

Lekki Headmaster Chapter Two

The Enticement

AFTER five days of interrogation and frustration, Mr. Bepo opened up. He was leaving Nigeria for the United Kingdom. He could no longer withstand the pressure to relocate, as his foot-dragging over the matter had pushed his marriage to the brink. He very much loved Stardom Schools, especially his students. He cared about them, wanted to continually be part of their growth. He found no sense in leaving them behind in a developing nation and joining the crowd working to further advance the United Kingdom: a developed country. But family was also keen on his mind. In the war to win him over, his wife had conscripted Nike and Kike, their two children, who, all the while, had been with her. He just had to quit and join them. Fortunately, he had already secured a teaching job in the UK.

Of the two decades plus Bepo spent at Stardom Schools, he was Headmaster at Stardom Kiddies-the nursery/primary arm - for four years. The foundation school remained constant in his professional history especially because of the nickname it bequeathed to him - The Lekki Headmaster.

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Apart from the fact that he sometimes mimicked the Village Headmaster in the old TV drama series, once upon a time, some of the teachers under him became so quarrelsome. Hardly would two weeks pass without a conflict being brought to his office for resolution. Given his humanistic and empathetic disposition, he often accommodated their agitation and even pettiness and resolved the issues. One day, during a staff meeting to resolve another quarrel, the clownish teacher, Mr. Audu, joked about Bepo's disposition. "The way the headmaster masterly resolves these fights reminds me of the way King Oloja, in Village Headmaster, resolved all the roforofos brought by his chiefs and villagers.

So, as they had their own Village Headmaster, we also have our own Lekki Headmaster. "Expectedly, laughter ensued. But there was more. A label stuck, which the many years that would eventually roll did not change. Even after Bepo became the principal at the secondary school, many still loved to call him The Lekki Headmaster'.

A good number of Mr. Bepo's colleagues at Stardom found his reaction concerning the impending relocation funny: extremely funny. Of course, what they really had in mind was that it was stupid. How could one have such a golden opportunity and ever stand and reluctant considering that thousands of people were sacertious. He did not have to travel overseas? His case was even enviable, they thought.

He did not have to borrow or steal money to make the journey. He did have to leave for menial jobs at the embassy. And, in the UK, he would not have to look for menial jobs; he wouldn't have to clean dishes', as folks uncharitably say about washing corpses.

His wife, Seri, was a nurse. Kumour had it that she could be earning up to £10,000 per month (a whopping sum of more than N17m, they swiftly multiplied). The teaching job Mr. Bepo got promised about £3,600 and other entitlements. As principal, his salary at Stardom was about N400,000. Which was bigger: 400,000 feeble naira or almost 4,000 heavy British pounds? They converted the latter to about N6 million - at about N1,700 for a pound. Why then would any rational being develop cold feet towards such a life-changing offer?

"But let us not forget that he will not spend the wage in naira. He will spend it in pounds. This is one factor many of us fail to take into consideration," said Orelapa during which he exclaimed, "No mate, how contrarily he spends in pounds, he will still have a lot to send to Nigeria." The Fine Arts teacher explained: "Just imagine, if he sends £1,000 to Naija every month, that is over N1.7m. You want to compare Bepo that saves N1.7m monthly to the one that earns N400,000 as salary? Are they on the same level? The principal knows all of these and still insists he is not leaving. I think Stardom's management has jazzed (bewitched) him. This is unnatural. I have to find his wife's home address."

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"And what will you do if you find it?" Oyelana asked, bemused. "I will beg her to adopt me as husband. I am leaving for the airport RIGHT NOW!" Audu said.

He stood up immediately, picked a few books off his table, pushed them under his armpit, and walked out of the staffroom, declaring: "I am heading to the airport for the next flight."

His colleagues roared with laughter. Of course, everyone heard the bell.

Mr. Audu was already late for his next class.

Bepo's plan was to retire from Stardom at the age of 55. That was still four years away. He had been thinking seriously about life in retirement. He had begun attending seminars on entrepreneurship: this was what he wanted to spend the remaining slice of his days on. He loved the freedom and confidence successful businessmen enjoyed, in spite of the fact that business enterprise harbours peculiar

challenges. Bepo also loved to develop fellow men and his country. He pictured himself in a position where he also could employ workers, no matter how modestly, and give people opportunity to earn a living and pay tax to government. It was one of the tips he learnt at seminars. According to one of his coaches, no employee should dream big about comfort or bank on job security either. Only a business owner could afford to do so, especially when the business had become successful.

Bepo would also not mind establishing his own school; after all, he had garnered a lot of experience about teaching and school management. Besides, he was a trained teacher, having studied English/History Education at the University of Benin. This projection would give him an opportunity to push his passion for moulding the young. His only reservation: he wondered if he would have enough capital to float a standard school, given the taste he had already imbibed at Stardom. He recalled that a major principle of entrepreneurship is starting small. He did not object to this, but experience had taught him a lesson: it is better for the facility to be in an area where parents are able to pay for the kind of education he wanted to provide. He could not forget in a hurry how a neighbourhood school-Fruitful Future-which he established alongside a friend, shortly after his National Youth Service, crumbled due to socio-economic challenges in the location. Of course; he knew his wife would not fund any project that would hold him down in Nigeria.

Bepo considered farming, food, and sachet (pure) or bottled water businesses. But he also had substantial inclination towards commercial transportation. He believed it was a business someone with minimal capital could begin with. An option he could readily chew over was buying a bus or a cab and leasing it to a driver. A fact about transportation, he knew, was that you begin to make money from the first day the vehicle is purchased. It is not like farming, where you had to wait till the end of a season or cycle before your seeds or animals begin to yield. It is not like retail or distribution business either, where, after getting a shop, you have to wait for customers to show up-customers who already have their preferred clients before you arrived. Besides, in many cases, buyers need to earn trust before patronising you. But in running a cab or bus, passengers have no loyalty to any driver or vehicle. As a matter of fact, Bepo knew: the newer your cab, the more attractive it is to commuters.

The problem with transportation, he learnt, was that many commercial drivers one would have loved to engage lacked enlightened business practices.

They were not trustworthy, and often ended up ruining the dream. At least, three members of staff at Stardom ventured into it but ended up with regrets. The drivers frustrated the idea, defaulted in payment, and often told lies that the autos broke down. On some occasions, they colluded with mechanics to defraud the vehicle owners. In spite of these sour details, Bepo kept the option open. He

believed there could still be a way out. There were, for instance, people who bought vehicles and let them out to drivers, who, in turn, paid instalments. He also felt that if big transport companies, such as ABC and God is Good Motors, could operate successfully, there must be a way around the challenges.

For now, however, he needed not worry again about those dreams. He was set to renew his teaching career in a new environment, a new country where he, definitely, would earn more and share a new life with Seri, Nike and Kike. He knew life, anywhere, is not a bed of roses, and every place harboured its challenges. He read the story of a Nigerian teacher who got rattled the first day he walked into a class in a UK school. One of the students was said to have asked:

"Are you an idiot?" Yet, Bepo knew that such an incident, if true, must be isolated.

And a good teacher should be able to handle that diplomatically.

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