

The Jungle

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“Ole! Ole! Thief!”

People scream as they pad angrily behind a rugged man, half naked and freshly bruised from some sort of struggle. He looks as though he is running for his life. He is.

“It wasn’t me,” he cries breathlessly amidst long strides and against a tide of hands that pull him backwards and into the angry crowd.

A bottle is thrown. I wince I pinch myself I pray.

Again and again he emerges, bloodier with each wave.

“Please!” He begs.

“Please.” I whisper.

Please.

Until he doesn’t.

The hunting crowd is made up of men, men that are angry, jobless, and disgraced enough to latch onto anything that will relieve their stress—anyone. Pain like this gives birth to the basest version of our humanity. Pain like this can only be alleviated by causing pain. So, for these chasers, the hunt usually begins in the market, let anyone use the word *ole* and the first person to run gets it. *Ole means thief*. Thief like all the politicians who embezzle government funds, like the oil spills that cause natural disasters, take their homes and halt their sources of income, thief like time and broken promises.

That day, an elderly trader claimed a man in a green shirt stole tomatoes from her worth two hundred naira. She yelled “Ole. Thief,” and the whole marketplace burst into helter-skelter. The chase bled out into the streets, hence the traffic, as everyone held their breath.

For two hundred naira—less than one dollar. A bunch of restless market boys jumped up to save the day and set out after the first person who moved too fast. His shirt wasn’t even green – it was yellow.

I watched as a man in a green shirt slipped out of the crowd and walked away quickly—but not too quickly—from this ungodly scene. He had a bulge about the size of three tomatoes in his deep pocket and a grateful smile on his face.

I am crying, I am screaming, “you have the wrong person, 200 hundred naira...please.”

A tire is thrown over the man in a yellow shirt, his lips move fast and his tears –

PLEASE

Fire meets gasoline on his skin and the fumes from the flames choke me as I write this.

The crowd bursts out in cheers and I, in tears, realize my backseat window has been wound up and I have had my hand clasped tightly across my mouth this entire time. My driver, Mr. Chuks, reminds me to put on my seat belt. The traffic starts to move but, on the roadside, that man's ashes stay.

This is the country I live in.

A week earlier, Mr. Chuks—a short, stoic, silenced man—was pulling out of the homeless boys' center where I volunteered, into a group of men encircling a bald girl who looked just about my age—I was sixteen at the time. The men surrounding her shoved the girl repeatedly saying, "Stupid girl!" "Thief!" Someone struck her. She didn't flinch.

"Mr. Chuks, do something!" I hollered while I stood up in the backseat—very still.

Eventually I brought my phone out and started filming and screaming and screaming and filming until two of the eight men or so noticed and started chasing our car. The video of that girl didn't go viral, contrary to what one might think. It stayed on my Snapchat with less than three hundred views and the only response it got was the occasional shocked emoji reaction. Never mind that this blatant act of abuse was conducted in broad daylight by men old enough to be my father.

Mr. Chuks whispered something in Igbo under his breath and said "Dannie *biko* put on your seatbelt," then "What could she have done?" as an afterthought, with a slightly worried expression on his face.

I came back to the center the next day and there was no evidence of that confrontation ever occurring except for a scrap of cloth by the roadside that bore a striking resemblance to the dress the attacked girl wore the previous day. "Did any of you guys see men beating a girl outside yesterday?" I asked the boys I was teaching. They all either shrugged or shook their heads. I didn't ask again.

This is the country I live in.

To cap off this horrific summer of shifting paradigms and the disruption of my sheltered existence, I walked around the streets of Port Harcourt with some of the boys from my center and their head coordinator to see where and how they lived before they found Badamia, the homeless boys center. We came to a bus stop shelter about a hundred yards in front of the estate where I lived. Victor, a short teenager with a face aged by vicious disappointment and something else I could not name, asked us to stop. We did.

"This is where I lived," he said.

I could not breathe. Before me I saw cardboard and...that was it.

"At night we have to sleep on top of all our belongings so that we don't get robbed. When it rains it gets too cold for us to sleep, because the roof of this bus shelter is broken, so we walk around until daybreak."

Victor had only just started his formal education since his recent arrival at the center, although he was sixteen, so I am heavily rephrasing his word choice to better capture his voice. The boys and their adult coordinator encouraged me to ask questions.

“What do you do in the day?” I ask. “How do you spend your time?”

Prosper chimes in, “We fuck sometimes or do gang stuff or drugs.” He’s about fourteen. In the wake of my silence, he continues with a laugh, “Prostitutes around this place cost like two hundred naira, with a condom.” Remember that this equals three tomatoes.

I go on to learn that many of the girls start prostitution “willingly” around twelve to earn money. I also learn the different street prices around the city. The things I see that day brings tears to my eyes as I write this—a heavily intoxicated naked boy by a canal, a three-day old dead body by a major road side—all within a mile radius of my home, and yet...

“Why did you stay? Why do people go back?” were my final questions as we get back to the center that day. Victor looks up at me, “These streets are the jungle and, in the jungle, we are free, we are in control—it’s hard, I can die, so many people I know have died, but I am free.”

This is the country I live in.