

Baba Idi's Enclave

Dada swept swaying patterns on the floor, singing in tune with the swishing of the broom until the pain in her back became unbearable. She straightened her back and stretched. She was not getting any younger, she thought, as she resumed her chore. That's the thing with having boys, she lamented. Girls would have helped out with this sweeping, but boys would just dump their smelly football boots in the middle of the living room and run off to other mischief. Her Zahra would have helped, that lovely child. But as always, thinking of little Zahra brought tears to her eyes and this time, a sharp pain in her chest. She fell to the floor, broom still in hand. For a while, all she could see was the little shrouded face. Pushing the image out of her mind, she used the corner of her wrapper to wipe her tears. But finding the strength to raise herself from the ground was difficult.

When Baba Idi breezed into the house, she was not able to rise quickly enough and eventually decided not to bother.

Not noticing her at first, he threw down the striped nylon bag he'd brought.

"*Sannu da zuwa,*" she greeted.

He gaped at her. "What are you doing on the floor?"

"Nothing," she said, wiping her eyes.

He looked from her face to the broom and sighed. He leaned back and fought his own tears. He knew that if he spoke about it, he too would end up crying.

"I brought some meat," he said instead. "It should last us a week at least."

She got up and examined the contents of the bag. She poked the meat. It would be stringy, but it would add aroma to the soup. It would have to last as long as she could make it. She would have to deep-fry to prevent it from going bad. The onions were large. They would do. There were also packets of seasoning. She prayed that God would increase their wealth and health.

He said, "Ameen." Taking off his cap, he continued, "Balarabe owes me money and he has been dodging me." He went on grumbling about how Balarabe had come to his shop at the market months before and collected bales of cloth on credit, how business had been bad because people were more concerned about food and less about buying cloth.

“Perhaps he hasn’t got the money to pay,” she said.

“Well, he’ll have to pay up. I need all the money I can lay my hands on,” he said.
“I’ll go see him now.”

“Shouldn’t you rest first? You just got back.”

“We don’t have time,” he said.

She observed how he bit off his blackened fingernails and spat out bits of them on the floor. She wanted to ask him to shave his grey stubble but she knew he wouldn’t, not just yet.

He asked if the water vendor had brought some water. She said yes. Nonetheless, he went to the five huge containers and lifted the cover of each. Then he nodded and slapped his palms together to shake off the dust. As an afterthought, he checked the tank.

“The tank is not filled,” he cried in horror. “Why hasn’t a task as small as this been completed?”

“The vendor is not done yet, he has gone to fetch more water.”

“You don’t know how much water we’ll need,” he said, as if to justify his outburst.
“Are you sure he will come back? Those boys never go straight, like dogs, they would as soon sell the water to someone else.”

“He will return,” she said.

Baba Idi made a mental note to commandeer the first water vendor he met when he went out. Grumbling about how women had no sense of planning for all eventualities, he went into the kitchen, where he examined things. There was a yellow jerrycan in a corner. He shook it. It was heavy. He opened it and sniffed—almost twenty litres of kerosene. There should be back up, just in case, he thought.

“I think we have enough firewood if this runs out,” Dada said. She was standing by the door, watching him.

He opened the cupboard and shook the containers of vegetable oil, opening each in turn. Satisfied, he moved on and checked the bags of rice, maize and flour. The quantity of beans wasn’t significant, but they didn’t usually eat much beans anyway. He touched the tubers of yams beside the stove. He opened the pot and seemed shocked by the quantity of tomato purée.

“That will last us a week at least,” she said before he could speak.

“What happened to all the tomatoes?”

“I kept some fresh.”

He considered the paste doubtfully but said nothing. Just then, it occurred to him that he would have to get some fuel for the generator. He was about to say so when he heard a squeak. He turned in time to glimpse two rats skipping over the pile of yams in the corner and disappearing behind the cupboard. He turned to her with a questioning look.

“Just rats, *maigida*,” she said.

Baba Idi was worried that huge quantities of grain would disappear down the rat hole. “I have to get rat poison as well,” he said.

He moved from the kitchen to the space beside it where a huge pile of firewood had been stacked. The mass of chopped wood could be sheltering scorpions, he feared. The heat could drive them into the house from the bushes behind.

“We will need medical supplies,” he said to Dada, who was standing a distance away.

“Come and eat first,” she said.

“No, not yet.” He went to the chair where he had left his cap and put it on.

“Where are you going to?”

“To see Balarabe,” he said, heading out.

She watched his retreating narrow shoulders and his washed-out kaftan swaying in the mild evening breeze.

Baba Idi walked down Bappa Avenue, pausing only to exchange pleasantries with the cobbler, his neighbour—the one-eyed tailor—and a couple of familiar faces. It was close to dusk and soon the muezzin’s call would rent the air. He wanted to be back in time for the Maghrib prayers. Motorcycle taxis with passengers on their pillions whisked past, weaving between the cars and honking urgently and brushing past people who also seemed to be in a hurry.

He took an alley, disregarding the houses whose facades were masked with glossy campaign posters. Some mischievous boys had drawn breasts around the eyes of one of the many faces pasted on the walls. They had also drawn a penis and testicles, which dangled from another’s lips like a cigar. Baba Idi snorted at the power poles, trees and even rocks that were covered with posters.

The muezzin’s call echoed as a mass of bats flew across the dusky skies. Baba Idi decided to stop by the mosque first, and it was there he met Balarabe sitting on a rock,

performing ablution. They exchanged greetings and went in together.

After the Salat, Baba Idi made his supplications and said a short prayer before heading out. Balarabe, however, sat throughout the imam's ten-minute admonition, calling on people to vote for good leaders and pray for peaceful elections. While the imam went on, Baba Idi chewed on some more of his nails and spat the pieces onto the ground. Then he busied himself scratching his stubble. He was already grumbling when Balarabe came out.

"You knew I was waiting for you," he said, his voice laden with accusation.

Balarabe mumbled something about paying heed to preaching.

"So, where's my money?" Baba Idi cut him short.

"I told you I'd pay you."

"Yeah? When?"

"Soon as I get it."

"I need it now. I need my money now."

This time, Balarabe caught the urgency in Baba Idi's voice. "*Haba*, take it easy. It's not like I'm leaving town or something."

"How do you know? Nobody knows what's going to happen."

"You are agitated. Is something wrong?"

"There's an election coming up, what do you expect?"

Balarabe couldn't help laughing. "Are you contesting or something?"

"Are you paying me or not?"

Balarabe went into a long narrative about how his wives were both heavily pregnant and about how he was planning on marrying off his daughter in a fortnight. Baba Idi stared at his friend's scraggly face, his chipped teeth and his unkempt beard. He found the strands of hair sticking out of Balarabe's nostrils particularly annoying. They made him remember how old they both were. They made him feel all the layers of his fifty-two years, as momentous as the growth rings of a long-lived tree.

"I said, who are you voting for?" Balarabe asked.

"Me? Why waste my time when we all know who's going to win."

"We have to make a difference, we have to come out and vote the bastard out!"

Baba Idi looked at him in contempt, as if he had caught him masturbating.

"I hear he has brought in truckloads of motorcycles to distribute to his supporters and help him rig the elections," Balarabe went on. "Zubairu the butcher has got one

already.”

“I have to go now,” Baba Idi said, and started walking away before Balarabe could say anything else.

Along Yan Doya Street, young men just back from some political rallies walked in groups, throwing slogans into the air as if they were tossing candy at every other person.

“*Sai Chairman! Tazarce kawai,*” a young man shouted right in front of Baba Idi. He held aloft a poster of a broad-smiling Chairman Tanko Danlele.

“*Karya ne, dan uban mutum!*” a woman selling kosai by the road side fired back, throwing some dirty water at the young man. Some of the water splashed onto Baba Idi’s worn sandals. Before he could protest, other boys from the neighbourhood jumped on the slogan-chanting young man, pulling him this way and that. Someone seized the poster and Baba Idi heard the sound of paper being ripped. He side-stepped the scuffle and increased his pace homewards.

When he made the turn leading to his house, he was shocked by two giant posters of Chairman Tanko Danlele, pasted on both sides of the main entrance. He contemplated the airbrushed, bespectacled, smiling face, and the colourful graphics on glossy paper. The two posters were different, but both were stylish, futuristic and elegant.

He ripped them off the wall.

Dada was tying measures of baobab leaf powder into transparent plastic bags for her petty trade in cooking ingredients when her husband stormed in, strips of shredded posters in hand.

“Who put these things on my wall?”

Dada only stared at his trembling shoulders.

“It was Idi,” a small voice said. Baba Idi turned to see his ten-year-old son, Sule, sitting on the floor, a bowl of tuwo before him. Next to him was his youngest son Dauda, just five.

“Where is he?”

Sule scurried off to get his brother.

“Sannu da zuwa,” Dada greeted.

Baba Idi ignored her. He was trembling with so much rage that she feared his blood pressure would boil over again.

Idi sauntered into the compound from his room. He was shirtless and barefoot. The top of his red and black-striped boxer shorts showed over the top of his jeans.

“Why did you put the face of this murderer on my wall?” Baba Idi asked promptly.

“What murderer?” Idi asked with a laugh. “Chairman never killed anyone, Baba.”

“Shut your useless mouth, you! Is this not the man who killed your sister?”

“What sister?”

“This man killed Zahra and you are here pasting his murderous face on my wall!”

“Baba, Zahra died of typhoid, everyone knows that.”

Baba Idi gaped at his son.

Dada wiped her eyes with the corner of her wrapper and noisily blew her nose. Idi turned to look at her. He did not like how she was always quick to tears, especially since Zahra’s death, a month before.

Baba Idi looked at her before turning to Idi. “If this politician of yours had not cornered the money meant to refurbish the hospital for his useless campaign, perhaps your sister would have lived. I want you to think about that the next time you see this man’s face.”

He turned and went into the room.

Dada wept. Memories of the hospital waiting room came back to her: an image of her sick eight-year-old daughter stretched out on the hospital bench awaiting the doctor, one of another patient, male, lying on the floor, his agonised groans filling the grubby room, and another of a pregnant woman being rushed in and the attendant nurse yelling at the woman’s husband not to bother her with his shouting. Little Zahra had lay with her head on Dada’s laps. When her irises disappeared beneath her eyelids, Dada too had started screaming.

“Hajiya? Why are you screaming like this?” another nurse asked.

“My daughter is dying, please, help me!”

“Be patient, Hajiya.”

“You tell death to be patient, you hear?”

The nurse had sighed. “Look, there is hardly anything we can do now. There is only one doctor here and he is busy attending to other patients. We don’t have any drugs and we don’t have any vacant beds for you people. So please, be patient . . .”

“Dada, that is enough now,” Idi said to his mother.

He watched her wiping her tears as he shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot before sauntering off.

Late in the afternoon on Election Day, Talatu Dillaliya breezed in, wiping the sweat off her plump face with the corner of her veil.

“Haba, Dada,” she said in the loud voice she always used to announce her arrival. “I was expecting you to be at the forefront, voting this bastard out of office, and here you are tying up kuka as if people won’t eat anything else but baobab leaf powder!”

Talatu fancied herself a kind of woman-leader, sowing opinions, thoughts and a little mischief in the houses she visited as she marketed her wares. She sold everything—used jewellery, electric irons, cooking pots, and pilfered foodstuff from desperate housewives. Occasionally, she served as a go-between, linking veiled women to marabouts who could help them sort out marital problems. Ironically, Talatu herself was twice divorced.

Dada placed a finger on her lips and made space for Talatu on the mat beside her.

“My husband is asleep inside,” she said quietly.

“Oh!” Talatu gasped, settling her bulk next to the basin full of green powder. “He did not go out to vote either?”

“Baba Idi burnt his voter’s card ages ago. He said they always rig the elections anyway.”

“Ah, things have changed now,” Talatu enthused. “You should have seen how people came out in numbers to vote out the Chairman. We have all had enough of him. Based on early results, he is definitely on his way out.” She emphasized this by clapping her hands together.

“I pray so,” Dada said, looking heavenwards.

“But you should have come and voted.”

“Baba Idi would not have liked it. He says they will rig in the Chairman anyway, and then there will be a riot, you know, like with the last elections, and the ones before those.”

“So, how come I saw Idi there? He was busy canvassing votes for the Chairman.”

“If his father knew, he would surely curse him!”

“Oh, he has been cursed enough already, you know, by people at the polling centre. You should talk to your son, really. They say he’s doing it for the stipends the Chairman will pay him and those weed-smoking friends of his.”

“*La ilaha illallahu!* This boy will kill me. He never listens to me, and his father has

washed his hands of him since he dropped out of secondary school for the third time. At twenty-two, doesn't he realise his mates have families of their own? Oh, what shall I do with him?" It was now Dada's turn to slap her palms alternately, liberating plumes of kuka as she did so.

"Well, I'll be getting some new merchandise tomorrow," Talatu said, switching from her gossiping tone to the one reserved for business. "People are already booking their shares. I thought you might be interested in *Sa Maigida Kuka*. It's been a while since you bought some. Or don't you want your husband wailing with pleasure?" Talatu said the last bit with a dubious smile.

"Perhaps tomorrow. I don't know. Let me find this useless boy first," Dada said, standing up and tightening her wrapper around her waist. She walked Talatu to the door. When she returned, mumbling to herself, she found Baba Idi leaning thoughtfully on the bedroom doorjamb, the sleep long gone from his eyes.

When returning from afternoon prayers the next day, Baba Idi ran into a cluster of his neighbours deep in discussion. Their sombre mien made him slow down as he approached.

"*Salamu alaikum*," he greeted weakly.

The men responded in kind.

"Did somebody die?"

Alhaji Audu, his wealthy neighbour, hissed. The men continued to talk, as if he should have known already. It took him only a while to realise that the Chairman had been "declared re-elected".

"It's just been announced," Tela, the one-eyed tailor informed him.

"But how could this be possible?" Tijjani, a member of staff at the local council wondered. "He lost in all the polling units."

"God will punish anyone who has a hand in this injustice," Shehu, the fiery mechanic, declared.

Baba Idi moved on. He saw another cluster of grim-looking men standing at the teashop, from which the aroma of fried noodles and eggs wafted. He said his *salam* and passed them. There was another cluster at the junction, this one of restless, young men.

"How dare they rig this election?" one of them shouted.

“There is nothing you can do about it,” someone else offered. “This is the way things are done here.”

Baba Idi quickened his pace.

When he arrived his house, there was a group of small boys outside. They seemed enthralled by the tale his young son Sule was regaling them with, while Dauda looked on, equally excited. Baba Idi ordered his sons inside.

“Idi has returned,” Sule volunteered.

“Ah, after two days, the bastard has found his way home,” Baba Idi muttered to himself.

A new motorcycle was parked in the middle of the compound, strips of plastic wrapping still clinging to it. Baba Idi assumed they had been left on it on purpose.

Dada was standing by the door, a mournful expression on her face. When she looked into Baba Idi’s eyes, she felt uneasy, as if she had an urgent need to rush to the bathroom.

“What . . . is . . . this?” he asked, gesturing to the motorcycle.

Dada tried to speak, but no words came out of her open mouth. Instead, she rushed off to the bathroom.

“It’s Idi’s motorcycle, Baba,” Sule offered proudly. “Chairman gave it to him. He drove it in standing, like this.” The young boy was demonstrating the moment of triumph, but Baba Idi was not looking.

When he could speak, he thundered, “Get me that brother of yours!”

“He’s gone out with his friend. He said he would be right back.”

Baba Idi went to the kitchen then came back out. He pushed the motorcycle off its stand and was guiding it outside when his young sons made to follow him. He growled at them and they scurried back.

“What are you doing? Where are you taking the machine?” Dada asked, having returned from the toilet.

Baba Idi didn’t even look back as he pushed the motorcycle through the door. When he got to the front of the house, he opened the fuel tank and laid the machine on its side. He reached into his pocket for the matchbox and struck it. Dada started wailing as soon as the flame went up.

Baba Idi stood back with the satisfied look of one burning a loathsome beast on a pyre. It was a sacrifice to pacify his ire.

At the junction, the restless youths saw the rising smoke column.

“Good, it has started,” one of them said.

Before long, several columns of smoke, thick and wild, rose into the afternoon sky. As angry voices rose and sirens started wailing, Baba Idi withdrew into his house and shut the door.