of naira it gulped left citizens thinking the more they looked the less they saw. Were the statistics enough to conclude that the Lagos- Ibadan Expressway was more important than, say, the road that led to Bayelsa, from where the country derived its largest volume of oil? Bepo reminded himself he ought to calm down as his mind was beginning to wander needlessly into politics.

Apart from filling stations, which had increased in number, he found that religious organisations and schools had also taken up a larger share of space on either side of the road. In the past, it was the likes of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) and Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministry (MFM) that were most noticeable along the expressway. But things had changed. While MFM is the first big one you see on the left, at Magboro, as you come from Berger, you would notice the Christian Pentecostal Mission on the right, after Ibafo. Shortly, by Aseese, you would get to the Christ Embassy ground, also on the right. About a minute's drive after, by the left, was the headquarters of NASFAT, the first major Islamic organisation on the route. Adjacent to NASFAT (Nasrul-lahi-il Fathi Society of Nigeria) was the Deeper Life Bible Church, with the Redeemed Christian Church of God's expansive Redemption Camp nestling about a kilometre away. The religious organisations had all along been there before the construction of the road. Now, Bepo thought, the grandeur of the new-look Expressway was making them even more noticeable.

While the conventional Christian and Islamic faiths stood to be counted, there was the Guru Maharaj base, shortly before the Ibadan Toll Gate, whose arrival in the area even preceded those of many of the aforementioned. He pondered the multiplicity of religious organisations on the road and its attendant irony. Nigeria, arguably, has many religionists but few godly people. Bepo restrained himself at the thought. Was he not becoming judgmental? Were there not truly many good Christians, Muslims, and traditionalists? Was he, Bepo, a saint after all? He smiled.

He was consoled by the fact that more business organisations were also

springing up along the route. This was the reason many observers believed the Oyo and Ogun State governments needed to take the axis more seriously because it promised a huge industrial base. Ogun, particularly, was benefitting more, in terms of the number of companies rising here and there on the Lagos-Ibadan Expressway. These included Mikano, a multi-faceted industry on the Long Bridge; Multi-Trex at Wawa, which was distressed due to debt issues; Punch Nigeria Limited and Lifemate Furniture in Magboro. He saw the signboards of McPherson and Babcock universities. No wonder, he thought, Ogun prided itself as possibly hosting the highest number of universities in the country.

Bepo observed that at the Ibadan end in Oyo State, some new business outfits were being developed, although their owners were yet to erect signboards. He noticed private universities springing up, including Dominion and the Oyo State Government-founded First Technical University, both at the Ibadan end. He also witnessed some changes in Ibadan township too. At Challenge, for instance, he discovered that a defining roundabout was no more there. The area had been redesigned to ease traffic congestion. He loved the sight of the brown roofs his eyes caught as soon as the Sienna descended the Molete overhead bridge. The sight became even more phenomenal as the vehicle reached the top of the hilly bridge after Bere. The scene reminded him of the legendary poet, J.P. Clark, and how he described the city in a poem titled, 'Ibadan'. Bepo struggled to recall some of the lines. Then he asked Google, which answered him:

Ibadan, running splash of rust
and gold-flung and scattered among
seven hills like broken china in the sun.

Such an evergreen and intense piece of art! He, however, felt worried that decades after Clark wrote the piece, the roofs he alluded to remained obstinately brown. The buildings, mostly constructed with mud, could be seen at the Idi Arere area, Oja Oba, Bere, and the Aremo zone, and many interior locations. While searching on Google for Clark's poem, his eyes had also caught the title of a novel—*Under the Brown Rusted Roofs*, by Abimbola Adelakun. Bepo hoped to read it later.

He remembered the innocent disgust some of his students expressed when they visited the University of Ibadan. They had followed the Challenge route, instead of Iwo Road, which (the latter) was more direct from Toll Gate. Bepo had made the Stardom bus pass through the belly of the city, so that they could appreciate its ancient essence. They returned to Lagos via the Agbowo-Iwo Road. As they passed the interior of the city, on their way to the university, one of the students had asked if Ibadan was a big

village. Bepo answered that it was not. He explained that there were many elitist areas that include Ring Road, Oluyole, Bodija and Akala. He also enlightened them on the political and pioneering status of Ibadan—host to the first university in Nigeria, the first stadium, and the first television station, among others.

By 6:40am the following day, he was already at the passport office in Agodi. That was the Ibadan miracle of commuting: never to be likened to Lagos. Because Lagosians always travelled with the fear of traffic palaver that is often their lot, Bepo left his hotel room at 6:25am, fearing he would not be able to keep the 7:00am appointment Tai gave him. He woke up late—6:05am, having barely slept until around 3:00am. His wife had called and engaged him in a lengthy phone conversation; and, hard as he tried, he could not have her shorten the talk time.

At the immigration office, Bepo tried to enter the premises before phoning Tai. But security officials stopped him at the gate, asking what his mission was. Bepo explained that he had come to resolve passport matters and needed to see someone first. The officers suggested he put a call across to the concerned. But rather than ask Bepo to walk in, Tai directed him to an open space opposite the office, which harboured several business centres. As it turned out, Tai was no immigration personnel and was not domiciled on the premises either. He was just an ordinary business centre operator, working in cahoots with some immigration staff. While some would call the guy a consultant, others might brand him a racketeer.

Bepo made payment to Tai, who retrieved and filled in details of the old passport. He also verified Bepo's National Identity Number (NIN), so that there would not be any issues during data capturing. The result of the check did not give an all clear to the principal: he would still have to visit the NIN office to validate his number. Bepo collected necessary data from Tai and went to meet the official Tai worked with. After exchanging pleasantries, the official took the documents in for validation. Fifteen minutes later, he returned with the old passport and asked Bepo to return for data capturing in three weeks. The applicant was happy the exercise did not last up to two hours.

"Is that all for today?" Bepo asked the personnel.

"Yes," the officer replied, confidently. "That is what you paid the extra amount for. If you had followed the normal channel, you would still be there with them," he added, pointing to a large crowd of people seated or standing inside a hall at the entrance of the premises.

"Thank you," Bepo said, handing the officer an extra N2,000 tip.

The man received it gratefully, gave Bepo a business card, and asked him to turn up early for the data capturing on the given date. He further reminded him to visit

the NIN office first.

But Bepo had a nasty experience at the NIN office. This was despite the fact that he wanted to, as the saying goes, be nice to anyone that was prepared to help him: just as it happened at the Immigration Service. But network glitches were terrible. He had to wait three more weeks for validation; by which time, he already risked missing his travel date.

Eleven

Point of No Return

A 3-D banner stretched colourfully across the length and breadth of the wall that overlooked the stage at the main hall of Stardom Schools. The school's purple and black colours enlivened the background. A large image of Bepo, laughing gracefully, was on the banner, headlined, 'FOR HE GAVE STARDOM HIS VERY BEST'. It was subtitled, 'Memorable Farewell for a Most Committed Principal, Adebepo Adewale'. Not until the day, many members of Stardom's community never knew that 'Bepo' had, actually, been the shortened form of Adebepo.

Confusion and debate concerning his future were over. He and the school had come to terms with the reality that he would depart. The only sacrifice Bepo had to make was to alter his departure date. This would give the management an opportunity to offer him a befitting farewell. He called Emirates airline to inform them he would shift his flight by a week. For this, he was asked to pay a $100 fine, which the school gladly paid.

The farewell programme began on a Wednesday with a novelty match between the school team and the staff. The event featured a lot of hilarious fraud, as the games master, Mr Ibe, who was also the referee, ensured the staff win 3-2. Every time the students came close to scoring, he would blow the whistle, citing a mysterious foul play. Even the staff's second goal came via a penalty that weirdly had to be taken five times – until the fifth player managed to beat Stardom's goalkeeper, Chido (Chish). So good was the young goal stopper, he had been invited to the country's Under-17 team. But in this abracadabra match, no one could really stop Mr Ibe's voodoo refereeing. After the staff had netted the third goal – eight minutes to the end – the games master blew the final whistle, swearing the time was up. He had sensed danger that the lads could equalise and was not ready to take chances. But it was all fun as the players capped the game with singing and dancing around Bepo.

On Thursday, a debate was held in his honour. The crux was: the arts have contributed more to development of the country than the sciences. Representatives of SSS 3 opposed the assertion, while their SSS 2 counterparts proposed it. The opponents, predictably, sought to win the audience over by espousing the values of science in health, energy, technology etc. The proponents, on the other hand, inspiringly, shook the table by highlighting the fact that Nigeria's arts, culture, and entertainment sector had blessed the country with more appreciable impacts. They cited the fact that Nigeria had not won the Nobel Prize in Science whereas Professor Wole Soyinka earned the Nobel Prize for Literature as far back as 1986 – "even long before our opponents were born".

The audience roared excitedly, following the ingeniously delivered 'long-before-our-opponents-were-born'. It was an upper cut. Bepo was glad that Maryam, the lead debater for the arts, smartly landed the jab, which underlined the importance of modest humour in debating. He always stressed this as one of the techniques to be deployed at speaking competitions. The arts advocates also noted the role Nollywood had played in Nigeria's Gross Domestic Product, diplomacy, and recreation. They even argued that music was, at the time, the nation's biggest export.

At the end, SSS 3 was adjudged the winner. Nevertheless, Bepo felt fulfilled at the brilliance, initiative and candour displayed by the students. He saw this as the fruit of a seed he had sown. He always believed the Yoruba proverb: *'B'Onirese ofingba mo, eyi to ti fin sile 'ko le p'arun'*. That is: even if *Onirese*, the master carver, eventually bows out of the trade, the carvings he has bequeathed to the world will live on.

From 1:00pm to 3:00pm, every Friday, Stardom had socio- cultural activities. That was why the school easily and predictably dedicated the programme to the grand finale of the Bepo send-off. The choral group opened the floor with an inspirational performance. It was followed by comedy skits by the drama club, which 'principally' imitated Bepo. Humorously, the comedians aped the way he often spoke on the assembly ground, with his trademark 'other things being equal...', 'by the way...' and 'if you say education is too expensive try...' He always allowed the students to complete the popular saying, by chanting "...try ignorance!" Of course, they also did not forget the 'principl' pronunciation.

Bepo might just have realised for the first time that he actually loved putting his left hand in his left pocket while speaking. Most revealing, perhaps, he discovered he could get naughty while reprimanding any teacher who failed to be punctual in class. An imaginary encounter the skit makers staged also indicated he was not immune to hot temper, especially when a teacher became lackadaisical.

The last main offering of the day was a string of dances by the drama club. These included the Bata, Atilogwu, Koroso and Canoe dances. The Yoruba Bata involved mathematical movements of the arms, shoulders and legs, fired by the Bata drum. (Because the instrument was not available, the students improvised with the djembe.) The Igbo Atilogwu dancers dazzled the crowd with spirited body movements and acrobatics. Koroso, one of the popular Hausa dances, featured the performers wearing identical outfits and moving their bodies simultaneously. Bepo was delighted at the richness of Nigerian arts and culture. He worried that he could miss these in faraway UK.

Then the last dance came. It was the Canoe dance of the Badagry people, which showcases the performers as travellers in a canoe, floating on a river. Bepo recalled how, three years earlier, he had invited a professional dancer from the National Troupe to teach the students the unique movements. That was after an October show he led them to see at the National Theatre in Lagos. There, the Troupe performed the dance, alongside other varieties from parts of the country. Even as he was leaving,

Bepo was happy the dance had come to stay at Stardom Schools.

He became more emotional when the dance transported him to Badagry, where he vividly pictured slaves and their agonies. Towards the end of the performance, he saw himself back at the Heritage Slavery Museum, watching a documentary on the inhumane treatment slave-masters meted out to the captives. As whips tore the flesh of the naked slaves, and blood oozed from their skins, Bepo felt their pains. Greatly distressed, he wondered why nobody stepped in to stop the cruel handlers. A flame of anger began to course through his body. As one of the men drew a sword and made to strike a feeble old slave, Bepo stood to his feet and cried out: "Noooo!"

Silence dropped on the entire audience. The performance stopped abruptly. All eyes turned towards the principal. Then, Bepo came to himself. He had been thinking deeply, very deeply, and had slipped into a dreamy state. The auditorium looked in amazement, wondering what had suddenly come upon the principal. It was Bepo's turn to improvise—and quickly too. He surveyed the many baffled eyes, and then smiled: "I meant no school could have done the Canoe dance better. None! None at all!" he said, as the audience applauded. The drummers revived. The dancers picked up their imaginary oars and paddled on, in sync with the pulsation of the djembe.

In her remarks, Mrs. Ibidun Gloss expressed deep appreciation to Bepo for contributing what she called an "unrivalled quota" to the growth of Stardom. According to her, Bepo was so impactful: if she had her way, she would not let him leave.

"But we know that, in life, we meet to part and part to meet. We can only wish Mr Bepo success in his new place, his new country." She stopped and turned in his direction. "Mr Adewale Adebepo, would you kindly step forward," she asked.

As the principal rose from his chair, the entire hall—parents, staff, students, guests, ALL—stood on their feet in ovation. Mr Bepo raised both arms high and waved at them in appreciation. He felt humbled. He walked steadily to the podium and stood at an arm's length from the MD, who had also joined in the applause.

"Thank you very much...thank you...thank you..." the MD said, as the cheers and whistling quietened gradually. Then she continued: "Perhaps, I need to state this. I am not the one who employed Mr Bepo. My late father, Chief David Aje, did. He was the one Bepo met 24 years ago, when he first came to this school. Unlike many others who faced our interview panels, Bepo only had an encounter with Dad—that first day. He had submitted his application letter to my father. They had a chat after Dad had looked through his Curriculum Vitae and certificates.

"Dad became stuck with him. It was a day in early September of the year. The arrangement they had was that he would resume on September 14, as the school returned from its long, end-of-session vacation. There was a vacancy for English. So, we expected that Bepo would resume the first day of the session. But he never did, neither the day after nor the third day – till the end of the week. We were worried and suggested inviting others who had applied or had been interviewed. Although Dad was

quite concerned that Bepo's assigned classes – SSS 1-3 – would miss out on precious study hours, he insisted we wait a little longer. Now, that was quite unlike Dad, who would take no nonsense from any member of staff, let alone leave a class unmanned. But there stood Father, making a case for a 'bloody' absentee employee.

"There is an essential teacher in the guy,' Dad kept telling us. To cut a long story short, Bepo arrived eight days behind schedule. Dad registered his displeasure, of course. But he was glad that Bepo turned up. Now, I must stress, Bepo has, from day one, justified the confidence and faith my dad reposed in him. He has never betrayed that impression of an all-round great teacher, which he gave Dad.

"Teaching flourishes on the pillars of competence, outspokenness, passion, empathy, and morality. Bepo is an embodiment of all of these and other qualities that a teacher may require to build great students. When he joined us, Stardom was still struggling to establish a name, prove itself and break even. He, over the years, contributed his shining quota towards the realisation of the dream. The golden dream! The Stardom dreams! Together, we have taken this school to the mountaintop. Teachers have come, teachers have gone; principals have come, principals have gone, but Bepo's input is unique in the history of our school. He has a genuine passion for students. He connects well with parents. He understands and does everything to promote the vision of the school. He has, indeed, been a blessing to our business, and that is why I urge every other member of staff to emulate him.

"Mr. Bepo, it is a pity Stardom and, indeed, Nigeria is losing you to Britain. We hope you will still find a way to always reach out to your darling students. As you and I discussed during our meeting on Tuesday, please, find a way to get your school in London to collaborate with us. We will cherish it, and value the bond and mutual gains.

"At this point (she turned to the principal), I like to present to you this little token from Stardom. We will not gift you a car or some electronic gadget because you are no longer in Nigeria to use such. Where you are going is the heaven and haven of good things... hoping this will not propel some other people to want to run away," the MD added purposely, prompting laughter.

"Here is an envelope for you..."

Mr. Bepo moved closer to receive it. As he did, she held out her right hand and clasped his in a solid shake. The duo froze for the historic moment as the school's photographer went click! Click! Click! Click! Click! Click! Click! Dozens of smartphone cameras joined the race to capture the hour, the minute, and the second when it became clearly clear that Mr Adewale Adebepo would be seen no longer on the premises.

"The gift is from the management," Mrs Gloss continued, "from the depth of our souls. I may not have to declare how much..."

"How much? How much?" several voices across the hall asked light-heartedly. Amid the din, one voice specifically yelled: "Ten billion!" Not a few people thought it

sounded Audu-ish.

The MD laughed off the inquiry and continued: "But I can assure you that you don't need to go to any bank or Mallam to change the money. It is not in naira..."

"How much! Tell us how much!" questioning voices persisted. "Well, I should admit that it is also not less than $10,000—the highest Stardom has ever presented to any disengaging member of staff."

The audience greeted the disclosure with another ovation. "Thank you...thank you..." the MD said, as she stilled the hall.

"But, meanwhile, it is a cheque *o*; a domiciliary cheque. Not cash. Not raw dollars, as you can see how flat the envelope is," she explained as she stepped aside and offered the podium to Mr Bepo. It was time for the celebrator to speak.

The hall again erupted in applause. The principal took hold of the microphone. He readjusted it from Mrs Gloss' four feet, nine inches position and brought it to par with his six feet, two inches world. "Thank you...thank you, everybody..." he said, as he waited for the roar to subside. "At moments like this, words fail to express sincere depths of appreciation. On behalf of my family and my...my...my..."

The principal pushed aside the microphone and buried his head on the podium. He had begun sobbing, audibly too. Not many were surprised. Twenty-four years after he first walked into the school premises – what had become home to him – only few people really expected a tear-free parting.

"Let's give a round of applause to Mr Adewale," the MD intervened. "Our beloved principal is overcome with emotion. We quite understand that, " she added.

It was the moment of truth. From pockets and handbags, handkerchiefs of all shades-white, blue, green, red, yellow, brown... appeared as members of the Stardom family dabbed their eyes.

Twelve

...Dawn

BEPO was billed to jet out with Emirates airline at 10:00pm on Saturday. He knew boarding rites might not start until around 5:00pm but he was determined to be at the airport as early as possible. He learnt his lesson six years earlier, when he missed his British Airways flight during a visit to his family. Although the plane had yet to take off, it had completed boarding when he arrived at the departure hall. His lateness, at the time, was due to sheer oversight. He had not carefully checked the ticket he bought about a month earlier. The flight had been fixed for 11:00am but Bepo thought he saw 1:00pm. He pleaded frantically to be reconsidered but the airline insisted the door had been closed, preparatory to take-off. He travelled the following day with the same airline, but only after paying a $100 penalty.

This time, he was sure the flight was 10:00pm. Very sure. He confidently dismissed sarcasm and teasing by Seri, who repeatedly asked him to check his ticket to affirm the time.

"I hope, this time, what you saw is not 1:00pm," she said over the phone on the eve of the trip.

"I am sure; one hundred per cent sure."

"Well, I will still advise you use your glasses or ask one or two people to help you confirm."

"The devil is a liar. My flight is 10:00pm. No lateness, no penalty this time," Bepo had boasted.

The joke, notwithstanding, Bepo ensured he left his Adeniyi Jones, Ikeja, home earlier than he would have done, probably a year before. He stepped out by 3:00pm. In the past, he would have waited till about an hour later. That was when commercial motorcycles (aka Okada) had not been banned. Many people believed they constituted a nuisance in the city, breaking traffic rules and limbs through a lot of accidents. Yet, their fiercest critics admitted there were days they became the saving grace.

When Lagos traffic became a demon wedged between you and a very important appointment, and you risked being late or losing a target, Okadas were the messiahs. Air travellers hoping to beat the traffic and arrive at the airport in good time knew this. Hence, they always hopped on the motorcycles as a last resort. But after some dilly-dallying on policy, the government banned them, clipping their nuisance.

As he was about to call Uber, a ride hailing service, he heard a knock on the door. "Mr. Bepo," the visitor called. He never mistook the voice. It was that of his landlord,

Mr. Ogunwale. As he opened the door, he saw the man, flanked by the landlady and their two grandchildren, Jide and Kemi. They had come to bid him goodbye.

"We guess you must be setting out by now," the landlord said, as the family walked in.

"Yes, just thinking of calling Uber."

"You will not need to. I will drive you to the airport," the landlord said.

"Oh, that will be taking on too much. Please, don't inconvenience yourself, sir."

"You have been very good to us, Mr Bepo. That cannot be anything too much," the landlady interjected. "You have been a very good neighbour. I can't call you a tenant. You have been more of a family member to us."

"I will follow you," Jide, the landlord's grandson, cut in.

"To the airport or London?" Bepo asked, as he shook hands with the boy.

"London," Jide said.

"You want to *Japa*!" seven-year-old Kemi chipped in.

Bepo felt uneasy at the expression, '*Japa*'. He wondered how, at her age, Kemi knew the term and whatever it meant.

As everyone laughed off the *Japa* humour, the landlord pacified Jide: "Don't worry. We will take you along to the airport. Then, next week, Mr Bepo will come back to take you to London. Is that all right?"

"Yes," Jide said, jumping excitedly.

Beyond the *Japa* palaver, Bepo felt guilty that he would be abandoning Jide. He had taken special interest in the boy for about a year, after he began coaching him on elocution and African history at weekends. It wasn't a paid affair, but Bepo always enjoyed sessions with the boy.

Mr. Ogunwale said a brief prayer for the traveller, after which he returned to his apartment and moved out his car from the garage. It was a Honda Pilot, with a boot spacious enough for the anticipated luggage. Bepo packed two big bags and a smaller one. They contained books and wear – in that order. His wife had advised he come as light as he could. Of course, that didn't include packing *iru* (locust beans) and *egusi* (melon seeds) ground with crayfish. She also requested the purchase of dry snail. He found the items at the big and well patronised Oyingbo market in Lagos, a famous hub for the delicacies. Ever bustling, a Yoruba proverb attests: *Oja Oyingbo ko mo'p' enikan o wa'*. (The Oyingbo market never gets to find out a certain person did not even turn up.)

Before D-Day, Bepo had sold his Pathfinder Sports Utility Vehicle for N1.5 million. The price could have been higher, but he was satisfied it was Stardom's accountant, Mr Jeremi Amos, that bought it. His deep freezer and electronics were also good enough for auction, but he chose to gift them to his landlady.

Bepo, his landlord and the two kids were about setting out when his phone rang. It was Mrs Grace Apeh, the vice principal. She had driven from her base in Ogba to Ikeja and wanted to know if he had left home already for the airport. With her in the

car were the accountant, Mr Oyelana, and Mr Audu. They had planned to join Bepo at home and accompany him to the airport or meet him there. He did not feel there was a need for this. But he could not stop them, especially as they were already close to his location. He urged them to wait for him at Ikeja Underbridge. Twenty minutes later, he met them, and the two-car convoy headed to the Murtala Muhammed International Airport (MM2). There was a light traffic, first, by the roundabout leading to MM2, then later by NAHCO. They arrived at the MM2 departure hall at exactly 4:07pm.

Departures! The word, boldly splashed on the building, ruffled Bepo's emotion. It was real after all! He was leaving! He stifled a tear.

Mr. Ogunwale and the young ones gave Bepo a final hug in front of the hall. Airport personnel received Bepo's luggage and transferred it onto two trolleys. Bepo gave Jide and his sister N5,000 and asked them to "Greet Grandma very well!" The kids chorused: "Thank you, sir." But Jide did not forget. "I will be expecting you next week. You must not fail o!" he reminded Bepo. The landlord expressed gratitude for the cash gift to the children. Thereafter, they got in the car and returned home.

After the VP had parked her car, the Stardom quartet walked in, keeping Bepo company as he went through the check-in process. They chatted about the parting feast at the school. Mr Oyelana, particularly, praised Bepo's contributions to Stardom Schools, and then added, jokingly, that all staff, "most especially, Audu, should borrow a leaf".

"Well, I don't know why you singled me out as if I have not been working too hard already," Audu said, adding: "The only thing I am happy about is that it's not the accountant advising me on what I should borrow."

"I am trying to understand the connection," said Mr Amos, puzzled.

"To borrow a leaf means 'to do the same thing' the principal did," Mrs Apeh tried to explain.

"That's not what I am saying," Audu replied, smilingly. "It's my turn to borrow money from the cooperative next week, and I don't want to hear any cock and bull stories, like 'a snake has swallowed the money'."

Audu was in his element. On his plans for travelling overseas, he promised he would never cry like "some people," and vowed he would slaughter seven cows, the day he got a visa, "even if it were to Afghanistan."

Check-in started at 5:30pm. After about an hour, going through security points and getting his bags checked, Bepo got his boarding pass. Seat no 56 – window side – Gate 2A. It was getting late for the Stardom team to hit the traffic-laden road back home. Almost all lived far from the airport: Audu, the wag, stayed in Ikorodu; the CRK teacher lived in Mowe, Ogun State; only the VP and the accountant stayed in Ogba and Ojodu, Lagos, respectively. They bid Bepo farewell and departed.

The excitement of the past three hours made Bepo forget he had his phone in the inner pocket of his jacket—a complement to a white T-shirt and a pair of black jeans

trousers. He quickly checked the phone to see if he had calls. His fear was confirmed. He had missed some – the MD, former colleagues at Stardom, but more prominently, his wife. She must have wanted updates about the trip, he thought. Yet, he could not make any call: he and other passengers were already undergoing final scrutiny at the boarding gate. Promptly, Bepo sent a text message to her, saying all was going on fine.

After the scrutiny, Bepo heaved a sigh of relief and relaxed on a chair alongside other passengers. All waited for the boarding call expected at 9:30pm. Barely 10 minutes after he sat, he dozed off and slipped into a dream:

He was at the Heritage Slave Museum in Badagry. Relics of slavery hung on the walls. He saw slaves and their White masters. The captives yelled, groaned, shrieked as they were whipped, kicked, and clobbered. Some were pierced in their ears, lips, arms, and legs with red-hot iron. After what seemed like a month of torture, those who survived the ordeal were moved to the Point of No Return. In chains, they filed into the ship, like sheep headed for a slaughter slab. Bepo began counting the slaves, even as whips tore their skins again and again. One! Two! Three! ...Seven million! As the last man was pushed into the ship, already filled to capacity, a White man came to Bepo, pointed towards the vessel, and said: "Enter!"

"Noooo!" Bepo screamed with all the strength he could muster – body, mind, spirit and soul. "I say, noooo!" he cried again, leaping up from the seat. A white airline official stood beside him, completely at a loss as to what was going on. Seconds earlier, the official had found the intending traveller fast asleep. He had whispered into Bepo's ears and tapped gently on his shoulder as the aircraft readied for take-off. Some security personnel and bystanders, drawn by the noise, also came closer. They persuaded him to come to himself and hurriedly get on board.

At 10:45pm, the plane took off as Bepo drifted between dreamland and reality.

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Monday. After Bepo's departure. Reality stared everyone like a boil in the nose. The weekend ought to have sufficed to brush off, at least, a little of the pains of his migration. But it did not. The hard truth waited for every student at the school gate. It used to be, every Monday and Wednesday, Bepo would stand at the gate to welcome the learners brought by school buses and or parents' cars. A few students came by themselves. It was a display of affection every member of the academic community and friends of the school could predict. But here was a new-era Monday. Mr Bepo, the principal, was nowhere to be seen.

But it was during the assembly that the void became quite vivid. For the first time, since all the students came to Stardom, Principoo, as they sometimes called him, was not available to talk to them, gist with them, threaten them, laugh with them.

The vice principal stepped in to address them. But Mrs. Apeh's speech did not strike the usual chord. Or so the students thought. Everyone, including the MD, felt

how low the mood of the morning was.

"Don't worry, students. You will soon have another principal," Mrs Ibidapo Gloss assured, as she took the microphone from the VP. The promise hardly assuaged the students' feelings. A few, who dared, murmured their non-acceptance of the appeasement. But just as the MD would say more words, a shout of 'Principoo!' reverberated at the gate. Was it a joke? All at once, everyone looked in the direction.

There he was! Yes, he!

Bepo, of course, grinning, arms wide open, as the students rushed towards him, screaming excitedly. They swept him off his feet, bore him high on their shoulders and began a frenzied dance around the premises. "I am back! I am back!" he cried. "I am here! I didn't go! I'm not going again! My heart is here! This is where my heart is! I am here to complete my mission!"

The man's voice was barely heard as the students gyrated to the school's victory song:

We're Stars, we're Stars! We're
Stars of Stardom!
We're Stars, we're always winning!
We're Stars and we have won!
No night so dark! No cloud so mean!
Yet Stardom Schools will win!

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The Lekki Headmaster tells the inspiring story of Bepo, a dedicated teacher who finds fulfilment in his profession despite its challenges. His unwavering love for his students and commitment to Stardom Schools lead to remarkable achievements.

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