First Principles

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John was never the biggest kid in the room. In SS1, he was barely 5’7 and weighed just under 50kg. There were bigger boys. Boys with the height of a pole and the bulk of a boxer. And they knew it, that they were bigger and dangerous and powerful. So, they taunted the smaller kids and took their lunches and asked them to hang upside down. Except John. No one touched him. No one did so much as say a word to him. Perhaps because his uniform was always neat and well-ironed; and his hair was always combed; and his manners were pristine, both in class and at the hostel. Or maybe it was his face, which was a mermaid, part horror, part angel. One part was pretty, the other a burnt toast. So, maybe that was why the bigger boys let him be.

But one morning they were at the reservoir, fetching water from the long row of taps when the gushes, one by one, turned into trickles. The boy beside John said, Thank God I can still use this half bucket. He gripped the handle and swivelled and made to return with his collection. Only to bump into one of the bigger boys. Billy Bagger, whose legal name was Boluwatife Akinro.

Bring that water here, Billy said.

The boy protested. Senior Bolu, this is the last one. I don’t have any other.

But his voice was weak. No conviction, no power.

Billy stepped back, as if preparing for a charge, like a bull. You dey mad? I tell you sey make you bring water, you dey tell me sey this is the last one. I go woze you o.

The boys were all clad in towels or boxers. Their upper bodies naked under the translucent brilliance of dawn. About 400 metres to the right was the Dining Hall, which would soon be thronged by the female students arriving for breakfast. Time was running out.

The boy started to hand over the bucket of water.

Stop, John said.

The boy turned to John, his eyes growing larger. But his hands didn't stop reaching out to Billy.

Don't take it Billy, John repeated. His own bucket was full. And he should have left the scene 30 seconds ago. But for some reason, he had waited.

Wetin you talk, Billy Bagger said, turning to John, advancing.

I sey make you no collect the water, John said. His voice was firm, steady, not a stutter.

Billy laughed.

John was at the last tap, standing on the reservoir pavement. Behind him was a bush. Billy, about seven metres away, was standing on red earth. The other boys at the tap had paused, some readjusting their towels.

Make I no collect water on top sey wetin. Who you be?

John said nothing. Just shrugged and looked him straight in the eye.

The boy completed the handover. And Billy lifted the bucket to his chest. See? What are you going to do about it?

John then passed his full bucket of water to the boy beside him and stepped up to Billy. He said, you have my water, I need it back.

They were less than four feet apart. And John could observe Billy debating his next move. Fight or flight? Fight, of course. A kid like Billy would never run. He wasn't that smart. He would calculate that he was twice as big as his opponent, and conclude that gave him leverage. Besides, there were people present. The humiliation would kill him; he would never survive the public relations damage.

So, fight.

Billy put down the bucket.

John tried to save him. You are signing your death warrant, he said.

Billy didn't get the message. Instead of retreating, he chuckled. Again, he wasn't that smart.

The first thing he did was to come swinging with his right, a move John saw from a country-mile. Too easy, too predictable. He feinted to the left, allowing Billy to stumble forward.

Billy turned around and came again. This time John didn't spare him. He let the right arm brush past him, before following with a left blow to the side of Billy's face, connecting with a blob of flesh and

bone, cracking things along the way. Reeling from the pain, Billy went all in, trying to tackle John with his size. John stepped aside and pushed an elbow into his neck.

In less than ten seconds, the fight was over and Billy Bagger, whose real name was Boluwatife Akinro, was on his way to the hospital, on life-support.

Things moved quickly. The school authorities got the police involved after Billy's mother threatened to sue them to the last dime. And the police came and picked up John and locked him up in a general detention cell. No one asked him questions. No one asked him to fill a form or write a statement. No one asked how old he was. No one asked if he needed a lawyer or wanted to call someone. But he was unruffled. He knew the school would call his mother and she would come to post his bail.

She came 48 hours after he set foot in the jail. She didn't look pissed, which was a good thing. At the police station counter, she checked his face and hands for bruises. Found none. She put her thumb underneath his eyes and pulled at the flesh to check the whiteness. Have you eaten? He said, no. Did they touch you? No, he replied. Then she turned her attention to the officers and within two hours they were both riding in her rickety Datsun, the windows down to allow fresh air bat away the stifling heat.

You know you could have spent the rest of your life in prison, right? Her voice was steely.

Yes.

Tell me, how do you know that?

I heard stories, in there. A guy said he has been awaiting trial for five months.

And you know that's just a police detention. Real prison is much worse.

Yes.

So why did you do it?

Do what?

Send a boy to the hospital.

He wanted it so bad.

She made a turn to the right, swerving expertly.

A brief silence.

Wanted what so bad?

The hospital bed.

You could have killed him, John.

I would have gone lower.

You would have gone lower if you wanted to kill him?

Yes.

She sighed. And then she pulled over. Just ahead, a woman was roasting corn by the side of the road. Above, the sun was living its best life.

She turned to him. Look, I know you miss your father, but acting out isn't going to bring him back. Do you understand that? And no, he's not going to be here to protect you. And I won't always be there either. Soon you will be on your own. And the world, love, I'm telling you, the world is a brutal place and –

A kid was getting bullied, John interrupted. What do you expect me to do?

Was that the first kid you've seen being bullied?

No.

Will he be the last?

No.

So why that kid?

He said nothing.

Answer me John.

Still, he said nothing. Just sat in the front passenger seat, staring through the windscreen as if he could bring it down with vision power.

All I'm trying to say is, pick your battles wisely. That's how you survive.

Then she changed gears and the Datsun coughed back to life.

She didn't take him home. She took him back to school. The authorities made a fuss about how he had broken school rules and was being expelled. His mother said they would do no such thing. John didn't throw the first punch and he had only been trying to protect another kid from physical abuse. When logic didn't work, she threatened to petition the Education Secretary and ensure the public knew all the filth that was going on under their noses. She threatened to destroy all their careers for letting the police take her son before informing her. John didn't hear the details – he was sitting in the corridors and could only make out the faint outline of the voices arguing inside the offices – but once she stepped out, he knew his mother had won. She had fought with her heart and breasts and head and back and won him a reprieve.

The next day, his mother gone, the Principal called him into her office and said she was counting on him to never get into trouble anymore. John shrugged. He wasn't a troublemaker, but if trouble comes calling, he wasn't going to back down.

You should be in military school, she said.

My father was a military man, John replied. He was tough.

She said, but this is not a military school. When you are in Rome, you behave like the Romans.

John said he understood. And they shook hands on it – the Principal, fiftyish, grey-haired, her most-

active years behind her; and John, 14, blossoming, the best years ahead.

He went back to class and it was easy to see that the news had spread. Everyone stayed out of his way in the corridors. His seatmate moved and he had more space to place his bag. He made himself comfortable. Being an outsider was nothing new to him.

But the girls. They were paying more attention. One came to his desk and asked to borrow a pencil. He caught them stealing glances and giggling. It was all good, even if what dominated his mind were the scenes of the 48 hours he had spent in police jail. The folks he met there, their stories, the darkness, the dampness, the heat, the misery, and the idea that there might not be an expiration date for them, like hell fire. It made him sick in the stomach. He wondered what real prison looked like, and the thought made him shudder.

Hi, can I borrow your maths set?

John looked up. Standing beside his desk was Selina, one of the girls he had caught giggling at him. Arms crossed in front of the abdomen, her white shirt was neatly tucked into her skirt.

He wanted to tell her off, that he didn't have a maths set to give out. But there was something about her eyes, hidden behind large goggles. And the shape of her mouth. And how she had asked. Softly, like a lullaby. *Hi, can I borrow your maths set?*

Of course, John stuttered, and started to rummage inside his bag.

You know what, why don't I join you?

What?

Let me join you here. I can use what I need and return it quickly.

John put the math set on the table. Well, I don't see why not.

So she walked towards her desk, which was about two rows away, to pick up her notes and graph book. It was break-time, but it was also the tail-end and the other students were already trooping back in. The next period was for mathematics.

John prepared for her return. He drew his bag closer to make space for her to sit. And adjusted the books on the desk too. When she sat, she smelt like tangerine, something fresh and sweet and natural.

For the next three minutes, she paid him no mind. It was like he didn't exist. Only the compass and the protractor and the ruler and the divider and the eraser.

And then the mathematics teacher came in and scribbled *probability* on the board. It was a boring lecture because John had studied the material and the man in front just droned on, like a robot.

After homework was assigned and the teacher exited, Selina started to rearrange the pieces of the math set back into the rectangular box.

Thank you very much, she said.

You are welcome.

She stood. And John stood too. She was taller by about two inches.

I wanted to say . . . never mind.

You wanted to say what?

Never mind, he insisted.

She paused for about five seconds, then she shrugged and left.

That afternoon, he returned to the hostel thinking about Selina. He couldn't think of anything else. He wondered what it would be like to hold her hand and go for a walk. And the thoughts filled him with bubbles. His heartbeat quickened. His feet quivered under his own weight.

This had never happened before. This rush of emotions at the thought of a girl. And it was weirder because he had known Selina since he joined the school, four months back. So, why now? Because she had sat beside him?

All afternoon he thought about it, but couldn't come up with a good answer. So he was relieved when the bells for dinner rang; he grabbed his cutlery and marched straight to the dining hall, which was a cavernous building with a high ceiling and long rows of benches and tables.

Dinner was beans and plantain, so the dining hall population was sparse. John sat at the first bench, together with a couple of juniors. At the other end, where the girls sat, two rows were occupied and John searched longingly for Selina.

She wasn't there.

After the meal, he stepped and headed for night-class, hoping that studying would take his mind off matters of the heart. But the words in his biology textbook kept fading in and out. He struggled for another hour but it was hopeless.

So he stood and started going from class to class, block to block. Until he found her. She was studying in one of the last classes in the main building. And, although there were a couple of juniors studying in the first two rows, she was alone at the back. No seniors, no prefects.

He walked in quietly and sat beside her.

I can't stop thinking about you, he said, without looking at her face.

Boys, she muttered.

What?

That's a bad pick-up line.

What's a pick-up line?

She chuckled. You don't know what a pick-up line is?

No, tell me.

She sighed. What do you want?

I like you and I want you to be my girlfriend.

I have a boyfriend.

Leave him.

Why?

Because there's no way he can want you more than I do.

And what about what I want?

I'm sorry.

You should be.

So where does that leave me?

I don't know, John.

He was quiet for a moment. Then he said, are you saying you don't fancy being my girlfriend?

Like I said, I have a boyfriend.

That's not what I asked.

It was her time to pause. Then she said, my boyfriend is Bolu, the senior you sent to the hospital.

I'm sorry about that.

You shouldn't. I'm hoping it makes him a better person.

You shouldn't hope. I wouldn't make you hope. I am a better person.

Selina smiled. You are funny. So, you want me to trade a troublemaker for another troublemaker.

I'm not a troublemaker.

Even if you are not, you have a reputation.

Reputation is about what other people think. I don't care what other people think. I care about what *you* think.

For the first time, she turned to him. He did the same, allowing his arm to rest on the back of the chair, almost touching her shoulders.

She smiled at him. You know what, I think I like you too.

He tried to control it, but he couldn't stop grinning.

John bounced all the way to the hostel. He felt taller, stronger, even optimistic about the future. It was a whole new feeling.

In the corridors, he passed boys lining up at ironing tables and remembered he had some clothes to press. At the main courtyard, a group of students had gathered in a circle for night fellowship and he wanted to join them to thank God.

Instead, he went through the hostel gates and found his room and sat at the edge of his partner's bed. He occupied the upper bunk, a decision that had to be made after Anthony's urine dripped down onto his face one night.

He was untying his tennis shoes when Anthony walked in and sat beside him. A short boy in blue check and shorts with a baby face. He was the only one who spoke to John in the room. Or perhaps, the only one John spoke to.

Guy, what have you done, Anthony said, flopping on the bed.

What?

They are looking for you oh.

The seniors na. They say you've stolen Bolu's girlfriend too.

Oh, I see.

Someone rushed into the room, carrying a bucket of water to stow away under his bunk. John and Anthony's bunk was deep into the room, second to the last against the wall, and shrouded in darkness; the fluorescent light in that section of the room was broken.

Is it true, Anthony said, prodding John with his bare foot.

Maybe.

Maybe? Anthony sat on his butt, supported by two hands on the bed. You are now stealing girls from seniors? You have mind oh.

Then a voice from the door tore through the room. *Last man!*

A melee ensued. Boys jumped from bunks and dashed towards the door. John blinked and even Anthony had rolled off, joining the mad rush to not be *last man.*

The melee was over in ten seconds. And the senior at the door shouted, person still dey there?

Of course, John was still seated at the edge of the bed. He didn't participate in struggles like *last man.* And no one had bothered him. But not tonight, it seemed. The senior stepped into the half-lit room, bucket in hand. John could see him in the light, walking through the two rows of bunks, towards him, into the darkness.

About three feet away, he dropped the bucket and kicked it towards John, conjuring the grating sound of plastic on concrete. The bucket, now on its round sides, rolled to a stop just at John's feet.

Pick it up, the senior said.

John, still seated, still very much comfortable and looking for more comfort, said, why?

Because you are my junior!

You are shouting, John said. Raising your voice doesn't improve the quality of your argument.

Are you mad?

You are doing it again.

The senior, bare-chested and in shorts, stepped forward. He was now standing over John. His leg was nearly touching John's knees.

Pick it up, he said through gritted teeth.

John felt sorry for him. A thousand ways he could hit him at that position and he would be dead. Or never be able to walk. But he didn't make a move. He had made a promise to his mother. Okay, maybe not an *I will never fight again* promise. But he didn't want to disappoint her. He had shook hands with the Principal. And Selina. *So, you want me to trade a troublemaker for another troublemaker?*

He didn't make a move.

Then he did.

He reached out beside the senior's leg and picked up the bucket. And stood. Shoulder to shoulder.

He said, I'm sorry.

And the senior, like an inflated balloon pricked by a needle, seemed to reduce.

Even under the cloak of darkness, John could have sworn he saw a smile on his face.

Ekus started writing fiction at the University of Benin in 2012. His major influences include Stephen King and Chimamanda Adichie. His first novel, about two characters struggling with their mental health, is scheduled for publication in 2022.