

The Premonition

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I sat bolt upright, like a puppet whose strings had been pulled taut. The remaining tendrils, bent on dragging me back to that blissful gulf of sleep and serenity, were ripped away, left hanging, as consciousness began to register.

The intermittent thuds to the door continued. I could feel that familiar sense of dread with its steely grip creeping over me, once again. This very scenario had played itself out, recently and regularly.

“I’m coming”, I shouted. I could never get used to the fact that Nigerians used that expression as an exit line. It was meant to indicate a plan to return, as in, ‘I’m coming back’.

I gingerly lifted the mosquito net. In the early days, I used to lie in bed, listening to the rain pound on my corrugated tin roof and imagine that I was Katherine Hepburn in *The African Queen*. The fact that I’d never seen the movie was incidental. I glanced up at the ceiling fan that the net was fastened to. My large house was devoid of furniture but had a bathtub, toilet, ceiling fans and some rather elaborate light fixtures. However, there was no running water or NEPA (Nigerian Electrical Power Authority but better known as Never Expect Power Always.) Sometimes I pictured the NEPA mysteriously activating. I could see the headline: “Canadian CUSO Volunteer Decapitated by Fan in the Night”. I’d been told though that the electrical wiring had never been installed so I figured it couldn’t really happen. Although, if the truth be told, I never really understood the fundamentals of electricity, despite the fact that my father was an electrical contractor and that my five brothers were either electricians or had spent summers immersed in the field.

I realized that I was trying to postpone the inevitable. The door. I inched towards it. For the last few weeks, I’d had nightmares and recurring images even in my waking hours that someone would come to my door and tell me there’d been a death in my family. The vision was both eerie and unnerving. I shuddered, involuntarily, as I opened the door. But I was safe. It was Mo, the proprietor of the Super Mo, the local bush bar. “They’ve caught him.” He was out of breath. “The head of the Dan Guy Group.”

I thought back to that day. The day that led me to realize that you **can** get over total devastation; a lesson that would serve me well on many future occasions. Unbeknownst to me, another was already careening my way.

I was returning from Paula's, a fellow CUSO. Once a week I stayed over at her place. Paula's school had a generator. We'd cook a meal and I could indulge in a cold Star beer or two and the comfort of sleeping under a ceiling fan that did function. I used to leave Paula's early in the morning to get home in time for a cold bucket bath before school. On that particular morning, Abubakar, an assistant at Paula's school, offered to "lift" me home on his "machine" It was a long hike and I was grateful for the ride. En route, Abubakar asked if he could borrow 10 Naira (about \$10 Cdn) I agreed to the loan, and since the money was in my house, he came in with me.

The first thing that struck me as I entered, was the large clean bare area on the table inside the door. That's where my tapes had been. There had been at least forty music cassettes. Family and friends had taped some of my favourites – J.J. Kale, The Stones, Van Morrison... - as send-off gifts.

It was harmattan and the time of year where everything is covered in at least an inch of red dust that blows down from the Sahara. During this time of year dusting is pointless because the red returns almost immediately. That's how I noticed so quickly that the tapes were missing. The dust hadn't yet arrived, to claim those square inches of table top.

I was puzzled but the full impact was yet to sink in. I turned and began to search the room. Suddenly, it dawned on me. I'd been cleaned out, wiped out, robbed blind! Horrified, I ran to my bedroom. I'd been given a beautiful doeskin leather purse by a boyfriend before I left Canada. This was my prize possession and it hadn't taken me long to realize it had no place in Nigeria (at least not in my life in Nigeria). During my orientation in Kano, I found it to be blatantly incongruous with my new surroundings, so on my arrival in Kutigi, I carefully placed it underneath some of my clothes in my closet. Occasionally, I would take it out to admire. Beside the bag, also hidden, was a basket full of lacy WHITE lingerie.

The underwear had been a Christmas gift from my sister, and while appreciated, white was not a practical colour for the bush. Once in a while, I would look at it too and remind myself that there was a place in another world where people wore white underwear and carried doeskin bags.

"Wondafull, wondafull."

It was Abubakar's voice. He was pacing my living room. His words seemed inane, given the situation, until I remembered where I was. During CUSO orientation in Ottawa, we'd been told that Nigerians use the expression "wonderful" to mean literally 'full of wonder'. We'd been given the example, "Did you see the wonderful mammy wagon accident today?"

"Wondafull, wondafull."

I tore open my closet doors in search of my buried treasure. Not only were my luxuries gone, but the closet was empty!

“Wondafull, wondafull.”

“Abubakar, PLEASE, stop saying that”, I implored. while thinking, “You say that one more time and...”

I began to survey the damage. I was truly gobsmacked.

Everything I owned was gone. Naturally, they’d taken all my toys – top of the line short-wave radio, cassette player, walkman, camera (all send-off gifts) and money (Nigerian, Canadian, American, travellers’ cheques and money orders). They’d also stolen my passport, shoes, gifts from home, all my food, dishes, sheets, things off the wall, clothes, toiletries, luggage and candles. I had had no furniture to speak of. Now I had even less. Even my dirty laundry was gone! I had nothing but the dress on my back. But what hit the hardest was that they’d made off with letters from home, addresses, photos (even peeled them off the walls) and a humourous, yet touching book of my life, that my two younger brothers had co-authored.

These things were invaluable to me. I couldn’t begin to put a price on them, but what worth could they possibly have to others? The money and expensive items I could understand. But this senseless looting of such personal items stunned me. I was stricken, cut to the bone.

I told Abubakar that I couldn’t loan him the money. He offered to inform my principal and “lift” me back to Paula’s. I arrived to find that she was teaching but Irene and Kojo, our friends from Ghana, invited me into their home.

I sat and yes, I cried.

Paula arrived to comfort me and accompany me to the police station. While there, I filled out an inordinate amount of paperwork, in what appeared to be triplicate. Nigerian police did not boast a reputation for speed. They told me to return the next day. I spent a restless night at Paula’s, bemoaning my lost goods, even during a fitful sleep.

After a limited amount of investigation, however, it became fairly evident to the police who the likely culprits were. A drama club was traveling around the state, leaving a string of thefts in their wake. We’d been talking about them only the week before. I remember wondering aloud what you would do if you walked into your house and found that everything you owned was gone. “You’d manage”, a friend replied. But it just seemed such an unfathomable situation that I didn’t spend much time contemplating it. Not that it could have prepared me for that eventuality!

It turned out that my principal, whose ethics were more than questionable, had owed the troupe money from a previous performance.

He'd given them permission to camp out in the school (classes had been temporarily suspended). They'd been there for a week already. I'd noticed them helping themselves to my water tank, even though I had very little in it and it was a major ordeal getting the tanker to stop and fill it. I often went weeks with a dry tank. There were about 15 of them in the group, many wives and lots of kids. My still night air had been invaded, punctuated by children's cries and adults' voices.

My house was a two minute walk from the school, across an empty African plain, where Fulani herded their white zebu and graceful egrets would pick the flies off their backs in a strange symbiotic contract. It was a scene I could never tire of. There was nothing else around for kilometers.

The school night magardi had seen three men from the group drive their machines from the school to my house three times at 4 a.m. but didn't think there was anything out of the ordinary going on!!! They'd broken the back lock.

I later learned that the police had picked up some of the drama club and detained them overnight. Yes, they were, according to police, definitely the guilty parties.

The next day I returned to the police station. The police had certainly changed their tune. The drama club had been released and I was told repetitively that my students (who I had a good relationship with) "must have broken into (my) house". I couldn't understand the about face. Later, it was explained to me. The head of the drama group was a Yoruba man. So was the Chief of Police. In Nigeria, ethnic blood runs deep. The reality of the situation hit with a dull thud. The police made a big show of going through stacks of reports, (probably from the last twenty years as crime had seemed to be a non-issue in Kutigi) They put on a pretence of trying to locate my file. It was an exercise in futility, humility and extreme humour, if you could see past the first two aspects. (It took awhile).

I would never again see any of my belongings. In a village where I couldn't replace a toothbrush (as locals used chewing sticks instead), I mourned the loss of my Revlon blush and lipstick, regardless of the fact that I rarely applied make-up. The police station ordeal had been a farce. I was deeply saddened. But now, I was just like my fellow Kutigians, living with just the basics. It was time to pick up the pieces and move on.

I roused myself from my reverie. Mo was reporting that the head of the drama club had been caught "red-handed" stealing a goat. Now this was a SERIOUS matter! He was handcuffed and led through town where he was sentenced to six months in Bida jail! Kutigi police always get their man!

As for the rest of the Dan Guy Drama Club, they spent the next three weeks living back at the school, with my principal's approval, using my water and causing me many uneasy nights. I shouted an occasional obscenity their way, though never actually loud enough for them to hear. But it made me feel better.

I was partly wrong about the premonition. No one knocked on my door. But the day the drama troupe packed up, I ran into David O., my Nigerian CUSO Field Staff Officer in a chophouse in town. He had come to inform me that my sister had died in a fire.