

A Story from The Son of Man

By

Amara Nicole Okolo

Parrésia Publishers 2016

THE TALKING SHOES

ANDREW

We are the shoes he wore for the interview, old and worn out from kissing the concrete every day. This was the thirteenth interview in two weeks, and our owner, Andrew, resembled our wear and tear: matted uncombed hair, chin shadowed with stubble, eyes red-rimmed from sleepless nights. His borrowed suit was a size too big for him and drowned his gaunt figure – the lapels hanging out like thirsty tongues, and the buttons missing from the pockets. The collar of his shirt was lined with grime, the armpits clumsily held together with safety pins.

We walked into the reception, the marble floor smooth, and the air-conditioner startled us with its coolness. *Ah*, we embraced it – the sizzling asphalt outside had nearly murdered us on our way here. Andrew looked around and saw the receptionist; she was seated behind a mahogany desk, her face thick with make-up. Her hands held up to her face in inspection before she resumed filing her nails. The sounds of the enamel board raspy, like sandpaper polishing wood. She looked at our owner with jaundiced eyes lined with dark kohl eyeliner.

“What do you want?” she asked, in a voice laden with disgust.

These receptionists, they are the same everywhere we have gone with Andrew, always asking what you want like you would stroll into an office with a folder under your arm on a Monday morning to sightsee.

Andrew smiled. “I am here for the interview, ma,” he said.

He was calling her “ma” too? This one who looked ten years younger than his unmarried obese kid sister back in the village, who sliced firewood and staggered under the weight of water pots from the stream.

She ran her eyes over him like he was festured with pustules. “Sit down there,” she said, waving towards the visitors’ sofa. “What’s your name?”

“Andrew Obaze.”

She consulted a file and without a word, stood up and went through an adjacent door. We waited, Andrew’s toes digging into us. He was biting his nails and muttering to himself. We guessed he was praying. He had prayed at the others too – and left with the same story: “We are sorry, but we cannot hire you.”

The receptionist reappeared and led us to the boss’s office. He was human lard, his excess weight packed on his swivel chair, his bald head shiny with sweat though the air-conditioner was on in the office. “I have gone through your documents, and even though you have a very good degree, I can’t really give you the job. It was taken few hours ago.” He licked his thick lips. “I have a position here for a cleaner. If you could take that...”

We walked out with Andrew muttering curses as he stomped out of the office. *Bloody idiot. Fat toad, he can keep his godforsaken job for all we cared. He looked at the skeletal receptionist as we headed to the door.*

“Thank you for your time. You look like a sick vulture by the way, go and swallow a mortar of pounded yam, *abeg*. You look anorexic!”

She gasped. Instantly, anger replaced shock. “It is your dead mother and your witch grandmother that are vultures, you useless—!”

The door shut out her obscenities.

On our trip back home, we jumped into the yellow danfo bus, Andrew shoving aside an old civil servant beside him with vigour. He pushed him again, entered and settled on a seat; the poor man missed his step and crashed to the dusty ground. The bus moved forward, leaving him behind. *Good.*

Home was Oshodi, its mangled buildings like hunchback trolls. The refuse dumps filled with colourful remains of household waste dotted the roadside like decorations. The gutters were clogged with mucky, smelly waters. People didn't mind their business – your business was their business. That is, until you came knocking on their doors to borrow money or beg for a plate of party rice. “Do I look like your father?” They said, snarling in your face. *“Abi na me bring you come Lagos?”*

Ghetto, they called it, but we called it home.

When we arrived, we met Andrew's daughters seated by our threshold, still clad in their school uniforms, faces forlorn and twisted with hunger.

“Mommy is not back yet,” Lola, the first, greeted him.

“And we are hungry,” Tinu, the second one added.

He gave them the change from his bus fare, and they scurried away to the Mallam selling biscuits at the corner. Andrew shuffled to his neighbour's house and knocked on the door. Mama Bosede peeped through the crack of the open door, a thin woman with ginormous breasts.

“Is my wife here?” he asked.

She eyed him. “Does this look like her father's house?”

She hissed and slammed the door in his face.

He turned to return to his home, no sense replying. She was right, after all. He turned the key in the knob and went in. He took us off and looked around the dingy room – her boxes were gone; the space where they had been were marked with dust and crawling cockroaches. She had left as she had threatened.

Jobless man! I'm sick of this life! I'm too young to suffer. You are a useless miser, and I cannot live with you anymore. I'm going to find a good life for myself; after all, this is Lagos, home of hustlers! I am one, and you're nothing but a lazy old swine with nothing but your forged school certificates! Six months gone, and all you do is wear those tattered shoes and yeye suit, parading the city like a lost sheep, then you come back with your excuses so you can swallow my eba and soup; food cooked with my hard-earned money! When you get your precious job, eat your chicken change alone!

He smiled as he dropped the note. She was right about one thing: he was frugal. But he had adopted that lifestyle to take care of her; to provide for her incessant lust for things he could not afford. It was a fanatic mantra he had endured: this pink African wax, that gold-rimmed lace material, this jewellery bead, that fanciful *gele*. She had even requested he use the children's school fees, which he had managed to save after working twenty hours on a construction site, to buy her a Blackberry. Infuriated, he had slapped her so hard his palm blistered. That had been yesterday, and now she was gone.

It was best she was gone. She had been a thorn in his flesh, a gangrenous foot that needed amputation. But she had also been his saving grace. She owned a small fish stall at

Yaba market, and with her daily proceeds the girls were sure of a hot meal at the end of the day.

He fumbled through his pockets and brought out the five hundred naira note. It was damp with sweat, and smelt like mildew. His heart sank into the mud of despair. That was the last money he had. What would they eat tonight? He was tired of begging that old hag Iya Rakia for rice and beans on credit. Her food was not that good; it always made him hurry to the toilet every fifteen minutes to shit. But he had no choice; he already owed her a fortune. The other day she had hurled insults at him, and threatened to bathe him with fermented beans water if he did not pay up his debt. He sighed and pulled out his certificates, dirty and dog-eared from numerous exchange of hands. Placing it on the old, creaky table, he walked to the small blue cupboard and pulled out the ropes.

What is life when you have no hope? When the future seems bleak? He had his life; nobody could take that away from him. He was the boss of that; he *owned* that. Within seconds they had secured the knot to the rusty hook of the ceiling fan. The yellow rope dangled before his eyes like a boa constrictor, the gaping hole like a monster with a frenetic laugh. *You can't do it, Andrew*, it jeered at him. *You have always been a weakling. That's the real reason Felicia left because you were never that man you claimed to be, a First Class graduate in Fine Arts with big English words to deceive a naive village girl. What can Fine Arts provide in this country? Can it put fish and meat in a pot of stew? Can it pay your daughters' school fees? It can paint an excellent canvas, an imaginative world of possibilities. You would have nothing but the stupid certificates and worthless canvases. Wake up and provide for your family!*

The taunting was physical, like an eagle's claw ripping through his epidermis. He screamed and climbed the chair, hurriedly throwing the noose around his neck. The room was

hot and stuffy, a gateway to Hades. Somewhere, music emitted from a stereo, and Fela's baritone seeped through his wall, he was blaming the Army for killing his mother. Sweat plastered his shirt to his skin; his hands shook with tremors of fright and excitement. No pain, he muttered to himself, I won't even feel it. In minutes it'll all be over.

He closed his eyes and raised a leg.

Then the girls came in, cherubic angels with their hands filled with sweets and sugared peanuts.

"Papa, why are you standing near the roof?" Lola said. His eyes flew open. They were staring at him, with questioning eyes, eyebrows furrowed with a perplexity only children can summon.

That was when the first tear fell. He took off the noose and jumped down, a sheepish grin on his face. The room did not feel so stuffy anymore. The air even smelled fresher like mowed grass after a stormy night.

"I was checking for mosquitoes," he said. He did not explain any further.

He sat down and drew the girls to his sides. Tinu offered him a biscuit. He took the offering, and hugged them, his face encased in a tearful smile.

The yellow rope still dangled slowly from the roof, a forgotten piece of art on a finished canvas.