

## **The Church Comedy: Fiction by Kanyinsola Olorunnisola**

Ola was the first to wake up that morning. Pastor had said the Sunday earlier that whoever goes late to church goes to hell. As he spoke then with such ferociousness that made Ola fear he would soil his pants, Ola imagined Angel Gabriel sweeping people up with ease and pouring them into the ever-burning furnace. He did not want that to happen to him or anyone in his family. So he wasted no time in waking his parents and his sister, the latter waking up with hideous streaks of dry saliva running from the tip of her mouth to her cheek. He rushed out to wash Daddy's car while his sister, Bimbo, swept the compound. Mummy had dashed to the kitchen to cook boiled yam for all to eat but he did not like that. He wished they would all just go to church without eating for once. After all, Dara's family did it all the time and his blind father had regained his sight the previous year. Pastor had credited it to fasting before coming to church and Ola wanted his family to cultivate the habit too. It was not like his own family needed a miracle – Daddy had a well-paying teaching job in the grammar school nearby and a hypertension which they had all come to see as a normal phase of life rather than a demonic ailment which needed miraculous intervention, while his mother was a fully healthy tailor – but Ola badly wished they would be more like Dara's family. He had a habit of comparing his own family to Dara's. Perhaps, it was because they were the only two Yoruba families in the Hausa-dominated neighbourhood.

The boiled yam tasted bitter. It was an unwelcome surprise. His mother's food had never been anything but incredibly tasteful in his mouth, but it was quite different that day. It was as if he was eating bitterness itself shaped in form of yam slices. He was glad they were not all eating in the dining room where his mother would have seen him spit it out. While his parents were getting dressed and Bimbo was having her bath, he slowly took his plate outside into the compound and poured it in front of the tongue-wagging Jerry, his dog, who devoured the yam in its entirety before Ola could get back to the house. It was as though Jerry feared the meal would be its last from Ola's plate. Ever since they arrived in Kano five years before, when Ola was just six, Jerry had served the family more as a means to get rid of excess food without necessarily wasting it than as an actual watchdog to fend off thieves. There was really no fear of thieves anymore. Unlike back in Lagos when they were robbed practically every month, things were much calmer in Kano. They were happy. A few biased Hausa boys in his school were hostile towards him for being Yoruba and Christian but that had never really bothered him. After all, he had once heard his mother talking to Dara's mother about the mild discrimination, both agreeing that it was to be expected. "This obnoxiousness happens everywhere, even our people might be worse. God help our country and tribalism," Dara's mother had said. She taught at the university and she was the only one he knew in the neighbourhood who freely used words like "tribalism" and "obnoxiousness" in casual discussions.

He took comfort in the friends who accepted him with open arms. Pastor always said that it was better to have few friends so that when Jesus came to pack you to heaven, the packer would be big enough to accommodate you and your friends.

The car did not start. His father knocked the battery with stones repeatedly but the engine was determined not to come alive. Daddy got into the car and asked them all to push it from behind. This had never happened before. Thus, Mummy, Bimbo and Ola stood behind the car, arched their backs and pushed with all the strength they had, which was very ridiculous and disappointing because the car did not move an inch. It seemed as though, combined, they had the strength of a feather in comparison to the hulk of metallic mass that was the vehicle.

"Push harder!" Daddy screamed.

"We are obviously trying our best," Mummy returned in anger.

“Not obvious at all,” Daddy shot back. “Not at all.”

Ola was embarrassed. As the only man pushing, he felt it was his responsibility to push the car to start but even with the help of two women, he still could not move it. After training to be like the muscled wrestlers he often saw on TV by carrying two heavy buckets of water from the well down the street to the house every morning, he had expected himself to be stronger. They were going to be late to church. Pastor often said eating before coming to church causes spiritual weakness. Pastor said a lot of things but Ola believed them all. He never doubted Pastor’s words. He feared that if he became a Thomas, Jesus would come down from heaven and slap some sense into him. He did not want that at all. So, even though he did not understand why he needed to close his eyes to pray or why he had to pay tithes, he never questioned. Pastor said good Christians never question what God says.

Frustrated, Mummy suggested they take *danfo*<sup>1</sup> and they did. The drive to church seemed like an hour, though it was the usual twenty minutes. While on the bus, Ola noticed the man seated beside him giving him a death stare. The thuggish man glanced at the bible which Ola clutched to his breasts and back at him as if the sight was insulting. Ola looked away nervously and wished he could melt into the leathery seat which his now-sweaty buttocks were married to. Upon reaching the church, the family hopped down quickly. Pastor had already begun preaching when they entered. This had never happened before. It was another one of the many unpleasant things that occurred that morning. Ola hoped that would be the last of them for the day as he sat at the back pew with his family. Dara’s mother, who was at the front with her own family, waved at them wearing a concerned look on her face. He wondered if Mummy wished she was sitting in front where everyone would get to admire her *gele*<sup>2</sup>. Pastor was preaching about making peace with others and Ola remembered the fight he had with Nasir, the rogue boy in his school who had lied to the Mathematics teacher that Ola copied his assignment from him despite the fact that it was exactly the other way round. As Pastor spoke with so much alacrity that shook the whole building, Ola wondered how a sermon about peace could be so...well, unpeaceful. The way his voice boomed out of the speaker right above Ola’s head felt like he was in a battleground. He heard noise from outside but he shrugged it off. He could never tell for sure anyway. After all, Pastor’s voice always seemed like a thousand voices wrapped up into a giant discordant sonic explosion that echoed in different parts of the building. He could not listen, he was focused on the way Pastor was gesticulating, throwing his fists in the air and kicking the ground forcefully, as if that would be his last sermon.

Just like in a poorly-cast horror movie with overtly enthusiastic actors, six men histrionically stormed into the church, carrying knives, cutlasses, guns and axes. Pastor stopped immediately and instinctively staggered back. It took Ola some time to realise it was not a stage play. The men’s faces were mostly unfamiliar. Two of the strange men locked the door and stood in front of it. Three surrounded the churchgoers and the last of them, who Ola guessed was the leader, went up to the altar. The assistant senior pastor charged at the man but he was stopped by a bullet that bored through the middle of his head, crushing his skull. The church was in disarray. People ran helter-skelter but after two deafening gunshots to the roof, they all went mute and still. Daddy, Mummy, Ola and Bimbo all gathered round, visibly scared to death. Ola saw fear radiating in his father’s eyes. His father, whose eyes had always lit up with courage and hope just like they had done even after retrenchment from his job, the unfortunate incident that brought him to Kano with the family in the first place, was now an embodiment of fear. At that moment, he was a shell of himself, no traces of the invincible man Ola had always known him to be. This was another unpleasant thing that had never happened before. Ola felt his knees go weak. It did not help when the leader asked them all to go down on their knees. He later recognised the leader as the man from the bus earlier. Pastor was begging for their lives to be spared.

“We will spare you on one condition,” the leader spoke Hausa which nearly everyone in the church happened to understand.

“Any condition, please,” Pastor replied in haste.

“Tear your bible and rebuke your Jesus Christ.”

“What?”

“I said, tear your bible in front of the congregation and admit that Allah is the way.”

Realisation dawned on Ola; he had never expected that it would come to this. Persecution of Christians in the north had never been this severe. It had been something he read about in the three-day old crumpled newspapers Daddy brought home, the only things he was able to smuggle from his place of work. It had been something (a hearsay if we are being precise), which Dara had told him about – a collection of macabre stories and distant realities he could only gape at in the voluptuous safety of his mind’s imagination. Now, he was personally witnessing it reach sky heights first-hand.

“Please, do not do this,” Pastor begged, with a tone Ola deemed too weak, too ineffectual unlike his habitual screams while preaching. “Jesus loves you.”

Triggered by that statement, the leader shot Pastor’s left arm in hellish rage. The latter screamed and let go of the bible which he had been holding on to tightly. He pressed his thumb on the bullet wound in a futile attempt to stop the blood flow and fell on the ground. He began to draw backwards, away from the leader with terror all over his face as if he had encountered Satan. “Why are you doing this? I have friends that are Imams.”

“Those are fools that cannot fight for Islam. Do you want these people to die?” he asked, pointing at the cowered congregation.

“No! God forbid! Death is not their portion,” Pastor quickly said, instinctively raising his voice authoritatively, as if in a sermon. Being aware of this, he immediately shut his mouth.

“Then, face them and say ‘Allah is the way’.”

Pastor’s face was losing colour now and Ola could see his fierceness reduce drastically as each pint of blood streamed out of his arm. Pastor looked at the other pastors, his wife, the congregation all on their knees, as though he was preparing to make the decision. At that point, Ola was too focused on the scorching-hot urine that trickled down his legs, setting his fears on fire while the smoke they emitted pierced through his eyes and released a river flow of tears that were hidden amidst quiet sobs, too focused on Mummy’s trembling hands and Bimbo’s loudly whispered prayers, too focused on an inner torment he could not yet understand, too focused on all of that to notice the dilemma Pastor was facing. Pastor was not a man to be envied at that point. Was he to let these people all die under his watch or was he, as their Pastor, supposed to tell them to throw their faith away and risk hell fire? Pastor sobbed loudly and began to speak gibberish. At first, Ola thought he was quoting The Scriptures or speaking in tongues, which he saw as a good omen: a cadenza of light in a multitudinous darkness, a flickering fire of hope in the midst of deepening despair, but to his overwhelming horror, what had happened was far from that. Pastor had lost so much blood, that sanity was also bleeding out of him. He fell to the ground, unmoving.

“He is dead!” a high-pitched voice cried out. It was his wife, a usually soft-spoken woman with light make-up who had now become a wild body of raging sweat and indignities. “They have killed him. These sons from a

foul's womb that was by fertilised wasted sperm." She did not continue her fearless, uncharacteristic grief-inspired accordance of insults for too long, not because she got tired or because the Hausa men did not understand the Igbo she spoke, but because two bullets to the neck did not exactly aid the continuation of her verbal assaults. The entire church was in turmoil. The Pastor and his wife had been murdered in cold blood.

In no time, the thugs pounced on the congregation and began slashing off heads here, severing hands there. The people tried to fight back but they were helpless against the armed and psychotic thugs. Some attempted getting out but the door and the windows had been locked from outside. The men apparently had allies outside. Everyone was running up and down, bumping into each other. Gunshots, cries to heaven, noisy splattering of blood on walls and the gory sound of axes grinding of human bone filled the air. One second, Ola saw Dara's mother searching for her son in the commotion and the next, an axe sent her head flying through the air and unto the altar, with the blood spilling to the ground as if from a tap someone had forgotten to lock. Her cold hard eyes stared into the emptiness of space. Daddy attacked one of the thugs that had a knife and wrestled him to the ground, hitting him with ferocious punches but, before Ola could try to assist his father, another thug had stabbed Daddy from the back. He watched in agony as his father silently fell on his side and shut his eyelids forever. Mummy and Bimbo screamed and tried running, they stumbled upon Dara's dead body which had bullet holes on the head. Bimbo tripped over the body and fell face-flat. Ola rushed over to pick her up but the blade of an axe that came out of the blue slightly grazing his forehead sent him rushing to the ground. He could not move. It was as if the intensity of the pain had taken over his body and was steeling his movements. The blood that poured unto his eyes blinded him momentarily and all he could hear was Bimbo's wails and pleas to be spared, followed by the sound of an axe breaking a bone, and another bone, and another bone. When he opened his eyes, the corpses of his mother and his sister lay before him. He screamed out and headed for a window. He could not open it, so he turned around and saw the man with the axe speeding towards him. As the man was two feet away from him, he threw the axe at Ola who swiftly ducked and the axe tore at the wooden window, breaking it into pieces and leaving the building open to the world. The man chased Ola around like a blood-thirsty vampire. All the while, people were struggling. Surprisingly, as the man chased Ola, nobody else had noticed the window – an escape route. Everything around Ola became a distant echo, a background noise drowned by the vision of the window he was headed for. Ola was able to trick the man into tripping over one of the dead bodies. Since all the other killers were focused on everybody else, he ran freely towards the escape and with all the strength left in him, jumped through the window. He landed on sharp stones that tore at his skin and nearly cracked his crown open. With adrenaline pumping into him at breathless pace, he ran away from the church building and saw that the street was empty. People had fled, he supposed. He had heard of this before, extremists clearing the streets and attacking churchgoers. He ran like a mad dog who had no destination. He looked back and saw two men chasing him, one with an axe and another unfamiliar one holding a large knife – perhaps the accomplice who had locked the doors from outside. His feet took on a new mystical importance, taking him far away from death while his pursuers thundered after him. He quickly turned to a corner and reached a road which led to various confusing paths. He saw a large building and ran into it, not checking who was there or what it was. It was after he had entered, breezed past some figures and hidden behind a wooden pulpit that he discovered that it was a mosque. Three heavily bearded-men wearing snow-white *jalamia* with cloths tied round their heads who had been praying before he came in stopped, walked towards the pulpit, tilted it and looked at him in bewilderment.

"Who are you?" one of the asked.

"Please don't let them kill me," was all Ola said.

A few seconds later, the two killers barged into the mosque. The men quickly tilted the pulpit back to shield him from the killers' view.

“Where is he?” Ola was not sure which of them was speaking. He was crouched in the pulpit, with slowed breathing and eyes shut. Dried blood had gathered around his left eye, making it hard for him to open it. There was a pause and Ola felt them coming towards him, he felt their breaths, the stench of genocide on their murderous skin drew closer to him and he was sure that the pulpit would be kicked away to reveal him anytime soon. His sweat pores became more fertile, giving birth every macro-second to oceans of sweat.

“Who? Allah is everywhere,” one of the men in jalamia answered, feigning ignorance.

“A little boy wearing a red shirt.”

“No such person has come in here,” said the same man in jalamia.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, of course,” another replied with the thickest Hausa accent Ola had ever heard.

“Let us search then.”

“How dare you search the house of Allah! How dare you desecrate His name with such acts of disrespect!” the third of the men in jalamia said. Cowed by the superstitious fear of offending a *mallam* in a holy mosque, the thugs left and continued their search elsewhere. As Ola heard their footsteps tell tales of their exit, he stood up gently and faced the men with gratitude written over his face, they met his glance with compassion and pity. Then, the world turned upside down and everything became black. Ola fell on one of the straw mats and felt himself drift away.

The next time Ola opened his eyes, he saw a nurse and a doctor at his bedside. He was in a hospital. They were asking him for his name, if he was alright, if he could speak, where he was from, what his parents’ names were. He merely looked at them, as if he did not understand a word. Slowly, their voices reduced in volume till he could not hear a thing. Their faces became contorted into blurry water-colour-like patches till they faded to black. He could not move his limbs. And in the absence of his ability to control any nerve in his body, the memories of the event came rushing through him. No, it had not been a dream. Lucky him, he had not died. He had been chosen by God to survive and relive the soul-shattering moments for the rest of his life. He had not been blanketed by the comforting nothingness of oblivion. In a fleeting moment, before his head crashed on a pillow and burst into an explosion of snores, he wondered how he would ever survive being an Atlas of agony forever. He had not died. Perhaps, he pondered, *that* was the real tragedy.

## **GLOSSARY**

Danfo – Nigerian slang for commercial bus

Gele – headgear

**Kanyinsola Olorunnisola** is a young poet and essayist who resides in Ibadan, Nigeria. He is an unrepentant believer in the power of words. His works have appeared on several national and international platforms such as the Sampad International Creative Writing Contest anthology, Kalahari Review and the BPPC anthology “Wind of Change”.