

There was a long interminable silence in my narration. I could sense my children wanted to ask a thousand and one questions. But each and every one of them was lost in their own thoughts. In fact their silence reminded me of my own silence twenty years ago when my husband made that revelation.

For a long while I could not utter a single word. Then, after what seemed like eternity, I sighed and told my husband to go to Dr. Samjohn and personally apologise on my behalf. I could not see myself going back to the school to face my HOD after my inexcusable behaviour.

My husband understood my plight and agreed. The next week when I chanced upon Dr. Samjohn on the corridor, he greeted me jovially as if nothing ever happened. But then, he was right. Nothing ever happened. It took a while for me to wrestle with my conscience and convince myself that indeed nothing happened. And life went on as usual.

“Mum, what about the quiet one?” Omar asked.

“The quiet one? Oh, the story my husband told me about our neighbour?” “Yes, mummy let’s hear that one.” All my girls seemed eager to hear that story.

I stood up to let the blood circulate to my lower limbs then resumed my seat and recounted to them the story of the quiet one as my husband told me.

I looked at Omar in the face and told him that the tale I was about to tell would be more relevant to him since he was the one leaving our tiny community to a bigger city. He should not judge people on the face value. Never judge a book by its cover. And he must learn to trust sparingly. You do not just trust everybody you meet.

I reminded them that in our little town, almost everyone knew everyone else. In Lafayette, the tradition had since been established that no stranger was hosted or given accommodation without the knowledge and approval of the District Head, the Hakimi. The wisdom of this tradition was to ensure that no criminal or fugitive from justice was harboured or accommodated in the village. Our culture of neighbourliness was superlative.

This was contrary to what obtained in the town. In the town everybody came and went as they pleased. Indeed, it was not inconceivable that two people living on the same street, or even next door neighbours could live for years without knowing who the other person was. In Lafayette the story was different. Everybody knew everybody else. In the case of the quiet one, everybody knew when he was born, or more precisely the circumstance of his birth.

His parents were bona fide citizens of Lafayette and they were known to be a very pious and humble couple. For several years after they were married they did not have children. It appeared, so the elders said, when they were about giving up, they consulted the services of a formidable boka, a traditional medicine man, and their wishes were granted. People give different interpretations to what actually transpired.

While some believed that the boka gave them some potent concoction for instant fertility, others believed that he was indeed the one who fathered the child. In either case, Talle was the result. He was called Talle on account that shortly after his birth, his mother died. Thus the secret of how he was fathered remained a secret. His father married another woman who also did not give birth to any child. So she helped in the upbringing of Talle.

Talle was not called the quiet one at birth. It was his reticent nature while growing up that earned him the title. He was never known to have engaged in fistcuffs with anyone even as a young lad. He withdrew into himself. And this silent character stood him in good stead whenever issues of responsibility arose in the community. He was barely twenty years old when he lost both his father and stepmother in a car accident. This compounded his state and he withdrew further into himself.

Talle was alone. Literally alone. He had no one to consult or to speak to. No one knew what he did with his evenings and nights, but from eight o'clock in the morning to four o'clock in the evening, he would go to work at the Local Government Office, where he served as a driver.

At the office, he was always on the first row during prayers. He was so dedicated to his piety that people actually believed that there was something about him that indicated holiness. Talle never argued on any issues; he hardly disagreed with anyone even if he was right. He never raised his voice on any one. That was how he got the appellation of the quiet one.

Then one day, just one day, things stopped being quiet for Talle.

He had unwittingly established a pattern in his market purchases over the years to the extent that the grocery stores he patronized knew at once what he was coming to buy. It thus became curious when suddenly the grocers discovered for over a week now, Talle's requirement doubled. The people knew he was alone and could not possibly consume all the items he was buying all by himself. One of them thought it was wise to call the attention of the District Head.

When Talle was summoned, he gave himself away by his very inability to answer the simple questions put forward by the Hakimi, the District Head. The session began ordinarily but ended with a sad dramatic twist. "What did you buy in the market today, Talle?" the Hakimi asked.

"It was, er. a few, er, a few measures of rice and some palm oil." Talle was fidgety and seemed suddenly ill at ease.

"What precisely did you need a few measures of rice for? Your customer here said you used to buy just a measure which lasts you a few days. The measure of gari you also used to buy suddenly doubled."

"Yes, Your Highness. But I just thought I should buy plenty so I would not suffer want in the event I have no money."

"So where do you get all the money to make these purchases now?" Talle bowed his head and studiously looked at the ground, the posture of an archaeologist who suddenly had a gut feeling that something precious was hidden under the very ground he stood on. He stood there mute.

The people were getting restless. They seemed to think as one that this was the one moment when the silence of the quiet one was not a virtue. He had better speak.

Just then there was a loud commotion coming from outside the gate of the District Head. There was a loud siren, as of a police vehicle or that of a military escort which came to stop outside the entrance of the Hakimi's residence. In fact, it was not one, but three police vans that came to stop outside the gate.

The villagers were first mesmerised by this rare forceful movement and they became alarmed. It was an unholy sight. And given the speed with which they came and parked before the entrance of the Hakimi's residence, the whole thing spelt something ominous. This had never happened in the history of Lafayette community. People thus surged to find out what was going on.

On hearing the siren from outside, Talle sprang up and bolted into the Hakimi's house. The courtiers pursued him and brought him back. This act of attempting to run, confirmed to the people that if nothing else, Talle was guilty of something. But guilty of what? Nobody knew.

"What's wrong with you man? Why are you suddenly scared of a siren?" one of the courtiers asked. Before Talle could respond, three policemen, armed to the teeth, barged in on the Hakimi and his courtiers.

"Is this the palace of Hakim Lafayette?" one of the mean looking policemen asked. "Yes." The Hakimi replied simply and added, "I am the Hakimi."

"We are looking for one of your subjects in connection with kidnapping, armed robbery and extortion."

"That is impossible," the Hakimi said. "We are a quiet and peace loving people here. Our community has never apprehended even a common thief, let alone a kidnapper."

"Well, well, we learnt differently." The policeman turned to one of his colleagues and said, "Go and bring Zaki in here."

"Zaki?" Everybody was shocked as Talle repeated the name. He swooned and fell. Those who observed at close range noticed that he actually urinated on his person. "Do you have a person named Talle in this village?"

"Inna lillahi wa inna ilaihir raji'un." The Courtier said. "We did not ask you for any supplication, the police officer said sarcastically.

“That was more of a pious resignation to reality,” the Hakimi said and added, “It means from Allah we came and unto him is our returning.” “Let your man spare me his Arabic lessons. Do you have a guy named Talle here or don’t you? And why is this guy sprawled on the floor?” the policeman was impatience personified. He did not even give the Hakimi the respect strangers supposed to accord him.

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“That is the Talle you are asking after?” one of the courtiers volunteered.

“Oh, in that case our search is over.” The policeman now turned to the Hakimi and said, “Who can take us to his house?” “He will do that himself. But what is all this about?” “We told you that this man is an accessory to kidnapping and extortion.”

Just then, the other policeman that was sent to bring Zaki came back dragging an obviously battered Zaki who was chained arms and legs. On the sight of the chained and manacled Zaki, Talle doubled over and, if that were possible, fainted a second time.

“Get up, my friend,” the policeman said curtly brandishing a kick at Talle’s middle.

Talle staggered up and immediately began declaring his innocence.

“Believe me, officer, I am innocent.” Talle said. “It was Zaki’s idea. He was the one who said they had a neighbour in town...” “Shut up, my friend. Nobody asked you anything. Just take us to the house, your house” the policeman growled. The Hakimi was beside himself with confusion. He had never before witnessed anything like this. And he had been Hakimi in Lafayette for over thirty years. And, come to think of it, if any act of misdeed were to be suspected in this humble village, Talle was the last person that would come to anybody’s mind. Now it appeared Talle was not only neck deep in whatever he was being accused, he was even trying to rationalize it. God, you really never know with men. Who would have thought... but what was it really that they had done?

“Excuse me, officer,” the Hakimi cleared his throat.

“Yes?” The policeman turned to the Hakimi.

“Whatever it is that this man here would have done, it is expedient that you take a witness from here so that we can explain his absence to those who may wish to know something about his whereabouts.”

“Please yourself, Hakimi.” But I can assure you that this man here would be absent for a very long time.”

“Who among you wants to follow them to town to report what is happening there?” the Hakimi turned to his courtiers and other members of the community who had earlier trooped in to complain that Talle was observed buying more foodstuff than he was used to buying. They had observed the trend for almost one week before they decided to take action.

The people cringed and turned their gaze away from the Hakimi. “Well, then,” the policeman said, “since nobody is following us to town, we would adequately inform you through the Hakimi whatever happened later.” He then turned to Zaki.

“Is this the Talle you told us about?” he asked.

Zaki nodded.

The policeman raised his baton, “Can’t you talk?” “Yes, yes. He is the one. That is Talle.”

“Ok. Let’s go.”

Two other police constables dragged Talle up and whisked him out of the Hakimi’s residence and into the waiting police van. As they drove slowly towards Talle’s house, the people, hitherto reluctant to follow Talle to town, now willingly followed the police vehicles to Talle’s house.

Once there, the policemen followed Talle into the house and shortly thereafter came out with a young boy of no more than thirteen years old. Talle was already handcuffed. He was hoisted onto the waiting vehicle where Zaki was and the boy sat in the front seat with the leading police officer who obviously was the IPO, the Investigating Police Officer.

The vehicles zoomed off and left Lafayette as hurriedly as they entered. That was the last anybody in the community saw of Talle. There was a rumour going on some years later that he was sighted in the border town up north where smuggling thrived. This rumour was however unconfirmed and it fizzled out as fast as it started.

Of course the Hakimi reported that the IPO sent a message detailing what happened in the Talle saga. Talle and his fellow conspirators were sentenced to some years of imprisonment with hard labour for kidnapping and extortion. The story the police told was intriguing in its simplicity. Talle was pressed for money and he went to town on a weekend and he met Zaki. Zaki had a better idea.

He told Talle that at the GRA, there was this businessman friend of his who would always be seen driving with his son in his car. If they could abduct the son, Zaki was sure the father would pay anything for ransom. Somehow the boy was drugged and abducted and in the middle of the night they brought the boy to Talle's house in Lafayette and kept him for one week before the police came and freed the boy.

The boy's father had been contacted and warned never to involve the police. The father reasoned that the kidnapers were amateurs since their asking price was one million and later came down to two hundred and fifty thousand naira. Zaki was arrested at the point of collecting the ransom.

"Wow. That is some story, mum." Omar said. "It appears to be a general admonition to all of us. Why do you say it is of particular interest to me?"

I smiled and said, "My son, you are like that young boy in the story. You are going to the university. Do not trust anyone."

"Surely, mum..."

“I understand. Of course you will make friends and all that. Just be careful.”

“If he likes, let him trust everybody,” Teemah said.

“Mum, I’ll...”

“Yes, I know what you will do. But whatever you would do, don’t get mixed with bad company.”

“Like kidnappers, mum?”

“Nope. Like cultists and those who engage in EMAL.”

“E- MAIL?”

“EMAL. Exams malpractice.”

“Oh, it was an acronym too?” “It has many names.

“Surely, I will avoid that.”

“You remember Salma?” Bint raised her hand as if attempting to answer a question in the classroom.

“Yes, my dear?”

“Salma is that student who embarrassed herself during your registration.”



Zbint declared.

I was impressed. "Clap for my Bint." The others clapped half-heartedly.

"Well, if you remember, by her confession, our school was not her first," I said.

"How did you know, mum?"

"She told me. We later became friends. It was exams malpractice that drove her out of the university."

"How?"