

Jomo

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You can't afford to miss Jomo by 7am. In a school where Mrs. Nwokejiegebe was more feared than the Headmistress, you're better off missing school for the day than turning up late. We lived in the suburbs. But if you made it to the bus stop early enough to catch Jomo, it was a one-way ride to my school's flyover. My school was in the heart of the capital, directly behind our state's government house. I do not understand why they called it 'government house' since one can clearly see that there were many buildings inside the fence. Mrs. Nwokejiegebe taught us that anything that was more than one was no longer singular but plural. I wondered why she had not bothered to correct us to start calling it 'government houses.' I could clearly remember the day she taught us that the plural of 'stadium' was 'stadia.' Before then, she had taught us to add 's' to any word to get the plural. So, we argued that it should be 'stadiums.' One of us, Dikeocha, sprang to his feet, his right hand shooting up with the swagger of certainty. He told Mrs. Nwokejiegebe that she was wrong. That the correct answer was 'stadiums.' That there was nothing like 'stadia.' We unanimously agreed and roared a 'yes'. My 'yes' was weak because I could clearly see the sting on Mrs. Nwokejiegebe's pride. She became red with disgust, and you could see that the pancake she used to plaster her face was beginning to crack.

'Are you sure?' She asked us.

'Yes!' We chorused.

'Okay, if you are sure, stand up and move to my right-hand side. If you are not sure, stand up and move to the left. If you agree with me, remain in your seat.'

We were forty-six in our class. Primary 5B. Thirty-nine pupils moved to the right. They agreed with Dikeocha. I agreed too but my daddy, who was also a teacher in another school, had told me and my siblings that at our age, our teachers knew better and were always right. But since it didn't make sense to me that the plural of 'stadium' should be 'stadia' instead of 'stadiums,' I chose to go to the left because I was no longer sure what to believe. Five others went with me to the left. Only Ukachi--the shortest, the fairest and the youngest of us whom Mrs. Nwokejiegebe had dubbed the most brilliant girl in Nigeria--remained in her seat. Seeing Ukachi sitting back, I grew restless. I wanted to return to my seat but under Mrs. Nwokejiegebe's watch, there was no room for double standing. 'If you choose something, you stick with it, that's why I give you enough time to decide,' she had told us in the early days of our meeting with her.

Mrs. Nwokejiegebe reached under her table and produced three long, fresh canes. She gave Ukachi one and held two in one hand. For not being sure, after all her sweat to drive home the point, she asked Ukachi to deal us six strokes each. To the team on the right, their problems were many. They did not just disagree with her, they were so sure that she was wrong and Dikeocha, our fellow pupil, was right. She gave them twelve strokes each and gave Dikeocha extra six, for leading a pack of blockheads.

Jomo was our unofficial school bus. A long, white 14/14, thirty-two-seater bus. I do not know why it was called 14/14. My daddy does not know either, but he said that Jomo was a coach not a bus. He said coaches were designed for long distances and buses merely plied up city roads, picking and dropping passengers.

'But that is what Jomo does. Picking and dropping passengers along the road,' I argued.

'Yes, you are right. But it was formerly a coach. It is still a coach though, but the new owners now use it for aka n'elu,' he said.

His explanation did not entirely make sense to me. But my daddy was a teacher. He was right. But aka n'elu--pick and drop--was not a befitting description for what Jomo does. Jomo was more prestigious than that. It was our unofficial school bus. Although Jomo was a thirty-two-seater, it did not carry thirty-two persons. It carried more than hundred. Each seat was initially designed to contain two persons, but the owners fixed a flat, wooden slab under each seat on one side of the aisle. When drawn out, it stretched to close the gap with the seat on the opposite aisle. This enabled two more persons, making a total of six seaters in one row. Added to the initial thirty-two, the number became forty-eight. The forty-eight sitting were under obligation to lap another pupil, making a total of ninety-six sitting. Then over twenty stood. Anywhere there was a space, was stuffed with a human, a pupil. The fare from the suburbs to the capital where many of the state's schools were located was ten naira. If you sat and lapped someone, you shared the fare in half. If you were standing, you paid five naira. If the person you lapped was your sibling, you paid the exact fare.

There were only two Jomos in the state. Both were milk-coloured and were aging too. They plied the road like every other bus but because the government was yet to provide school buses for school children, the Jomo drivers decided that their first two morning trips would be solely to ply pupils to schools after which they would return to their normal businesses. The first trip was made by 6:15am and the last by 7:00 am. If you missed any of these trips, you were surely going late to class because you either joined normal buses with their incessant drops and pickups along the way, or you waited till a good Samaritan in a private car offered you a lift.

Inside Jomo, the drivers kept long canes. Even though the bus was not free, they felt compelled to use the canes on us, on their customers. The fixed wooden slabs in the middle of the aisle squeaked and had no back rests like the main seats. And because they were hard surfaces, they were a real

pain in the ass. This made them undesirable. To avoid sitting on them, struggles always ensued each time we were going to or returning from school. The bigger or older pupils, who were always quick to get into Jomo, blocked spaces until their younger ones or the ones they would lap boarded. This led to fights and quarrels. And the drivers always intervened with intense whipping.

'Children raised in Owerri are very stubborn, I don't know why,' the driver of my favourite Jomo cried one afternoon after using the canes to design the bodies of pupils whom he felt were obstructing the boarding.

That afternoon, one orobo girl that liked doing selense used her entire body to block the bus's single entrance. She claimed somebody pushed her from behind. When she turned to enquire who pushed her, everyone looked away, including me. I saw the boy who did it, but he was from Shell Camp, and the girl was from Alvan Ikoku, so I was forbidden from telling on him. So, she insisted she would not move an inch from the doorway unless the person who did it stepped forward. The queue began to stretch. Time was going fast. The driver shouted at her to move away to let others enter. She refused. He produced the cane. She did not flinch. He went ahead to lash her many times on the head before she caved in and gave way. The caning led to a pandemonium and the driver stepped forth to flog more pupils. When he was done restoring calm, he was panting and heaving and sweating like a petty criminal that escaped from a mob of irate killers.

Beside my school was another school called Shell Camp Primary School, Owerri. Their uniform was red shorts or skirts with red check shirts. The name of my own school was Alvan Ikoku College of Education Demonstration Primary School, Owerri. Our uniform was also red shorts or skirts but with plain white shirts. Across the flyover by the main city road, was the famous Alvan Ikoku College of Education. In it was the staff primary school called Alvan Ikoku Staff Primary School. Their own uniform was purple shorts or skirts with purple check shirts. There was fierce animosity and competition among us. But because my school and Shell Camp were immediate neighbours, we agreed between us to always side with one another whenever there were problems involving the three primary schools. It was not like we held a meeting anyway. It was informally agreed, and the reason was simple. Aside from being immediate neighbours, pupils of Alvan Ikoku always carried themselves like their parents worked inside the government house. They believed they were rich kids because their school was the staff primary school of a big university. Whenever we crossed paths, they looked at us with big man's face, with mpompo. Inside Jomo, they have said it, many times, to our faces that we smell poverty poverty, and they show it by always trying to sit away from us. If any of us was unfortunate to sit beside them, they'd pretend to close their noses until they alighted.

We resorted to calling them umu nde big man--children of big men. And we did that with all the indignation the phrase carried. We gravitated towards each other, Shell Camp and Demonstration College. Although we also fought and beefed within us, but we united whenever umu nde big man were involved. For instance, pupils of Shell Camp mocked us for the mouthful that was the name of our school--Alvan Ikoku College of Education Demonstration Primary School, Owerri. They said the founders of our school were undecisive whether they were to name us after Alvan Ikoku or something else. Some wondered why they didn't just call it Demonstration Primary School. One jagajaga-teeth boy, pained by the many goals they conceded during one of our friendly matches, said that the 'Demonstration' in our name showed that the founders were just testing if we were to be a school or not.

'My daddy said your school's name--Shell Camp--was an afterthought. He said that that was the first headquarter of shell oil company when they first came to Nigeria. That was where oil was first discovered in Nigeria before they relocated to Bayelsa State. You see, your own school was a mistake.' That was me. With a history my father told me about the name of the school. I converted it

to a banter weapon, and it worked.

'Your daddy does not know anything,' the boy fired back at me, if our school was an oil company before, does it not show we are important?'

'It is your own father who did not teach you how to listen,' I fired back. 'My daddy did not say it was a former oil company. He said the white men lived around there when they were digging for oil. It was their former apartments that were converted to school blocks, including Shell Camp Police Station,' I responded sharply, irritated that he had insulted my father.

'Because your father is a teacher, we will not hear word,' he said in a tone that sounded like defeat. 'Why are you not in Alvan sef?' He fired angrily, his voice rising.

'It is because we don't have money to go to Alvan, but I swear, none of them can win me in a debate or letter writing,' I boasted.

'Yes naa. Most of us from Demonstration and Shell Camp are more brilliant than them. Is it because they always carry heavy bags of notebooks and they feel they know something?' another boy chipped in as the banter quickly moved to a conspiracy against our enemies across the flyover.

So that afternoon inside Jomo. A serious banter ensued after the bus took off. The girl who blocked the entrance was crying when someone from Shell Camp said something about plumpy girls feeling they were big girls.

'You are just an orobo--an English fowl. See how you are crying like a baby because of five strokes of cane on your head. Your body size makes you think you are a big girl,' he teased.

Stung, she raised her head and turned towards the direction of the speaker. 'Akpa ushi you cannot even speak simple English.' She fired back at him, calling him smelly.

'It is your mother's vagina that is smelling. You like doing selense but you don't even have your own car to bring you to school,' he doubled down.

'My daddy has a car that brings me to school. I only take Jomo when I'm going home because I cannot wait for when he will finish from work and come and pick me. You are jealous because your father can't even buy wheelbarrow,' she taunted him.

'I'm not the one they flogged on the head,' he mocked. It seemed to have worked because the girl flew into a bout of raging and cursing and crying, to the amusement of Shell Camp and Demonstration pupils.

'Every time they will be doing mpompo as if they don't use to shit, but just a small yabbing, they are crying,' someone from Demonstration resumed after the driver shouted at us to keep quiet.

'Your school is full of housemaids from bush villages, that is why you people always use Igbo words inside English. Bush people.' A fair boy from Alvan Ikoku replied. He wore glasses, the type that rich men's children wear.

'Mr. Blind man, I know your glasses makes you think you are Professor Chike Obi, okay, what is the meaning of mpompo in English.' I joined the war.

'First of all, I am not blind. Is just that I don't see far things,' he retorted.

'It is still the same thing. Glasses are for blind and blinding people.' I replied.

'Answer the question. What is mpompo in English?' someone insisted.

'It means pride,' the fair boy said casually.

'It is a lie,' I shouted. 'Mpompo is arrogance. Pride is the one that is selense. You people just carry big bags, you don't even know anything.'

One morning, an unusual thing happened. The road was blocked. Cars moved slowly. Drivers were honking and hissing. The sun was slowly picking up. It was nearly 7:30am and Jomo was just on its first trip.

'Nna ehh, what is causing this go-slow? It has never happened before on this road,' the driver said in a loud voice. He wasn't speaking to anyone in particular but he was speaking to everyone. In a city as small as Owerri, that was how people made small talks. Other road users joined him in nagging.

The returning lane flowed normally. But for the heavy blocks that demarcated the lanes, drivers would have found their way on the free lane. We kept crawling and wondering and worrying. Mrs. Nwokejiegbe will have a field day today, I cried in my mind. I feared for my life.

'O boy, what is causing this go-slow?' the driver hollered to a colleague of his that was returning from the other lane.

'Na from FMC. Dead body full for their gate. Una don de reach na, you go see,' he said and drove on.

'Dead body kwa? So why is it now causing go-slow? Did they drop the bodies in the middle of the road?' our driver wondered aloud.

After what seemed like eternity, we eventually crawled to the Federal Medical Centre. They shared fence with Alvan Ikoku College of Education. We were close. At the FMC gate, we could see corpses, about four of them, all male. They were gigantic, dressed in black and boots, their faces covered with ski masks. We learned they were armed robbers and had been killed during a shootout with police the previous night. They looked menacing even as they lay lifeless on the floor. They were huge huge and I wondered how many bullets it took for each of them to fall and die. Aside from the cars slowing down to watch, there were crowds at the gate and at the opposite posts. In an instance, it seemed as if the dead robbers will jerk back to life with quick reflex and shoot everyone. The thought terrified me. I turned my face away.

'But why will police or whoever brought them here drop them at the gate. Is here a mortuary? Look how them useless my work this morning,' our driver nagged aloud and moved on, unconcerned about the incident.

In school, there was no punishment for latecomers that day. Even Mrs. Nwokejiegbe and the Headmistress was late. Many teachers were late, including those that have their own cars. The news of the incident was all over the state and the excitement carried on through the rest of the day.

Later that afternoon as we rushed to the junction where we waited for Jomo to pick us up, we saw the image that will remain with us for a long time. To get to the junction, we must descend to the foot of the flyover that demarcated our school and Alvan Ikoku College of Education. She was sitting on the floor, a few meters away from the foot of the flyover. She was emaciated, almost bony, and we could see she was a fair, beautiful lady before whatever that was wrong with her began. A greater part of her body had open sores. Her lips were dry, and flies perched on the sores by the corners of

her mouth. The sores were red with blood, and she had a sachet of water on her fragile hands. Her dress was a worn-out gown, pink in colour and dirty from long usage.

Her presence disturbed us. We filed past her hurriedly. She did not beg us for money, but she looked like she'd be happy with some food. She was unperturbed by the way we looked at her. The next morning when Jomo dropped us at the other side of the road, in front of Alvan's big gate, we heard people talking about a dead woman on the flyover as we ascended the stairs. They said she ran away from the hospital where she was being treated for AIDS. They said she looked like she died the previous night and wondered if government would come early to pick her corpse.

When we crossed to the other end and turned to descend into our school, we could see her body on the other end of the descent. The image terrified me. I was seeing a dead body, up close, for the first time. The dead bodies of those four thieves were far from me, from us. They were thieves and we had seen them through the windows of Jomo. But this one shared our flyover with us. It lay on the path we must cross to reach Jomo on our way home.

In class that day, Mrs. Nwokejiegbé taught us the meaning of AIDS. Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome. She said there were two of them, and that the other one was HIV, Human Immunodeficiency Virus. Most of us were hearing of these diseases for the first time and their names terrified us. She said that AIDS happened when the HIV infection had advanced too much in the human body and weakened the immune system. She said that for that woman to die of AIDS, she must have had HIV and refused to take her antiretroviral therapy seriously. She said it was the treatment for HIV, but that you had to take the drugs for everyday of your life to avoid dying.

'How then is it a treatment if somebody has to take it everyday unless they die?' Ukachi had asked her.

Mrs. Nwokejiegbé smiled. She always loved it when Ukachi asked her questions.

'We call it treatment, but what it actually is, is management,' she said. 'It has no cure, that is why all of you must be careful. Do not share sharp objects with anybody. And make sure to keep yourselves until you marry. Am I understood?' she asked.

'Yes Antyyy!' we chorused.

When we were going home that afternoon, we ran. Nose covered, eyes to the left, and with full speed, we took turns crossing the spot where she lay. She was beginning to bloat. The sun was mercilessly crushing her skin against the hard surface. Water was dripping from under her. An elderly woman who sold oranges by the foot of the flyover said she'd decompose fast because of her illness. Many of us were gripped with terror when we descended the flyover and quickly, Jomo arrived and we scrambled to get it. A girl turned to the gutter and retched.

Jomo had barely moved when we heard gunshots from behind. We panicked, screamed and ducked as the gunshots got closer. A V-boot Mercedes Benz overtook us with speed. The gunshots were coming from the open roof of the car. It got to the gate of FMC and the three occupants descended and opened more fire in the air. The pandemonium worsened as people scampered to safety. Every care to a half, causing a serious traffic jam. The shooters seem to have a boot-load of ammunition. But what were they shooting at? People wondered. They just blocked everywhere and continued to bombard the sky with bullets. From inside Jomo where we crouched, and where many of us were wailing and calling for our parents, we could hear the shell casings of the bullets hitting the tarmac. Bullets rained heavily on car roofs and nearby zincs.

After what lasted like eternity, they got into the car and sped off towards the direction of where we

were headed. Dazed and shaky, many drivers managed to start their vehicle and began to move. Just then, a police Hilux arrived the hospital gate with many policemen jumping about to control the traffic. They cleared us to the end of the lane and commanded all cars to stop. Then a Pajero SUV screeched into the hospital, followed by more police vans.

That evening, during the six o'clock news on Imo Broadcasting Corporation--IBC--the newscaster announced that *the former commissioner for Commerce and Industry, Chief Ogbonnaya Uche, fondly known as OGB, was assassinated the afternoon of today being the 4th of February 2003, in his Owerri residence. The assailants barricaded the gate of the Federal Medical Centre, Owerri, with gunshots, to bar him for receiving urgent medical attention. Chief Ogbonnaya was the senatorial candidate for Orlu zone in the forthcoming election and had resigned his position as commissioner to run for senate under the All Nigeria People's Party (ANPP)....* The announcer's voice tailed off as my father's scream overtook the sitting room.

'They have got him! They have got him! Those bastards have got him!' he screamed.

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