

Lekki Headmaster Chapter 11

...Dawn

Bepo was billed to jet out with Emirates airline at 10:00 on Saturday. He knew boarding rites might not start until 5:00 pm 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

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, flanked by the landlady and the 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 lapa!" 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 lapa 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

PARAGRAPH 1 IN PAGE 61 IS MISSING HERE. LOOK IT UP ON YOUR COPY

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 fide and his sister N5,000 and asked them to "Greet Grandma very well!" The kids chorused: "Thank you, sir." But fide 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 has called his wife. He had missed her—the MD, former colleagues at first, but more importantly, his wife. She must have wanted updates about the trip, he thought. Yet, how could he make any call when he and other passengers were already undergoing final security at the boarding gate. Promptly, Bepo sent a text message to her, saying all was going fine.

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

He works at the Heritage Slave Museum in Badagry. Relics of slavery hung on the walls. He set slates and then White masters. The captives yelled, groaned, shrieked as they were whipped, kicked, and clothed. 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 slaughterhouse. 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 later, 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 home migration. But it did not. The hard truth waited for every student at the school gate.

It used to be, every Monday and Wednesday, Hepo would stand at the gate we 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 aednie community and friends of the schoot could predict. But here was a new era Manday Me 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, Hut Strs. Apehs speech did not strike the usual shord. Or so the students thought. Everyone, including the MED, 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.

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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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