

Mohammed Kabir was not a medical doctor. In fact, he did not even hold a PhD. But almost everyone who knew him addressed him as doctor. It – was a nickname he had since he was in secondary school and it stuck. When he was employed as an LT, a Laboratory Technologist, in the university, almost everyone was calling him doctor.

When his HOD asked him his proper name, he said it was Mohammed Kabir. “I am pleased to meet you, Dr Kabir.” The HOD extended his hand for a handshake. And since then he became Dr Kabir to all. And when he wore his oversized lab coat, the verisimilitude with a genuine doctor was uncanny.

He was a very friendly and intrusive sort of person. He had a way with people, that before you knew he would come real close to you. He was virtually on intimate terms with almost anyone who mattered in the school. This ranged from the Vice-Chancellor, the Faculty Deans down to the Heads of Departments.

Kabir’s friendliness cut across religion and tribe. Everyone was his friend, male or female. The only blemish he had on his character was that he had a weakness for easy money. And most of his colleagues did not know this. So it never bothered them.

It was true that Kabir was friendly, but he was also almost always moody. His state of permanent impecuniosity attested to this. In the school, people could not explain this oxymoron of someone being moody and cheerful at the same time. Most of them however were never close enough to him to know of his financial affairs. Rumour had it that no matter how much money he had, he would always lose it at the cards.

He was more of a compulsive gambler than a habitual one since the money was not regular in coming. Consequently, he was reclusive. But whenever he encountered anyone, he affected this visor of permanent cheerfulness, largely, perhaps, to mask off his real feelings for being alone and destitute.

By the time Labaran finished supplying this information to Habib, it was all Habib could do to stop himself from laughing out loud.

“You are telling me that the person who duped your girlfriend was a common lab attendant?”

“It looks like it Honourable.”

“And a common gambler?”

“Yes, sir.”

“How did you get all this information about him then?”

“When Salma left the committee and came to me crying for justice, I said you were the only person who could help us. So through our campus pimp, I traced and found the person who gave Salma Kabir’s name. We gave him a little working over and threatened to expose him to the school authority for the racket, or is it syndicate, they are superintending in the university. He opened up and sang like a canary.”

“So, how do you intend to deal with the matter?”

“Zaki, of course.”

Honourable Habib was quiet for a long while. He was not comfortable with Zaki at all. The last time he was instructed to deal with Alhaji Adamu by kidnapping his son, he bungled it. He had to involve the services of one inexperienced villager and together they got themselves arrested. It was to his credit that he did not divulge my name. That blunder cost me over a quarter of a million naira.

It was not so much to secure their release as it was to protect my name. The police were asking for over a million naira to kill the matter. Luckily, my position helped. I remember distinctly that the village shamus, what was his name, Talle, I think, had to be instructed to go and settle in a remote village, not better than the Lafayette he loved so much, but no worse. The police ensured that he was physically taken there and they made him promise never to set foot on Lafayette soil again. He gave his word after they threatened to open the case of kidnapping against him anytime he was even rumoured to be seen in Lafayette.

Talle had assured them that he would never visit his village again and vowed never to have anything to do with anyone that he did not know before. I heard that he went about telling people that he was a successful farmer in his new village that lay somewhere between Nigeria and Niger. The actual story that filtered out was that he was into smuggling. I did not know and really did not much care.

I was more concerned with Zaki. He may never be straightforward, but he had his day. He was visibly involved with business of importing and exporting spare parts of cars. But once in a while he would rent out his brawn for additional income. And he never bothered to find out the legality or otherwise of this additional income. Labaran was right. We needed Zaki.

Omar was looking strangely at me. I noticed also that Jamila, Teemah and even Bint had their eyes transfixed on me in total surprise, even disbelief. They wanted more details perhaps. But the immediacy of the story took care of the moment. If they wanted, they could ask whatever clarification they required after I was done with my tale. So I resumed.

So Zaki was contacted and he trailed Kabir to one of his regular gambling joints. Zaki waited in the suffocating and densely smoky gambling hall till it was late in the night when they were almost done with their dealings. He entertained himself by mentally running over in his mind the chorus he knew off hand from the song of late Kenny Rogers, The Gambler:

You've got to know when to hold 'em

Know when to fold'em

Know when to walk away

And know when to run

You never count your money

When you're sittin' at the table

There'll be time enough countin'

When the dealin's done.

Maybe Kabir was aware of the song, maybe he was not. What was instructive was that, by some indirect telepathic instigation, after the time he cleared a major win, contrary to expectations of all gamblers, including himself, he said he had had enough for the night.

He came to the arena with less than fifty thousand naira and now he was three hundred thousand naira richer. To the consternation and chagrin of all those who respect the cards more than their God, they watched solemnly as Kabir stood up to go. This was simply against the norm. No gambler worthy of the name left the table after winning. They were often known to leave after losing. Or when the game was off.

The Kartagi, that is the leader of the gambling group, reputed to be inconsiderate, tough and definitely merciless, winked surreptitiously at a thug seated opposite him to correct this anomaly. The anomaly of a gambler leaving the table after winning when the game was still on. The thug nodded, stood up and began following Kabir at safe distance. But the distance was not safe enough.

For Zaki also was following Kabir though the thug was between them and unaware of this fact. At the time, though, Zaki himself did not know that the thug was following Kabir. It was after a series of turns that brought them to an unlit alley that Zaki believed that someone else was following his prey. This confirmed two things; Kabir did not have as many friends in the gambling arena as he did in the school and secondly, he must have won plenty of money this night to warrant his being followed.

Before he could take a turn to the brighter side of town, the thug hurried up and tackled Kabir from behind, making him fall. The thug was not even hooded, but Kabir did not have time to immediately recognise or identify who fell him.

Before he could make sense of what was happening, he felt the weight of another man on top of them. The three of them sprawled on the floor fighting and kicking at one another. The thug was more shocked because he did not believe that his boss would send another thug after him. That meant kartagi did not trust him. I will show that bastard once I get free from this.

While this was going on, Kabir had a good look at the thug and shouted, "Gumuzu? You mean this is how you guys operate? I have never won anything as substantial as this in my entire life, and now you can't even allow me to keep it? Is it you or Kartagi?"

"It is your mother!" Zaki said as he landed Kabir a very deafening blow. Gumuzu saw that he was no match for Zaki and attempted to back off. He almost succeeded but Zaki gave him a heavy karate kick that landed in the groin.

This made Gumuzu to yelp and scream out loud. He doubled up in pain and held his groin with his two hands. He remained in that position for a few seconds more and when the pain receded somewhat, and at the slightest sight of escape opportunity, he ran down the alley and disappeared into the darkness.

Zaki now had his hands round Kabir's neck trying to choke him. When he was certain Kabir the money?" got the message, he eased up the pressure and asked, "Where is

"Here, here. It is in my inner pockets. Please don't kill me. Tell Kartagi, I would never set my foot in the gambling hall again. I thought they were straight people, good people. I did not know that all of them are crooks. All gamblers are cheats!"

"And what are you?" Zaki said sarcastically, as he slowly retrieved the money from Kabir's pocket.

"I am a decent employee of the university."

Zaki slapped him hard, across his face and spat, "Indeed. And do you

know one Salma?"

Kabir sat up groggily feeling the pain all over his body. He only heard the

question faintly.

"Salma?" he repeated uncertainly.

Zaki kicked him by the side again and said, "You heard me the first time."

"Yes, yes. I know her."

"Well then, this is for her, for the money you collected from her, for lying to her and for coming to gamble with her money. And indeed for all the girls you have been deceiving by impersonating one officer of the university or another. She has a tape of your conversation and we are going to make it available to the school authority at the appropriate time.

This," he kicked him hard again, "is a message from Kartagi. He said if this is the kind of gambler you are, then you are not fit to be called one. He warned that you should be careful when next you meet him or any of his boys." He kicked him again.

"That is my comeuppance," strangely that was what Kabir heard in his head before he passed out.

Zaki took the money to Labaran.

By the time Labaran counted the money and saw there was three hundred thousand naira, he counted fifty thousand and gave to Zaki and held unto the rest.

He had no intention of handing the money over to Habib. This was not betrayal, he reckoned. He justified his act by giving himself three reasons why the money must not go to Honourable Habib: in the first place, Habib was the Speaker of the house, and therefore did not need such a paltry sum as three hundred thousand naira.

Secondly, he reasoned that Habib was in no position to know how much he took from Kabir, or if he collected anything at all, because as a perpetual gambler, no one would expect Kabir to even have a kobo on him. Thirdly, and more disturbingly, Labaran was sure that Habib did not give the money to Salma just like that.

It was a payment for some service rendered, which service all of them were well too aware of. No. It did not amount to betrayal what he was doing. If it must be categorised then this act of non-remittal would simply appear like a levelling up. After all, he was all prepared not to think about what must have transpired between Salma and Habib as betrayal. It was simply convenience. And this was certainly convenient to him.

At this point, I paused in my narration and asked for a refill of my zobo

Omar seemed to have a million and one questions to ask but he restrained

“Is there anything you want to ask, my dear?” I asked him directly. “Mum, I just want to know how Honourable Habib ended up.” “I would give anything to know how he ended up myself. But Salma did not say.”

“There simply is no justice on this earth.”

I did not quickly agree with my son. But I know he was right.

drink.

himself.

It was not in me, as a mother, to underscore his feeling of despondency over the affairs of the world. Or indeed his disenchantment with the social set up as a whole. But he was right. Justice was just ice. Frozen. Perhaps never to thaw until those who matter decided to make it thaw.

“But there is always justice in the hereafter, my son.”

“The journey to the hereafter is rather long and tedious, mum. And frankly, I am not in a hurry to go there?”

“Go where?” Bint asked him?

“The hereafter,” he replied without thinking. “I don’t want to go there either.” Bint was not sure what he was talking about. But she believed if her brother said he was not in a hurry to go to any place, then it would be wise for anyone who had sense to delay going to that place as long as possible.

“That reminds me of the incident that happened when Salma lost her father while she was in the university.”

“What happened, mummy?” Teemah asked.

On the eighth day after the funeral, Salma came to the hostel all the worse for wear. She was really looking haggard. It became obvious to anyone who cared to observe that the girl was in mourning. Her friends and roommates, Ngozi, Ada and Tomiwa had collectively gone to commiserate with her for her loss. So when she got back, they saw that she was really down physically and spiritually, they still commiserated with her further.

Ngozi however could not resist asking her the all-important question that had been at the back of her mind since the death took place.



“Why are you people always in a hurry to bury your dead?”

Salma did not answer. Tomiwa however picked up the gauntlet. “What precisely do you mean by that?”

“Take it easy, my dear. I just meant to observe that you people seem eager to bury your people as soon as they are pronounced dead.”

Tomiwa was sitting on top of the bed at the upper bunk, she now jumped down when she heard this. She sat near Salma while she addressed Ngozi.

“There are three things wrong with your observation. The first is that we do not bury people. We bury corpses. As soon as a person is pronounced dead, his personality automatically ceases with his last expiry of breath. The second thing is, we are not eager to bury our dead. We were anxious for them to get well when they were ill, but the moment they die, our anxiety ends and their own begins as creatures bound for a rendezvous with their Creator. We do not want to delay the meeting. Moreover we are religiously enjoined to hasten their funeral, since the more the delay the more anguish that would be unleashed on the family of the bereaved.

And thirdly, when you look at it objectively, funeral delay does not have advantages on any one. It does not help the dead. The body would begin to decompose after a while. And it does not matter how well you think you have preserved it. It does not help the bereaved either who are made to grieve several times over.”

“What exactly do you mean, Tommy? You cannot be serious.” Ngozi said, her tone uncertain. “You mean someone dies and you rush to bury him like he was a nobody. Like he was a nobody? Nodast rites, no lying in state, no waiting for his children and relations to come and bid him final farewell?”

“If the children are around when he dies, fine. Nothing stops them from praying for him there and then and forever thereafter.” “Yes, Ngozi. Children pray for their parents and the Lord God would hear

“Forever thereafter?” their prayers and take pity on the soul of the dead.” “Mhmmm. For us, all good deeds, and bad ones for that matter, cease with the seizure of breath.”

“So you do not pray for the dead?”

“No.” Ngozi said this with needless emphasis. “Such prayers are like medicine after death, ineffectual.”

“So what does RIP mean?”

“What?”

“You heard me the first time. What does RIP mean?”

“It means rest in peace.” Ngozi was not sure where the question was leading to.

“Who or what should rest in peace?”

“The soul of the departed.”

“I thought you said you do not pray for the dead.”

“We are not praying for the dead. We are praying for the repose of his soul.”

“Whose soul?”

“The dead.”

At this juncture even Ngozi herself was not too convinced again. "So, tell me," Tomiwa said, "why do you delay burials?"

"First, to make sure that we are not burying our relations alive." "And where do you keep them to ensure that they are alive? The morgue?"

Ngozi ignored this remark and let drop what she considered her trump card.

"The more we delay the funeral the more we allow people, friends and relations who are living far away to come and pay their last respect so that they would not be tormented after the body is interred." "I think differently, NG. I think family and friends are tormented three times over. First, when the death itself occurs. Second when the body leaves for the mortuary and third on the day of the burial. It kind of stretches the level of torment and the length of sadness."

"But it is our culture."

"Yeah. A very expensive one at that."

"And we are not complaining, Tommy."

"I understand. And neither are we, NG. You bury your dead with so much fanfare after a long period and we bury ours with solemnity as soon as the person is confirmed dead. It does not mean that either of us love their dead less."

As they were going on with this discussion, they heard a whimper and as

one they looked at Salma who had been crying all along.

“We are sorry, Sally. How insensitive of us.”

Ada went and held her by the shoulder like someone trying to rock a child

They all gathered around her quietly, sadly. That was how they slept that day, quietly, sadly.

Those four people were more like sisters than roommates till they left the school.

“Mum, this is a very interesting story if you remove the dying bit. I love to sleep.

how the girls relate with one another. It is really interesting.” Omar was beside himself.

“Why won’t it be interesting,” Teemah said, “since it is all about girls?” “Mum, I hope you are listening to your daughter. Someone is going to lose her teeth in this house.”

“And someone would not get their smartphone in this house.” Teemah ensured that she came to sit beside me as she said this.

“What do you mean by that, Teemah?”

“Nothing. When Daddy comes back, I would make sure I rush to him and tell him first about the admission, the phone he promised to buy for you and what you intend to do with it.”

“And what,” Omar said, gritting his teeth in a maniacal sort of way, “did I say I intend to do with it?”

“Pursue girls in the campus,” Teemah said simply.

Omar looked beseechingly at me in a comical sort of way that made me to believe if I did not do something quickly he would either insult his sister or leave the house. The mood was still cheerful and I did not want anything to spoil it.

So I said, "Like all other advancements in technology, there are advantages in owning a Smartphone and there are also disadvantages. It all depends on how you use it. Salma had a boyfriend named Salim who had a sour experience with Smartphone.

After she lost her father, Salma decided to change her ways. She became decent and very serious. When Salim talked to her, he told her straight up that he wanted to marry her. And the courtship began. When I saw the level of her seriousness and commitment, that was when I allowed her into my life and I was always admonishing her on how to conduct herself.

One day I observed that she was no longer chatting as frequently as she was used to doing on her flashy phone and I asked why. She told me that Salim, her fiancé had a very nasty experience on account chatting and that experience settled her once and for all to become a changed person.

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