

WE FLY AT NIGHT

Lagos, Nigeria. October 2011.



I am on pastoral work at St. Mathew's parish, Amukoko. I work with Father Benny, a 72-year-old Irish priest whose complexion threatens to blanch from the scorching sun and humidity of Lagos over the past thirty years.

After morning mass on Tuesday he sits on a bench under a mango tree in front of the parish office, body lousy with golden hair. I fling a good morning as I walk past him. With a half-smile he asks whether the insecticide works, the one he gave me last night. I say yes, even though what I mean to say is no, because last night was horrible. The insecticides did not work, I am angry, I can still feel the bites, the spots upon which they deposited something.

Fumbling in my pocket for keys at the entrance I notice a lump of saliva at the doorstep. It has to be the streetwise-looking, dark-skinned woman who bounded into the office yesterday protesting she wanted to change her child's baptismal name from Juliana to Uchubiyoyo. I politely told her that Uchubiyoyo was just not godly enough, and we argued back and forth until she left with a furious snarl, hesitated at the door to drop this saliva.

I swallow my anger, the way Father Benny would like it. People should not fight, people should forgive, people should pray for those who offend them, and wish them well. Fr. Benny's image of God has to be something of a lamb to the slaughter.

"Oh yeah, I'm coming right there," Father Benny says in his Irish accent to a caller on phone. He hangs up. Someone is dying, he tells me he's leaving for anointing of the sick as he starts to rise, so anyone who wishes to see him in office should be told to wait until he is back. I nod my head, the way he would like it. As his old corolla eases out of the cool of the churchyard I think of other places and objects upon which those tyres will screech today: the chunks of road outside eaten by erosion, the unapologetic ditches from Maiyegunoro street to Adeoye to Omowumi and Omoniyi streets. I recall times when I drove with Father Benny to St. Gerald's parish and on the roads were a number of arrested house rats flung from windows, looking guilty as charged as they waited for their final death sentence by tyre screech.

I take my seat at the reception in the parish office. Elizabeth, the jolly parish secretary in her mid-thirties who speaks with the speed of the curious and overfed, sneaks into the office like a rumor. My eyes are half-shut in a short prayer. We exchange greetings, Elizabeth and I. She inserts herself into her seat. I watch her apply powder to her face and peep into a small mirror.

Soon we start conversing about everything from her Aunt who choked on fufu to the old woman who hates Holy Water, to the seven-year-old boy who steals his way into the queue to receive Holy Communion on Sundays, and cracks a smile each time the church warder unplugs the boy's small stature out of the line. We converse about a Jesuit priest who has been kidnapped, we have more things to talk about when Father Benny is not around. We trade opinions, exhaust all topics, and she turns to the computer and minds her business of typing something.

I like this gorgeous and wide space: the musty scent of books plus lysol that hang thick in the air. There is a large frame of the sagacious, watery-eyed smile of Pope John Paul II waving to a cheerful mammoth crowd with his grey-speckled hair flinching in the wind like Olympic torch, his head tilting towards his crosier. He is so holy. Like the hallowed virgin mary photos in Father Benny's office, John Paul's head can never be straight. Next to it is Pope Benedict whose eyes seem darkened from a lifetime of studying hard, hands open to wave at a crowd. The frame looks towards a corridor lined with locked after locked doors that gave off to Father Benny's office. Next to it is the Cardinal Archbishop of Lagos in his full regalia wearing episcopal smile, the smile he wore on *The Paulist Magazine's* special edition for his pastoral visit to my childhood parish in Ebutte-Metta many years ago. I have sometimes wondred as a child whether there was a book titled, "*Special Guidelines to Smiling while you are a Catholic Bishop in Nigeria*", because all Bishops seem to smile in a particular way. But my attention barely rests on these photos as I always have to read my way through bans of marriage on my table, or write announcements for Sunday masses, or attend to each person who walks in. Today I am telling each visitor that Father Benny will be back soon, gesturing them to take their seats as they wait, the way Father Benny would like it.

At half past twelve a lady walks into the office in flapping, oversize dusty slippers, her skin as dark as a moonless midnight. Her head, like a sucked-until-small lollipop, is shaved to skin it catches the rays of the electric light in the office. Her silky scarf unveils it slowly, unwrapping itself, separating from her head and slowly slipping down to her shoulder, hangs across her breasts, then drops to the floor. She steps over it and approaches my table. Ahn-ahn, is she unhinged? Her eye-catching eyes are glistening with a desire to cry. She leans on my table, my chair squeals an inch backward. I invite her to sit, "please sit down", the way Father Benny would like it, adding "sister". She refuses. She insists on standing across from me, quiet. I feel a nervous tic, something is about to go wrong.

"Hello sister?"

"We want to see Father Benny," she says, her voice is like a pitched chorus of two girls, it echoes as if through a metal throat.

I ask why she wants to see him.

She says she is not alone, then I notice another young lady, a mediocre version of herself who is very black and sweaty like her, standing outside the church office, and I am scanning and matching the two of them to see whether they are twins.

The one outside is looking even more bitter. She is stretching to yank at leaves of the mango tree as if scolding them for blossoming on the wrong stems. “How can I help you sister?” I say again after drawing a deep breath, feigning undauntedness.

“Madam speak up now? The seminarian is talking to you,” Elizabeth charges in with her fruity voice, turning from her computer to us with a coy frown, her hands bearing a file that reads “*Solemnity of Christ the King*” on it.

“Well, we are both evil spirits, the two both of us,” the girl says. I feel suspended in the air from legs to buttocks as she gestures to the girl outside, “me and that one”. The world suddenly feels like an old fragile house collapsing against itself and everything in it. “Did you hear me?” she asks, and the parish office is becoming smaller and smaller.

“We fly together at night, so...” my heart flies, the office shimmers out of focus. Pope John Paul’s smile seems to melt and dry up. The frame of the Archbishop of Lagos seems to shut its eyes and face. One of the waiting visitors is trembling. Elizabeth smacks a file shut and freezes.

“...*I come and do deliverance,*” she finishes her sentence.

After a hard swallow, and everything is slowly coming back clearly again, I tell her Father Benny is not around, to join her friend outside while they wait for him, the way I think Father Benny would like it. She remains there, looking sternly at me, her lips widening in a huge smile like she is hungry and I am supposed to be edible. Jesus, my heart hurdles. “I should go? We should go?” I feel small, like somebody’s missing child, terrified. Is she talking to me? I can’t feel my knees, I can’t hear well, I can’t, I can’t.

“Brother Anthony I want to use our toilet,” Elizabeth says with the eureka voice of one who has come up with a big idea. She hastily springs up. Her chair clatters to the floor. She leaves without the key to the toilet.

“The keys, Elizabeth”.

“Oh. Yes the keys,” she avoids my eyes as she plucks the key bunch from my hand and scurries to the toilet. She is so jittery she has to try twice before she can unlock the toilet.

“Is...is that your sister?” I ask her with a voice that sounds thinned by distance. I am glancing at her shoulders and imagining wings growing from them, she dodging electric poles on the streets of Lagos, defiling the laws of gravity in the company of her sister, two dark shiny heads and owl eyes.

“Oh yes,” she says, “it’s good when sisters don’t just walk together but also fly together. What do you think?” I tap a foot on the floor to be sure that I am still alive. Her sharp blink is a spank against my forehead. She smirks, pinches the side of her laps, leaves her scarf there on the floor and moves out of the office. O my God, I feel a purge of relief. Outside, she hardens her face, whispers God knows what to her sister and joins her in the tearing of leaves, and the noise fills the place. It looks like serious manual labor, the continuous yanking and the cracking. I won’t tell them to stop – it is not in my place to tell them. Let them tear all they can, I shall sweep when they are gone.

Mr. Simon the church compound manager is a restless soul with a touch of stubbornness about him. I don't like how he orders people around or walks into my room without knocking – just because he's the compound manager. He is slim and slouchy I do wonder how he gets to sit on the chair in his office for long hours. Typical of him, he stops at the tree and watches the ladies tearing the leaves. One branch is already bald, Mr. Simon's mouth drops. I think he is thinking of something witty to spew.

“Wait. Look at you these *gaals*,” he snaps at them saliva drizzles from his mouth.

“Do you know how much we pay the gardeners to trim this?” he adjusts his trouser, watches from below his glasses, as if they girls are specimens in a laboratory. They ignore him like he is a mere fresh air that human beings need do nothing about. For the first time, I am afraid for Mr. Simon, and I don't know how to warn him. Poor Mr. Simon.

“Hello *gaals*. *Ahn-ahan*, you have no respect? Listen silly *gaals*,” he crushes pieces of leaves on the ground with his feet as he draws closer to them. He makes to touch one of them, the one who had come into the office.

“Don't. Try. It,” she quips, “you are playing with *faya*”. Mr. Simon takes a step backward, takes off his glasses, one more step backward, blinks disbelievingly.

“I am a former secretary in the river Niger where we hold our general meetings,” she says, reassuringly. I notice Mr. Simon's right ear jinx. Only once. This must be really serious. Me, I dip my hand into my pocket and caress my rosary beads as one Hail Mary recites itself in my mind. I don't pull the rosary out, I just tap it as if to say, “please stay with me”.

“And she,” she gestures to her sister, “Is the present treasurer. She keeps baby skulls for sacrifice,” she pauses, “we really do love eating small babies.”

“I like sucking from their skull. What about you?” the other one chimes in, facing Mr. Simon.

“I like their heels. Really cool dear, cool. I prefer Calabar babies,” she says with tears in her voice “I love baby heels,” she breaks into tears, wipes her misting eyes, then turns back to the tree and focuses on the leaf tearing. But why is she crying? I am so confused.

“I heard this man has one new baby *abi*?” the other one says. And it is true, Mr. Simon's baby was baptized by Father Benny only two weeks ago, *sheybi?*``.

“His baby is very fresh. I hear she is red, like tomatoes from Jos,” her sister concurs with two slow nods, wets her lips with her tongue, “ah delicious”, then bursts two ripe pimples from the side of her face with one scratch, they weep in sequence. The other one doesn't wait for the pus to crawl down. She stretches a finger to her sister, robs the weeping pimples and puts her finger in her mouth. “Very tasty” she says.

“J-zus, *Ghod*,” Mr. Simon lets out a shout, I start to feel my head full of water, my brain swims in my skull, my vision blurs again. A waiting visitor in a Christian Mothers uniform who has been asleep suddenly comes wide awake, wipes the yellowed ends of her mouth with her wrapper and pries her eyes with both hands.

“Where is Anthony? Where is the seminarian?” Did Mr. Simon just call me? Call my name? Something props me to rise from my seat and rush to the toilet at the backdoor

“knock-knock”

“But I have not finished, Brother,” the secretary says, “Anthony I am very sorry, I am just very sorry”; she is plain useless in this situation. I return to my seat. I am more comfortable cleaning the entire church building three times a day than I am watching this happen in my presence.

“Everything has happened today, just today,” the woman in a Christian Mothers’ uniform whispers to the man near her, but the bandage around her neck won’t let her turn to him. “I thought it was a dream. I didn’t realize this is happening in my presence here and now,” she robs her palms against her laps.

“May God take power from the devil” the man says in Igbo, snaps fingers into space. Outside the office Mr. Simon has disappeared and the girls are still tearing leaves. The floor is littered with green, the tree sways left and right as it gets undressed.

Soon Mr. Simon arrives with two men: a police officer and a church security man and everything is starting to feel more tensed up. Random people are starting to gather around the scene like ants coming to nibble at misplaced sugar cubes. The secretary is still in the toilet. The four of them on the visitors list who were mumbling prayers, erupt with complaints about the girls, “police, take them, they are demonic.”

“God forbid you leave them.”

“Let them do something”.

“Blood of Jesus”.

These people cannot go home because the witches have blocked the entrance. The fattest of the police men shouts “*khaaa!*” at the girls, and they are unmoved. Another fresh air has blown itself across, so what? They do not even look at him.

“You girls are really stupid, *e be like say una no dey look face abi?*” he charges, holds out his gun. Mr. Simon takes cover behind him, although his hands are still folded as if he’s in charge of things. The security man who is a Muslim is quietly mumbling “*la ila ila la*” to himself as the girls finish off another branch. Finally I see Father Benny’s Corolla ease into the church compound and come into sight. The car halts with a loud squeal of break. He rushes out, almost running to the scene: an armed police man, a stunned security man, two hardworking girls who are busy, a humbled Mr. Simon.

“What’s the problem *han?* A gun? In my church?” the police man lowers his gun and Mr. Simon erupts with reports about the girls. Relief seeps through my nerves, *aahh*, it seeps through.

The girls are now cracking stems, one of them bends and grabs a handful of torn leaves, throws into her mouth and starts munching *chkgrkkgmm chkgrkkgm*, veins line her forehead and her neck, her eyes shine from effort.

“Hello girls,” Father Benny says softly. They both stop the tearing at once. I hear the toilet’s door behind me creak open. Elizabeth sits near me, her breath raspy, I am disappointed in her. Fat coward! I will teach her a lesson after this.

“*It is you that we come and see,*” one of them says. Elizabeth cuts in with a loud voice, “they both say they are demon-possessed, father”. “They are witches and they fly up, fly up and down” two of the visitors say at once, then silent after their sentences stumbled into each other.

“Follow me into the office,” Father Benny says, “Or did any of you come before these ladies?” he asks the visitors.

“Ah no father let them go first,” they chorus randomly, heads jerking or nodding in denial or affirmation. The girls move in step behind Father Benny into the corridor that leads to his office.

“Me I want to go to my home now. I don’t need to see Father anymore. I will figure out how to take care of my marriage issues. Father is busy,” one of them says, “I have forgiven my husband already, with all my heart I forgive him. We will live in the peace of Jesus Christ”.

“Oh! Because the entrance is now cleared” the Christian Mother says, “now you want to leave us and run away”

“*I want see wetin go happen*” another one says, curious, “I have never seen a flying person before”. I can now focus on reading the bans of marriage file. “I am sorry,” the secretary says to me, “I thought you wanted to pee. The toilet is now open”. I withdraw the words I wish to throw at her: *when you go back to that toilet make sure you never come out anymore..*

I continue reading, sliding a glance towards the corridor leading to Father Benny’s office from time to time. Four pages later I see the girls walking out of the office, both of them approaching the secretary and I. If I have feared anything before now, then I had been afraid of the wrong things.

“Anthony I want to pee,” the secretary whispers in a rush to leave, “give me the keys” she commands me, her hands open in my front, her eyes on the girls, her breath fanning the side of my face. But she has not returned the keys to me, she doesn’t remember she still has the keys to the toilet.

“But it is now my turn,” I say, annoyed. She tells me she is a woman, that I don’t understand how women’s body work, looking desperate like a thief about to be caught. Her cheeks shook, “give me my key, I am asking for the last time,” she looks mad. But the ladies have reached our table already, all eyes in the office are on us. I hear Elizabeth mutter something that sounds like her mother’s maiden name. She last muttered it when robbers came to the parish on the first week I arrived. After the robbers made away with the money, I asked her for the meaning of what she had said – there must be something life-saving about *Chuchukruku*. I think of my Mother’s maiden name too, but Ekeidnma doesn’t sound life-saving. I start muttering a Yoruba worship to myself, “*wo nu mi o, k’ewa ba mi soro*”. Otherwise, the office is death silent.

“Father say make we book another appointment,” one of them says with hands folded across her breasts. I fix my gaze on her flask nose, my heart is pounding somewhere around my neck, or I no longer know where my heart is.

“Do not be afraid,” Father Benny appears behind them with a smile, like the risen Christ. “This is a psychological case. I have called one of the sisters at the hospital who is a psychiatrist. Demons don’t come looking for deliverance, Anthony.” Suddenly a car with the words Medical Missionaries of Mary draws up outside the parish office, rear lights blinking, and an unveiled Nun with grey-speckled hair climbs out of it, “come on girls,” she claps and beckons on them like they are pets, “let us go”. The girls move out of the office to meet the Nun. Father Benny apologizes to the visitors for inconvenience. They forgive him very fast with rigorous nods except the Christian Mother whose neck is bandaged.

It is now evening, the reception is emptied of visitors and Elizabeth has gone home after apologizing for a second time. The early evening mosquitoes are starting to do rehearsals for night’s work, crickets are starting to tune themselves for tonight’s shrilling. Father Benny invites me into his office. His face is the reddest it has ever been.

“That experience this morning must have troubled you *han*. Thank you for making them wait”

“Thank you for coming back” I say, feeling shy.

“Could you have dealt with it had I not come back?”

“Hmm, Father. Many are called, few are chosen, others are conscripted,” his face goes red-pink in a stifled laugh, and I join him. He laughs like a healthy baby. I laugh all the more, bent and weakened, eyes watering, I think for a split second that my breathing might actually stop. He laughs all the louder and stretches both arms so that he looks like a badly depicted arabesque I have seen in a Nigerian newspaper.