

The Ordinary Events of a Dying Day

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January 20, 2021



Kofi was getting married in Warri and I had a morning flight to catch. The plane was scheduled to depart Lagos at 9.20 a.m. and arrive in Warri at 10.30 a.m.

The time was 8.30 a.m. The Domestic Wing of the Murtala Muhammed International Airport was rowdy. The queue at the counter was disorderly. A clean-shaven man asked for my passport. He proposed to help me with my boarding pass because my aircraft was about leaving. Although he spoke with a voice of authority, I knew he was just another hustler.

I ignored him.

My flight was called by a burly man in lemon-green reflectors holding a walkie-talkie. He shouted into the crowd that passports were to be submitted to him.

Real Authority.

We responded in the most chaotic manner. I was unperturbed. Chaos is the language of Lagos. And after chaos comes the calm. Then, it was announced that our flight had been delayed by thirty minutes; the reason was muddled with microphone static.

The lobby was full of people. Travellers appeared distinguished with their suitcases; their mannerisms suggested there was somewhere else they would rather be. My eyes fell on a group of travellers nursing a conversation.

I was looking for a familiar face because I always found one at airports. I once met an ex-lover at the airport in the company of her parents who frowned when she offered me a bosom hug that lasted longer than their notion of civility would prescribe.

My eyes fell on a man about my age. He looked familiar, balding and storky. Dressed in flowing buba and sokoto, feet shod in black leather slippers. His wedding band gleamed in his left fourth finger. His laughter was measured. He felt at ease, discussing with a bespectacled man.

I nudged him. He remembered me within seconds.

“Dami?” he asked and we hugged and shook hands.

It had been at least eight years since we saw. We were in the same residential hall at 100 Level in the university; his room was opposite mine. We began to trade names, tracking friends with whom we had lost touch.

“Everybody keeps in touch on Facebook these days,” I said and we both laughed in agreement.

I whipped out my phone and he did the same. I asked for his number and politely asked how it should be saved.

“Seyi,” he said. He didn’t appear offended that I had forgotten his name. My immediate recall was bad. I knew that if I gave it sometime, his name would return to me.

The airport official was back with our passports and boarding passes. We formed an imperfect circle around him and he called our names and told us to proceed to the departure lounge.

The immigration officials were full of implicit admiration and outward smiles. One even asked me how we intended to spend the weekend and I smiled in return. He patted my body, doing his routine security check, my hands raised in surrender, his face facilitating a venal grin. When he completed his official routine, he wished me “a nice day”.

As I walked into the departure lounge, I became aware of my hunger. I remembered that I hadn’t said goodbye to Seyi. I remembered that I had not told my folks about my trip to Warri. My refusal to tell my parents was deliberate. An act of defiance, perhaps. After all, I was a full-bodied adult.

I considered sending a text to my father.

Something like, Dear Sir, Good Morning. I am en route Warri for my friend's wedding. I don't know if you remember Kofi. Kofi once lived with me in Lagos but now he is back in Warri and I am surprised he is getting married because last year he was passing through Lagos from Accra on his way back from his cousin's wedding and he was having girlfriend issues. Now he is getting married to a different girl.

Too much information. Delete key.

My father’s response would have been a curt *Okay*.

I decided to wing this. I was due back in Lagos this time tomorrow. *Everything will be normal, as if nothing happened.*

I walked to *Double Four Restaurant*. I had only sat and asked for the menu when my flight’s first boarding call came.

The ride to the aircraft in the airbus was short and bumpy. A middle-aged man in denim clothes and fancy denim shoes stood beside me.

“Nice shoes,” I said.

“Nice bag,” he replied, “really classy.”

I smiled and considered telling him that it was a gift from an ex. I wondered where he had bought his fashionable shoes from. Perhaps it was a gift too, from an ex.

I saw two middle-aged ladies dressed in different styles of the same lilac fabric. They looked like sisters. I decided that they weren't sisters. One wore brown sandals and her toes were manicured. She looked like she was in her late forties. She had an air of confidence about her. She looked well-mannered, if not wealthy. I wondered what she was going to do in Warri. Perhaps, like me, there was a wedding to attend. Looking at her cute purple traveller's bag, I imagined how she must have looked twenty years ago.

The air hostess in the aircraft was too generous with her smile. She pointed me in the direction of my seat and I wondered why. All seats were in that same direction. I found my seat beside a bearded white man with headphones. He was fiddling his Samsung phone. I sat in my aisle seat after placing my bag in the overhead carriage. I whipped out my phone and called Kofi. I wondered if he wouldn't be too busy to pick up. He picked up on the third ring and I told him I had boarded the aircraft. He said he was about leaving the hotel for the registry.

Passengers walked past my aisle seat as I looked through Kofi's pre-wedding photos on my phone. My favourite picture was the one where he was styled like Micheal Jackson, ankle-shy trousers held in place by suspenders, white socks peeking, his smile made of teeth. His woman looked like a geisha with long eyelashes, she held a small pink umbrella and a matching hand fan.

One year ago Kofi had kept the night at my place on his return from Accra. He was returning from his cousin's wedding. He was having issues with his medical student girlfriend of three years. The issues were not clear-cut but it had led to their break-up. She had given Kofi a different kind of closure when she called three months later that she was getting married.

This was six months ago. Kofi met another girl. Today, Jite weds Kofi.

Kofi and I met during youth service. We had both been posted alongside one thousand Nigerian graduates to undergo the mandatory one-year programme. Kofi and I met in a shed at mammy market where I was served medium-rare fried chicken. He intervened and the chicken was returned to hot oil; we remained friends after camp and visited each other. He was posted to Umuchu-Achalla, an outskirt town close to Imo state while I was in Orumba North Local Government in Anambra state. I worked at the Model Hospital, Ubaha in a dusty community called Ndiowu. Ndiowu was popular for two reasons. One: former Vice-President of Nigeria had married two wives from one family in Ubaha Village. Two in 2012, a Dana Air Flight 992 from Abuja crashed in Lagos and six members of the Anyene family of Ubaha Village perished. The death news remained on the lips of the townspeople. The tragedy of losing six souls in one aircraft. Ndiowu was the biggest casualty of that air crash which killed one hundred and sixty souls.

During my service year, I lived in the Anyene's compound, in a detached Boy's Quarters with a roomy verandah. When I told well-meaning villagers after consultation where I lived, they would say, “You live where Onyeka used to live.”

Then they would begin to eulogise the man called Onyeka Anyene, the lawyer who had married a

Hausa woman. A soft-spoken man in person, his kindness was staggering. He gave to people and instructed that they should not tell anyone—that was the nature of his philanthropy. He had lived in that detached Boys Quarters until he built his own mansion on the ancestral land further up the hilly village. That property was now irredeemably empty, manned by a chain-smoking guard called Yao.

An elderly woman was having difficulties finding her seat. An air hostess swung into action and walked her closer to the Business Class area, she was smiling until they stopped short of the Business Class curtain; the old lady's smile waned.

A lady carrying her infant daughter and holding her toddler son's hand had difficulties loading her luggage into the overhead compartment. Her son began to cry in front of me and she looked perturbed. A man behind her, presumably her husband, was unperturbed, rifling through his mobile phone. The lady looked like she was about to snap. I looked at her and gestured for her son.

He sat on my laps like I was momentarily his father. He fiddled with my ear-piece, gestured for my phone which I put in my pocket, out of his reach. He began to cry and I said something which he surprisingly found soothing. I looked behind me and I saw the lady in the brown sandals again. Her companion in the same fabric was talking and she was listening. The lady in brown sandals looked like she approved that I took the crying toddler. The white man was in his own world listening to some loud rock music. I wondered what he was doing in Nigeria. Perhaps he was an expatriate at some oil rig.

The smiling air hostess began to talk into the microphone. She requested that the aisle be cleared. The lady had found a seat. Her husband came for his son and carried him out of my lap without a word.

I looked behind me. The lady in the brown sandals was distracted by her talkative friend. The boy's mother was busy with her infant daughter. I pulled out my phone and switched it off in time for the instructions. Before take-off, the pilot's voice from the cockpit apologised for the delay which was due to bad weather. He welcomed us on board and estimated the flight duration from Domestic Wing to Osubi airstrip to be about 45 minutes.

The plane leapt into the sky and we were suspended in the clouds by a force I thought was better explained by metaphysics. I pulled out Oliver Sacks' *The Man Who Mistook his Wife for a Hat* and began to read.

The inflight service began first with the business class and trickled down to us: a stable croissant, cheap sandwich biscuits and a small pack of orange juice. The flight was without incidence until we began our descent.

Then it became turbulent.

Looking out of the window, everything was blurry. It had the dreamy and aqueous quality of a storm. As the aircraft rocked and struggled through its turbulent descent, the cabin was quiet. Even the chatty woman behind fell silent.

I looked out again and I saw nothing discreet. The pilot's voice announced that we are about to land. We held our breaths. We waited for what seemed like eternity. Fifteen minutes later, we were still air-borne.

What happened to landing?

The pilot's voice came again. Visibility was poor, he said. He was unsuccessful in his attempt to land

the craft. He was going to try once more but with a caveat that if he failed again, he would return us to Lagos.

Passengers became uneasy. I looked over my shoulder and saw the mother of the boy, she was speaking in tongues. She had taken a cue from the pilot to raise her voice.

I was surprised by my calmness. The unease was palpable. People were terse in their seats. There was zero conversation and no eye contact. The air hosts were out of sight while the turbulence reigned.

An unsettling alarm erupted from nowhere. The mother's children began to cry. The mother's voice became emboldened. She was decrying, binding and loosening every force within her reach. Passengers around her had begun to say amen. Their hands held in fellowship.

The alarm continued. So did the turbulence. I looked out again and I saw a rapturous void. I saw frissons of light; I saw the darkness wobble as if it was made of liquid. I couldn't see anything that resembled a civilisation. It all looked like an abyss. I looked behind and caught a teardrop rolling down the eye of the woman in the brown sandals.

What happens before a plane crash? The last cockpit conversation is recorded by the black box. What happens to the goodbyes in the cabin? The prayers. The wails. The hysteria of people who must urgently meet with their violent ends.

We felt the plane continue to descend. I was too scared to look out again. I looked at the white man beside me and I saw his fears too, etched in bold letterings across his face. I asked him where he was going.

"Escravos", he said in a thick Eastern Europe accent.

The passengers behind us were singing a worship song. The Nigerian rendition of the divine rescue of Paul and Silas. The cabin speakers came on and we were informed that the alarm was just the toilet cigarette alarm.

Some quiet. Some respite. The prayers mellowed. My thoughts were with Onyeka Anyene in his final moments. How does a man endure his death alongside that of his wife and four children? I looked at the husband of that young mother but I could not see his face. Was he saying amen to his wife's loud prayers? Was he appraising his relationship with friends and even strangers? Did he think he was going to die? Was I going to die?

I thought about my day. It had begun like an ordinary day. I had woken up beside my lover. I had met an old university friend whose name I couldn't remember. I had collected his phone number which I knew I would not call. I had exchanged compliments with a much older man, fantasized about an older woman. These were ordinary events of a dying day.

The plane grumbled towards the ground, the pelting rain showering its fuselage. We held our breaths. This was a do-or-die affair. This plane must land or we go back to Lagos. Or what did the pilot mean when he said he will return us to Lagos? Was Lagos a metaphor for something else? My thoughts ran awry, finding no comfort in the visage of fellow passengers. Where are the air hostesses when you need them? They were not displaying any facile smiles. Perhaps they were contemplating their mortality too. *A career of air-borne hospitality punctuated by death in the skies, period.*

The plane touched the ground with a loud bump and as it taxied valiantly down the airstrip. People

clapped, ululated, cheered and smiled. Their relief was palpable. Their joy, meaningful. It was a close shave with death.

Moments later, we disembarked from the aircraft. I saw the husband holding his son while his wife carried their infant daughter. I saw the women wearing the same lilac fabric when I looked behind, the chatty one had resumed talking while the elegant lady in brown sandals just listened.

Everything was normal, as if nothing happened.

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