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Abstract

The caption under the wedding photograph in the local newspaper read, 'Claude hooks Hope,' as a matronly and obviously pregnant Hope, in white wedding dress and veil, stuffed a much-too-large piece of cake into the mouth of a bewildered and be-gloved Claude. Hope looked triumphant as the one who had 'hooked' Claude!

KANCHANA UGBABE

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The caption under the wedding photograph in the local newspaper read, 'Claude hooks Hope,' as a matronly and obviously pregnant Hope, in white wedding dress and veil, stuffed a much-too-large piece of cake into the mouth of a bewildered and be-gloved Claude. Hope looked triumphant as the one who had 'hooked' Claude!

Our wedding picture was not quite so conventional. The photographer had me sitting on one of those wooden playground swings (a studio creation, of course), while my husband clutched at the chains. Very romantic, like a scene from the Indian movies. That was how I took my plunge into matrimony. It has been not just a turn on the swing but a regular roller-coaster ride ever since. My friend Daphne says that the sharp bit goes out of the situation if you stick it out long enough and that you arrive at a sort of benign indifference where the boat doesn't rock too badly, even if you keep wishing in the back of your mind that you were in a different boat ... My husband tends to be philosophical about these things. He maintains that women get the men they deserve and vice versa. I don't know if Kemi deserved the man she got, but she wasn't going to wait to find out.

When my husband told me his friend Debo's wife was coming from Lagos to stay the weekend with us, I felt the usual tingle of resentment. I disliked strange city women even before I met them. Kemi was coming to see her son, who was at a boarding school in our town. It was his free weekend. Debo and my husband had been at school together, but it was twenty years later, with both engaged in different occupations, when their paths crossed again in Lagos. They were both following up payments for completed army contracts. I had written Debo off from the start when I heard that he had two wives. Two wives and six children at forty! He must be one of those unreliable men, a womanizer, a spendthrift – a man who squandered his money on cars and clubs, I concluded. The two wives lived apart in separate houses, with Debo doing the rounds between them. For all practical purposes, he lived with Kemi, his first wife. But it was Biola my husband talked about, Biola who was shy, Biola who was mild-mannered and soft-spoken, Biola who baked cakes. Biola was Debo's showpiece. Kemi was an unknown quantity, and I didn't look forward

to entertaining this Lagos woman, an employee of the National Shipping Company, at my home.

I stayed longer at work than usual, knowing my husband was at the airport to meet Kemi. On her arrival, Kemi bounced her way up the stairs and took me completely by surprise. After the initial welcome and introductions, we settled ourselves in the living room. Kemi sat across from my husband, her miniskirt tight about her thighs. He stared at her legs all evening, from the ebony calves up the smooth shaven legs to where the patchwork leather skirt ended. Her puffy childlike hands had rings on every finger. The painted fingernails danced wildly as she gesticulated. She had an endless repertoire of stories, from corruption in high places to armed robbery and drug dealing. She spun them out with confidence, shaking the silky brown hairpiece that was unobtrusively attached to her hair by a silver clasp. She was thirty-eight but looked and acted about twenty-five.

She punctuated her conversation with 'Darling, you have no idea...!' She rolled her big brown eyes and said, 'I'm going to leave him. You wait and see. I'm just praying that God will give me a good man. That's it.' With the appropriate gestures, she washed her hands of Debo. I rushed around to make her bed and carried a bucket of hot water to her bathroom. She sat like a princess, and, when everything was set, took herself to the bedroom on her spiky-heeled patent leather shoes.

Over the next two days, it was a total surprise every time Kemi emerged from the bedroom. You could never predict what the outfit might be. On Saturday morning, it was a burgundy wrapper and a flamboyant head-tie, with red lipstick that generously covered her lips. The pale edge of the wrapper read, 'Guaranteed Dutch Wax.' In the evening, it was striped culottes in black and white, the style accentuating her well-endowed bosom, and gold-studded sandals. On Sunday, it was a boubou¹ in gold that trailed after her, sweeping the harmattan² dust off my floor.

I didn't expect her to come into my kitchen, but there she was, blending the pepper and tomatoes, and browning the oxtail with Maggi cubes, early on Saturday morning. 'Darling, we have to be at the boarding school by ten o'clock,' she said, pouring a gallon of oil into the stew. So we cooked and we talked.

As she diced the carrots for the *jollof* rice, I noticed her smooth, well-rounded wrists and the pearl-studded gold bangle that fitted tightly around her wrist. 'Can we buy Kemi a gift? It's her first visit with us,' my husband had inquired, opening his wallet. 'Buy her something personal, like a bangle,' he had added. I had thought of something neutral, like an enamel saucepan or a Melaware tray.

'It's good to be independent,' Kemi said, 'then you can tell these men to go to hell!'

'How do you cope with your...with Biola, I mean?' I hesitated.

'Darling, I'm Debo's *only* wife!' she responded. 'If he chooses to keep a prostitute somewhere, that's his problem.' She volunteered more information, letting me in on a secret. 'Biola used medicine. She goes to witch doctors, and that's how she trapped Debo. I can't forgive Debo. I have had two children and four miscarriages. Every time I miscarried, Biola got pregnant. It's the medicine.' I warmed up to Kemi. 'Taste the stew,' she said, offering me a spoonful. The pepper singed my tongue and set my intestines aflame. 'It's too cold in this town,' she reasoned, 'you have to eat plenty of pepper.'

Her job with the National Shipping Company kept her comfortable; her contacts in Lagos gave her access to all sorts of loans. She was building a block of apartments. And she was into the supply business, buying garri³ in bulk from the factory in Ibadan and supplying colleagues and friends every two weeks. She had her social clubs: the Inner Wheel, the Esteem Sisters, Ajegunle Women's Club, and the Fellowship of Business Women International. They met in each other's homes, drank beer and other local brew, and consumed huge quantities of fried meat and fish.

'You should come to Lagos,' she invited me, squeezing my hand. 'I have grand things planned for you.'

Biola was the bane of her existence. 'Do you know Biola has two children by an Alhaji, and she's now pregnant by an Igbo man?'

'What does Debo see in her?' I prompted.

'Darling, she is *ugly*. Crooked front teeth. Skinny, in buba⁴ and wrapper. Oily, pimply face – that's the type Debo goes for...I'm just waiting for a nice man to come my way,' she concluded.

We got in the car. As we drove past the market, Kemi beckoned to me to stop at one of the shops. It was pretty much a shack, with wooden boards hastily nailed together, the nails still sticking out. 'Come to Blessed Spot and Enjoy Yourself,' urged a piece of paper nailed to the board. In this haven of bliss, this oasis, there stood a Coke machine in one corner and a photocopying machine in another. A cupboard with a glass front, roughly put together, housed lotions, creams, and other cosmetics in jars with orange, pink, and purple tops.

'How much is that facial mask?' Kemi asked the girl, who was squeezed between the various gadgets.

'Forty naira.'⁵

'What about the nail hardener?'

'Thirty-five naira.'

I shifted and discreetly eyed Kemi. What was she going to ask for next? After much haggling, Kemi declared that these things were cheaper in Lagos anyway, and promptly left.

We brought her eleven-year-old son home from the boarding school to spend Saturday with us – a scrawny lad with unkempt, dry scaly

skin, and a shell-shocked look. Kemi gave twenty naira to the master in charge of the dormitory for his newborn child. 'Boy or girl?' she inquired, intending to send a gift on her return to Lagos. The chief prefect and the hall messenger got twenty naira each, to 'keep an eye' on the eleven-year-old Dele. 'He has to pass his exams. I'll hold you responsible,' she teased the chief prefect as she tucked the twenty-naira note into his palm. Once home, Dele was scrubbed from head to toe, washed, bleached, and disinfected, and fed a generous helping of jollof rice and the pepper stew loaded with oxtail, liver, and other choice cuts of meat. There was a brisk and practical air about it all – she had come from Lagos to do a job, and she had to do it well. Dele's appearance, lectures on studying hard, compliance with authority, taking care of personal belongings – she seemed to tick things off one by one on her mental agenda. Later in the day, we took Dele back to suffer the rigours of boarding-school life.

Kemi and I sat down to a cup of coffee. 'My life has been wasted on Debo,' she moaned, 'when I think about it, I get palpitations.' She talked of injustice, and it seemed as if all men were ogres exploiting and deceiving their wives, and lavishing love and money on mistresses. We exchanged stories of betrayal, of husbands who drove us to the outer limits of despair. It was our inner strength that had saved us from high blood pressure and heart attacks. We had acquired wisdom through experience.

Kemi couldn't sustain this sombre mood for long. As I brought the second cup of coffee, she launched into stories of erring husbands who got involved with several women and then dropped dead, leaving a labyrinth of woes for their wives. Lorraine, her friend, stood in her black scarf and black wrapper, she said, the picture of wifely grief, flanked by the boys on one side and the girls on the other. Kehinde, the 'other woman', burst in on them at the funeral, also clad in black, holding two children by the hand and a baby on her back. Lorraine was hysterical, Kemi said. 'You won't have peace where you are going,' she screamed to the man in the box, rigid in embalmed security. 'It's not the kingdom of God you are heading for. You'd better get up and sort out this mess!' I laughed till my sides hurt.

'How much do you have in the bank?' Kemi inquired casually. 'You know, I could send you wrappers and shoes from Lagos. Just add your profit and sell them quietly. Before you know it, you can buy a piece of land and put a few bricks on it. Then, like Debo, your husband will come to you when he needs a mere fifty naira.' I had meagre savings, put together erratically over a period of ten years. In a household such as ours, it wasn't easy to operate a bank account without my husband finding out about it. I hid the savings book and switched its place periodically – and panicked at being found out. My husband and I operated a joint account that was perpetually in the red.

My husband was not a notoriously difficult man, but Kemi's presence made the differences in our outlook more pronounced. He was the kind that filled his tank every time he passed the petrol station, while I flogged the old Toyota on reserve and then grudgingly drove in for maybe a quarter-tank of gas. He coaxed his car, keeping it in top form, changing its tyres periodically, checking its brakes. I left the windows down in the rain; I cursed the old car when it jerked and threatened to give up on me. All the trash over the past six months accumulated on the floor of my car – drugstore receipts, church programs, candy wrappers – you would even find an odd potato or onion nestling under the seat. The children treated my car with scant respect. His car radio played blues and jazz and he cruised along. He talked about joining the Road Safety Campaign.

I mulled over Kemi's proposal through the night. Lying in bed, I looked around the room. There were landmarks everywhere, milestones, souvenirs of my quarrels with my husband over other women, real and imagined, and my attempts to get even with him. The Sony Cassette player marked a major quarrel, when I rushed out and bought it as something belonging to me. I was going to put my feet up and listen to music. Another heated argument resulted in expensive lace curtains. The shrouded figures emerged one by one from the closet, women who inhabited my bedroom in silhouetted shapes, lurking in corners, insinuating themselves between the sheets. The names spilt out, echoing around my bed. I had never had an instinct for business or the initiative, but Kemi was going to launch me into the world of garri and palm-oil entrepreneurs. My life was at a crossroads, and the horizon held innumerable pots of gold.

Kemi and I entered the bank. 'Do not abuse the naira. Handle it with care,' said the Central Bank poster, with pictures of grubby and bacteria-ridden currency notes changing hands, tucked into sweaty blouses, in traders' pouches attached to petticoats, and crumpled into unrecognizable shapes by newspaper vendors. The shiny coins were so much better, though coins made you feel poorer than you were and made your purse heavier. I stretched out my hand to present the withdrawal slip to the cashier. A whiff of sardines emanated from the lady standing next to me; she continued with her crocheting, oblivious to everything around her. Kemi and I sat down on the bench. The women looked colourful, the men drab. Tight clothes reduced the sperm count, Kemi said. Sitting back, I watched backsides, big and small, in trousers, skirts, and wrappers, all provocatively tight. A woman with a baby sat near us. The baby bounced about and played with her fingers. Then, without warning, it pissed all over the man sitting next to the mother. 'Baby don piss O!' cried the man, jumping from his seat. 'Sorry O,' said the mother, mopping up with a tissue from her handbag. The baby said, 'Come, come.'

'No way,' said the man good-humouredly, gathering his naira notes and hurrying out of the bank. I handled my savings – with trepidation – as Kemi and I walked out of the bank. I felt hollow inside, having emptied out my savings account. I quickly put the money in an envelope and gave it to Kemi.

'Darling, just give me one week – seven days – and I'll be in touch.'

It is almost two years since Kemi's visit. I wait for letters and parcels and the passport to entrepreneurship and that peculiar independence that only Kemi could envisage. Maybe she has completed her block of flats at Ajegunle and moved in; maybe her prayers have been answered and God has given her that 'nice man'. She left behind a souvenir though – her gold-studded slippers and lipstick on the edges of my coffee mug.

Notes

1. *boubou*: a long flowing garment worn in parts of Africa.
2. *harmattan*: a seasonal dust-laden wind on the Atlantic coast of Africa.
3. *gari*: ground cassava.
4. *buba*: a plain blouse, worn with a wrapper.
5. The amount is equivalent to about one U.S. dollar.