

AT THE END OF THE RAINBOW

by Olusoji Obebe

It was in the dead of the night—a very cool night; a time lovers would have been locked in each other's arms, relishing the moment of lovemaking. Or bachelors that might have slept naked, face up, dreaming about carousals and flirtations. Or the nocturnal animals roaming around. Or the *children of the night* trying to break into houses to cart away properties.

But I was indifferent. I lay on the bed fully awake, thinking about my journey to Lagos. By tomorrow, I would be in Lagos. I'd never been to Lagos, but I'd heard enough beautiful tales about Lagos to last a lifetime. First, the vastness. These people would say Lagos is very big—perhaps the second largest city in Africa—with millions of people. Quite fascinating! Second, the luxury—the sophistication. Third, the civilization. Fourth, the technology. Fifth... And I might keep mentioning and mentioning and mentioning them—a lot that has been said about Lagos.

So, I couldn't wait to find myself in such an environment as Lagos. I also wanted to enjoy the splendour of being a Lagosian. I wanted to breathe the air of Lagos. I wanted to tread on Lagos' earth. I even heard that all the roads inside Lagos were tarred, not like our own clay earth that turns squishy with the faintest rain drop. People who came back home from there did say Lagos is sweet.

So, I would someday come back home and tell people too that Lagos is sweet. I'd tell Kola, Gideon, Beku, and the other guys that Lagos is sweet. I'd call them local boys too. They would

know that *level don change*. I'd wear that skimpy skirt, off-shoulder and tomato-coloured wig. I'd put on heels and walk this way, that way. Catwalk, right. That real Lagosian lady walk.

Lagos! I couldn't wait and that had kept me awake.

I dragged my body to the left side of the mat. I wanted to be certain if I hadn't been talking aloud all this while. So, I rose to pay attention to the quiet environment, throwing open my ears like a dog trying to discern the whistle buried in the air. I lay back right but my body was now heavy and weak, too reluctant to be moved, as a result of sleeplessness. Then, a wave of past events swept over me. It rewinded and doused my sleep yet momentarily.

A man had come this morning to visit my grandmother. It wasn't his first time visiting. But today he came, glancing at me intermittently. When he entered through the entrance door, he smiled at me as I tried to get my dishes out to wash. I felt quite uncomfortable with the smile. Then he came out with another sly stare. I didn't know what all that was meant for. I didn't know what he had spoken with my grandmother but I could see my grandmother smile and bid the man farewell. They might have had a really nice discussion.

I was still washing the dishes when my grandmother called me.

"Do you know that man?" She had asked.

Yes, of course. Who didn't know Brother Solo? He was a native of this village, Gbeke. But he resided in Lagos State. He only came to Osun State during the festive season or for important things like he had done today. Though, I still doubted if I was really the subject of his discussion with my grandmother today.

"Solo decided to help us and you, particularly."

I still didn't understand. So, I asked, "What kind of help, Maami?"

"God bless you for asking, my daughter. He wants to send you back to school. Which means you will stay with him in Lagos, help him with chores and continue your education there."

I still didn't understand!

"Maami, you mean I will leave you and go to Lagos? No, I can't o. Unless you follow me."

My grandmother sighed and called me so much affectionately that I had to smile. "Omotayomi."

I smiled. There's always a special feeling that comes when one's name is called in full. I beamed like a 100 Watts light bulb.

"I want the best for you," she continued. "And since your parents have died, I've been trying my best for you. I want you to go to school and become a great woman in life. Great women like Funmilayo Kuti, Folake Solanke. Don't you want to be like them? These girls all had to go to school."

My grandmother had a way of convincing me. Deep down in my mind I wanted to go to school, and to Lagos. But who will take care of Maami?

"But who will be helping you?" I asked, sombre.

"I've been helping myself before you were born. You've been helping me till now you've become a beautiful fifteen-year-old girl. It's time to help you, my daughter. Besides, Nurse Queen is there for me. She has always been there."

It was certain that I wasn't so convinced, this time. I looked at my grandmother. Ageing really reflected on her skin. Wrinkles formed across her face. And life has been so hard on her that she

now needed much care. But Nurse Queen. My grandmother was right. She had become part of our family. And I didn't call her Nurse Queen anymore but Aunty Queen. She fed us with food and water every blessed day. And because of this, she rented an apartment next to our house; even though she spent most of the time in our house and sometimes, slept in our room. I knew she would take care of my grandmother.

And as for me, I would be going to Lagos to become a great woman. So, I blessed my last day in Gbeke.

The next day, I woke up with a wide yawn, the edges of my lips almost touching my ears. I never thought I would eventually sleep off yesternight. I came down from the bed having untucked the mosquito net from my bedside. Almost curiously, I cast a glance at my grandmother. She was still asleep. There was a mirror carefully positioned at a corner of the room which welcomed sun rays. But because the sun hadn't risen, I hardly saw my reflection.

These days I was always concerned about how I look and what I wear. Truly, I'd started growing into a woman. By the end of this year's rainy season, my breasts were already forming; first, like small round balls and now with tender nipples. I didn't have a bra or whatsoever. I usually went on errands with my breast bouncing behind my clothes. Maybe that is why Kola and his friends were staring at me that day on the other street. Maybe they were not only looking at my face but my breasts. Bunch of idiots!

I turned round and observed my hips. I rested my two hands on them. And the image of me wriggling to the Conga beat before the king occurred to me. At once, I was reliving the moment.

It was a year ago at the Osun Festival where girls who had just started to experience a monthly flow of blood were asked to dance in a religious attempt to say 'bye-bye' to girlhood.

But I danced the best. My waist beads were rattling as I moved my body acrobatically to the rhythm. I too knew I danced with youthful vigour. I bent, twisted, pattered my bare beautiful feet on the floor, shook, threw my arms to the sky, returned them to my waist and wriggled it.

Then, my grandmother's guffaw interrupted me. I'd been dancing. She sat up and taunted me for being anxious about going to Lagos. She made fun of my dance steps too. Though I knew deep down in her heart, she was admiring my vivaciousness and perhaps saying some prayers too.

It was when I was about to leave that my spiritedness dampened. It was then I knew no one could fill the vacancy of my grandmother for me and of me for my grandmother. I wept. We both wept, as though we were mourning the dead. How is life going to be without Maami? I'd lived virtually all my life with my grandmother. Leaving her now seemed a hard thing to do. But she told me: You have to go. Go daughter, and make me proud. With a witty smile, she had said that. But, I knew she was hiding her tears. Aunty Queen was there too. I could see that she also looked forlorn and somewhat pitiful. I heard her say to my grandmother last night, "But Mama Tayo, this decision didn't go down well with my spirit. Tayo can do well here, even better under our nose. I just hope this isn't child trafficking."

What's child trafficking? I wanted to ask but the opportunity to ask was lost. I couldn't talk with Aunty Queen that night because she received an emergency call from one of her patients. Only now that I was already in the car she arrived and waved at me. I didn't even know if her waves were goodbye wishes or were meant to stop me. I innocently waved back.

Shortly after exiting the town, I resumed my being high-spirited. My curiosity caused this feeling of vivaciousness. And now, I took a closer look at Brother Solo. He wasn't someone I had thought he was. He was being brotherly. On the journey, he had bought some bread and chilled bottles of soft drink. We ate and talked. I was quite inquisitive. My curiosity. The feeling. I asked about every single thing I saw as he drove past the road. I asked about Lagos. And he just kept laughing and simply replied, "Don't worry, you will get to Lagos soon."

But before I could really smell the air of Lagos, I'd had a very shocking sight on the road. It was on the double-lane express road. A small car was badly crushed like a compressed tomato under a very big tanker. People had gathered around the accident scene. It was a recent accident.

Brother Solo said it probably happened last night or this early morning. Fear gripped me. I smelt fresh blood. Fear gripped me hard. Even while Brother Solo was still saying something about the government not providing good roads and the drivers' recklessness, I was far drowned in thoughts. My grandmother already told me that my parents died of a car accident when I was just a kid. And now the thought of it tormented me. I began to draw a picture of my parents' accident from the one I just saw. God! It was a gory one. The picture flashed through my mind like a blinking danger light. I imagined my father swerving his car into a nearby bush in an attempt to dodge the incoming tanker that defaulted the lane rules. And then, blood! Blood! Blood!

"Tayo!" Brother Solo, startling me out of my dream. I had slept off in the car and had a dream.

But we'd arrived in Lagos. The different scenes fascinated me. The way cars were aligned, with colourful bumpers on what Brother Solo called *go-slow*. The way people, a great multitude, trudged along the pedestrian overhead bridge. The hailing there and the shouts here. The horns of cars. The blares of tankers. The children, the old. The beggars hanging around the corners with

bowls and standing sticks, the light-skinned lady ignoring sizzling calls. The madman, the....

Lagos is a beehive! There were just too many things to watch, open-mouthed. Too many people to see. So, this marked the beginning of becoming a Lagosian. The beginning of greatness.

While I was expecting Brother Solo to take me to school, he didn't even say anything about it. It was now two months of my stay in his house. Surprisingly, he didn't have a child. Not even a wife. That was none of my business, though. My own cup of tea was to go to school and become great. And so, I summoned up courage—though he had always remained nice to me, like a brother—and walked up to him. I needed to go to...

"Shut up!" He had rebuffed. His countenance changed. Brother Solo's nice look contorted within a few minutes to a bandit's. I wasn't expecting a brusque refusal. I thought he and my grandmother had talked this over. I wept. But he continued, "Now, listen young woman, I have paid your bride price to your grandmother. You're now my wife! A full house wife. No school! So, get that into your skull."

I shuddered. Bride price? What does that mean? But I knew quite right what *wife* meant. Wife? I was just confused. This is what I knew: I was just a little girl who wanted to go to school, become great and take care of my grandmother. There was no such word as *wife* there. Or if there was, it definitely shouldn't be now. But the reality just dawned on me. Could this be what Aunty Queen called *child trafficking*? Or did Aunty Queen also know about this? But there was no such word as *wife* in *child trafficking*. Did grandmother really make me a wife to Brother Solo? But

how would I become a great woman by that? I was thinking. And whenever I remembered I was helpless, I wept and wept and wept till tears dried up.

And one very night, Brother Solo came into the clumsy room I slept in. I was fast asleep. He placed his filthy hand on my bare lap. I was deep asleep. His other filthy hand unbuttoned my sleeping gown and started fondling my breasts. Then, I was startled out of my sleep—what I had thought was a nightmare. I shivered. What's Brother Solo trying to do? He was forcing himself on me. Or more appropriately, he was trying to rape me. And that was just what he did. For the first time in my life, I felt like a rag. I was bleeding and I thought I would die. What Brother Solo did to me was the most painful thing that had ever happened to me.

But that didn't stop the monster from coming the next night. And it continued, on and on and on and on and... My life was becoming a big mess. I couldn't call. If I shouted, Lagos would not hear me. Not even the government who sat up there in the recliner, sipping wine. Perhaps, they had their own problems to face. But I was dying. I was crying everyday. I was losing much flesh to nightly struggles. I was losing my voice to tears. I was losing my beauty, my future. Maybe, I was losing my health too. I was indeed losing everything.

So the following night, before Brother Solo's arrival from his outing, I had packed—I didn't have anything even—I had run into the street. The Lagos street of wide open arms. I ran out to face my fate squarely. I ran out, searching for what might return my lost things. I ran out, ready to receive whatever the street would give me. Bread. Breath. Something. Anything.