

YOU ARE A CRIMINAL

by Sunday Obiageli

That day, I saw him before it happened. His painstakingly twisted dreadlocks rested on his shoulders, fluttered momentarily in the air whenever he shook his head strongly. He wore a brand new eye-catching Tee-Shirt with a frightening emboldened letters: FUCK YOU that spread over the glistening golden teeth of an American music artist, Fifty Cent. He smiled at me when I extolled him the usual way we did: "Brother Desmond". He stopped walking immediately I extolled him at the Sansan football field. He gestured at me to meet him. When I approached him, he ran his hand through my ringworm infested head. I smiled back at him even though in my stomach, there was no genuine instinct to make my mouth gape. He squeezed a fifty Naira note into my moist, sandy palm. His smile ebbed by his determination to instruct me on how to spend it.

"Buy garri 20, groundnut 20, sugar 10. Go home, soak and drink". He said to me, the ebbed smile returned, dazzled his face once more as the unwanted gap between his teeth glared at me. He lost two of his front teeth in a fight with an agbero at Oshodi.

"Thanks Brother", I said to him.

"Look at where you kept your schoolbag, look at your school uniform. Go home now before I deal with you". He said in between anger and love.

I hurriedly ran to the Sansan field where my schoolbag lay on the sandy floor. Some of my defaced books had been spilled by the outworn zipper of my aged leather bag. I picked up my schoolbag, threw the hand across my shoulder, pinned it with my neck

as I tried to button my shirt. Only two buttons were left. The usefulness of those two buttons were limited to their presence. Each time I slid them into the holes, they tugged out from the bounds of the buttonholes to bare my sun pelted belly, my hungry belly that never got satisfied no matter how much my hand offered it.

I turned and glanced at him, to know how far he had gone. But he was still standing there, where I had left him. His glowering eyes warned me intensely but dotingly. He was a brother to every child in Igando, a friend to all and an enemy of none.

When I attempted explaining to him that I was trying to button my shirt, a flood of phlegm surged out of my nostrils, the colour brown. A sign of the brown dust that took refuge in my head. When he saw the thick, sticky brown substance that shut me up, prevented me from explaining myself, he laughed hysterically, threw his hands in the air mockingly. He turned immediately and started walking energetically towards the Igando market. His baggy jeans with two bear-size pockets on the back, one of the pockets, the right one, housed a variegated bandana. The bandana swung this way, that way, in same direction as his flickering dreadlocks as he walked.

That was the last time I saw brother Desmond. The man I wanted to be like when I grow up. He said he was going to become a footballer and I wanted, too. The Igando Sansan field was his second home. His football boots which I used to carry for him sometimes after his training or football matches, were his most treasured possession.

I ran to their house, Brother Desmond's house, where he lived with his one-leg mother and his younger sister, Favour. He was the breadwinner of his family, the reason for his mother being alive. His mother's eyes were as unreliable as her one leg.

The other leg had been amputated, the left one. Brother Desmond had told me that it was diabetes that caused it. He told me that it softened the sole of her left leg like a macerated tuber of cassava. The doctor at the Igando general hospital chopped off her left leg because of that. It was the day he told me about his mother's leg that he told me how difficult life was. He told me how he started doing the job of a bus conductor since the age of nine, immediately after his father's death. Brother Desmond was a bus conductor and an admirable footballer in Igando, the king of goal, the most prolific striker in Igando and its environs.

When I got to their house, I saw so many women, neighbours and others who might have heard what had happened and decided to come and say a few words to his mother. Some of them I knew, some of them, I did not know.

“Ino go better for them and their generations upon generations”, one of the female sympathizers said.

Desmond's mother's eyes were as red as burning coal. She cried intermittently, slapped her leg, tugged at the outworn wrapper she fastened round her chest.

Sometimes, she patted her forehead as if trying to remember something, or blew phlegm into her wrapper. I didn't know what to say or do. I wanted to say something but an invisible string held my tongue, my mouth was too dry that it appeared as if my tongue cracked. But my eyes did not disappoint me, it spoke all the words my mouth could not. It asked all the necessary questions my mouth failed to ask. It was resilient in its monitoring of movements, rueful faces, shrugging shoulders of Mama Desmond and the irate youths that had gathered in front of Desmond's apartment. Everyone was

crying or saying something except me. My heart was too busy to give water to my eyes. It was overloaded with sorrow. I searched for Favour, Desmond's one and only younger sister, the one he was taking care of with their mother through his bus conductor job, but I did not see her in my hurrying search.

“God have mercy, person pikin na him they use gun kill like that. God, where you dey?” One of the female sympathizers said, her two hands thrown into the air in the direction of God, in protest. My resilient eyes followed them, her hands, as they soared in the air, faltered, and finally dropped on her head in a crisscross.

The evening breeze became angry as if it were also protesting the death of my role model, the death of our Desmond. It tossed objects into the air: empty plastic bottles, nylon bags, rags and washed clothes that hung low and high on lines.

Desmond's mother felt invigorated by the patting hand of anguish and she started groaning, laying curses, shaking her head vigorously.

“Olopa, police killed my son for nothing. My only son. Who will buy medicine for my sick bodi? Who go give me food chop? Who go pay Favour school fee? Make una answer me ooh”, she lamented in a singsong manner, spittle forming into bubbles and deflating intermittently as she spoke.

Everyone in Igando knew how he died. The story was told in all corners. Desmond was killed by the police. He died in the hands of some policemen. One of his friends, his teammate, the one he was going with to watch a football match, Dayo also known as Agbara told the story before the crowd of sympathizers.

Desmond was killed by some policemen right in front of the Igando market for his refusal to release his phone to the policemen who accused him of internet fraud. His

dreadlocks were undoubtedly the trademark for internet fraudsters, his baggy jeans, his Tee-shirt, and his expensive phone— these were more than enough to be labeled an internet fraudster. Desmond refused releasing his phone to them for his online activities to be checked by the fierce looking policemen. But the policemen could not accept his no for an answer. He tussled with them when the metal head of one of the policemen A.K-47 struck his head. The policeman landed the metal head of the gun fiercely, severally on his dreadlocks covered head while he shouted: “you are a criminal”. Desmond body became torpid, he fell to the ground listlessly, his eyes became bleary. The other policemen watched Desmond fall listlessly to the ground. Blood trickled out of his ears, his nostril as he quaked on the ground, flapped this way, that way until his body became still, serene in the scorching heat of the afternoon. His unseeing eyes gaped heavenwards, in the direction of God, not at the fleeing policemen nor the awed passers-by whose guts could not embolden to ask the bolting policemen questions. Not when they had seen their brawny faces, and the white man’s guns held menacingly in their hands, ever-ready to blot out the life force of anyone who resented them. Who does not know them? SARS, the Special Anti Robbery Squad?

So many youths gathered there, at Desmond apartment. Some of them, his football teammates. Some, bus conductors and drivers, and those who had in one or more than one occasion been patted by the generous hand of Desmond. They conspired in low voices and yelled spitefully at the accursed policemen.

“Desmond body is not going to be left at the Igando market forever”, Dayo said, his cheeks rouged thanklessly by dried tears.

“Let’s go and carry his body, but for me, we should take his body to the killers. We should take him to the police station. Let them eat his body”. Oga Kolo, Desmond boss, the owner and the driver of the commercial bus he worked with before his death, said.

The youths resolved to march to the crime scene.

I wished I were a grown up. I wished I could join them. Even though I was warned sternly to stay behind, not to follow them. But I could not. Staying behind was suicidal. I followed them, walked behind them, distant from them.

As they marched in one heart like hymenopterous insects whose habitat was infiltrated, they sang resentfully and in rancour infused in them by the untamed policemen. Their chants soared in the air as much as their jogging legs which grazed the enduring face of the earth, roused latent dust into the air.

Cloud of dust soared in the air, green branches rising and falling. They all wore black shirts, black trousers, and canvas shoes. Everyone of them held something in his hand: wooden slabs, stones, bottles, sticks, and rods. They surrounded the lifeless body of Desmond, singing, gyrating round his pale body.

Everywhere was deserted, the market was empty as if there were a war or a suspected terror attack. Even the Igando-Isheri road was deserted. Only a few motorists sped past. All the commercial bus drivers suspended the day’s hustle in ruefulness and in respect to the deceased Brother Desmond.

I moved closer to them, looking through their legs to see his addled body on the floor, to know if truly he would not wake up, if he would stand up and say "leave those people, let us go jare. They think say na them sabi something", baring his accidental gap tooth, smiling at the jubilant faces of the mourners cum protesters.

I clambered a wooden woebegone table by the side of the road, to know if I could see his face, to ask him why he was so weak. Was he not the one who told me stories of how he dealt with some agberos? How he fought two knife-wielding agberos until one of them fainted from a single punch with his left lethal hand. Whatever the policemen did to him, was not enough to kill him. How could his powerful muscular arms, dotted graphically by popped veins, disappoint him in that disguise?

Now I could see him, his face, through the legs of one them, the youths. His face was now blacker than the black face of brother Desmond. His mouth was agape, his gap tooth was his, the Tee-shirt and the baggy jeans, his dreadlocks were his. But every other thing was not, didn't look like his. Fast-flying houseflies swam in his mouth, perched on his head, buzzed in his nostrils and ears, scavenging. There and then, I knew that he would not rise, he would not buy the football boots he had promised me, he would not buy a new school uniform for me, a new school bag. I felt a surge of hot liquid, as hot as boiling akara, bean cake oil, gush down from my eyes to my cheeks. The liquid flowed relentlessly, in correspondence with my heaving heart.

Dayo pulled his black Tee-shirt, stooped towards his head, wiped at some flies with it before inserting Desmond's head into the shirt. He knotted the neckline of the black

Tee-shirt into a taut. The same thing he did to the hemline around the neck of Desmond. It made him look like a masquerade. Dayo and one other person lifted the body to their heads. They marched towards the police station at Akesan/Egan road. It was not far from where Desmond was killed. I wouldn't stand aloof anymore. That was a decision I made in my heart. I ran towards them with the naked soles of my swift tinny thirteen-year-old feet. I walked side by side with them, sang along with them the lyrics I knew. Those I did not know, I nodded my head rhythmically and clapped my hands or slapped my chest as others did. Nobody told me to go back, they all were so busy, so anguished to notice my presence.

When we got to the police station, woebegone vehicles parked at the front of the station greeted us. Some of the vehicles were charred, some had missing legs or shattered windscreen. Only a few were in good form.

Dayo and the other person lowered the dead body of brother Desmond at the yellow coated gate with two big black stripes that laced its overall shade of yellow.

Our chanting increased in its crescendo. Some of us pulled our black shirts as perspiration gleamed our bodies, glistened in the afternoon sun. All the policemen seemed to be afraid of us. They were all inside, none was seen in the lawn of the station. We started hurling sticks, stones, and bottles at the roof of the station buildings. The rusted zincs creaked, shuddered from the hit of our missiles, some of them dislodged from the bound of rusted nails. I was the supplier of the stones and other items I assembled from the gutters, on the rough Egan/Akesan road, and from the abandoned filling station that stood inches away, in my hurrying search for

missiles. I ran towards everywhere, picking stones, packing them into my school uniform and teeming them in front of them. After all, it was my mentor they had killed for no just course. The stones and sticks I assembled were hurled at everything in the police station by the powerful hands of Dayo whose pseudonym was Agbara, strength, and others. But then, the policemen came out of their hiding with looks of we-go-deal-with-you-today on their faces. All of them carried guns, they pointed their guns at us, all of us, we were all in line of fire. Shortly, they threw something at us, a canister that hissed out smoke, thick smoke into the air. The smoke was peppery, choking and blinding. It strangled me, wanting to suffocate me. As if the juju smoke they threw at us to blind us, to choke us to death was not enough, they shot into the air, not once, not thrice but severally. Everybody started running, running away from the danger glowering at us. I darted off with just one of my eyes open, the other was shut, blinded by what they had hurled at us that pervaded in the air, strangling me to death. But I wouldn't abandon brother Desmond, I wouldn't leave his body and run away. I stopped running, turned and glanced at the police station. Dayo, Agbara was still there. He did not run. He and some others did not run. They were beating a police man. Dayo landed a very heavy block on the policeman's head and he sprawled lifelessly on the ground. Other policemen were shooting in the air but it didn't deter brother Dayo and his friends. As I watched them, something struck me, in my chest. It was hot, very hot, hot like a metal reddened in a furnace. It went into my heart and unleashed its venom. Its venom made my head woozy, my legs wobbly and my breathing difficult. Where I stood on seemed to be rotating too fast in a whirl hauling by the powerful hand of God. I fell to the ground, looked at the disappearing sky, it

was fading away just like every other thing, everywhere became blank, there and then.