

HOPE AND THE THIRD HOOD: LAGOS EXPERIENCES

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Image Credit: Council of Foreign Relations

From the moment you knew your legs did not extend down the sofa when you sat up straight, from the time you realized your legs could not touch the floor when you sat in, you understood—at least, you believed so, how it meant to be unequal in this space, too small; insufficient. Suffice it to say, going by your shallow, green mind, that you might not have thought about this idea of inequality back then as a child, but you are sure the idea lingered somewhere in your infantile thoughts. You are also certain it were the tiny white flecks of ideas that precipitated, by no fault of yours, into what ideas you have now as an adult. And for a long time, even after your legs began to touch the floor and even extended over some length of the sitting room, you found yourself being exposed to the harsh knowledge of insufficiency; insufficiency in yourself, in the value of your thoughts, intelligence and in what you could get and would get later as a human in Nigeria. There was always the vague, unsaid knowledge that your two brothers and you would always get it less than anyone else, or less as everyone else around you. Your legs started, over time, to stretch across the parlours you lived in, and they sometimes went too far off. You would often indulge yourself with the thought that, perhaps, your legs did not grow any longer, nor was it anything close to congratulatory that it stretched so far. The problem—you would discover it was one, was that in time your sitting rooms just got smaller. They shrank to what you got in the third house.

You grew up with your family in three hoods. You are still in the third. And interestingly, this is the reality of many young people like you living in Lagos. Your friends lived in hoods, too. Virtually everyone you knew lived in hoods, just sometimes better or worse versions of them. You all grew up much later with books in you heads and poetry in your souls. The young people are idealists, folks who could not tell the difference between what obtained in the poetry you all wrote and what existed in real life, in the hood. They could not strike a balance, and so they found comfort in dreams. You were not much of a dreamer, never much an idealist, either. You could be accused of tottering between the lines, playing with the ideals of both. But it is difficult often times as a young man, being a realist. Realism is not exactly

a thing of the hood. Gambling, stealing, smoking weed and getting damn high, building castles in the air. *Dreams*. All a part of the idealism of the hood. It is what the hood thrives on—that rare ability to live in dreams. Hey, there is not exactly anything real about living in the hood, anyways. You just have to be real. But that's just your thought. You could be killed for it, for breaking the code of the hood. *Dreams*. You would not be too surprised, then, that the hood is made up of 87% of dreamers. And dreams work sometimes, too.

You young folks meet up in different places, random spots—churches, the university campus, in friends' houses, parties, etc., and you would rant and vent about everything idealistic. The earlier you know the dream of every young man here is to get out, the better for you. No one wants to die in the hood if they can help it. The hood-spawn intellectual who manages to do his first degree in Nigeria does not want to pursue his Master degree here. *Jand* is the goal, man. Everyone wants to *jand*—to school, to work and send foreign notes back home to the hood, to get a foreign wife and get a crisp green, to get a foreign husband and give birth to dual-citizenized mulattos who would return many years later and contest and win political positions in Nigeria, etc., etc. Man, some others go there to just die! They get their visas ready, scratch up some money, pack their bags and fly from MM2 to JFK airport only to die in the States. But, hey, it pays well when it is said you died in the United States. In that way, you die a more favourable death. You evade Atan's grasp if you're lucky to have your body buried there. Your family makes it a priority to tell the printer in Agege to include in your obituary flyer that you had died in the U.S. after "a long illness." Everyone deserves some honour even in death, don't they? The hood gives you very little of the honour you want.

It is then hard to be realistic here. You, like your fellows in other parts of the country, have been in poverty so long you have become unwilling lovers of it, and you show this in many subtle ways than you can actually agree with the point. In the quest to run from poverty, you keep chasing it. One hell of a vicious cycle. You never blamed the poetry boys. Many of them, like you, discovered early—too early, perhaps, how small they were in the realm of things. Many of them (you are pushed to say 'all') grew up with their legs shy from touching the other end of the four walls of their living rooms. When you grow up in such a place, realism becomes a hard knock to crack. And so the young folks find some bit of comfort in their heads. In their dreams, they build the future they want, whatever it is. They pray they make it out of here with their heads still stuck in their shoulders. They need to give those dreams life. But like hard nuts, that, too, is hard to deal with. It is difficult waking up every day after a night of dreams only to walk all the way up the street, socks on, boots up, to fetch water from trucks. It is hard to reconcile the difference between the kings they are in the dreams they had last night and the street urchins they become when they wake. And this does not change. There is the belief that the rigours of today would come handy in the future when things become better. The ability to adapt into this life gives them some sort of invincibility, a certainty that they can overcome life if they overcame the hood. After your tour through the rigours of the university and come out with a first class, you still return to the hood and

face what everyone else is facing, but only in a better way. But you face it nonetheless. Regardless, you still dream.

The first house, the one which takes the credit of being your first physical home, was built in a hood in Aguda, Surulere in the late 80s. The deal between your parents and the builder still exists in smoke in your head, but it was the house you were brought into on your coming to Lagos in the 90s from Abia State where you were born. The Aguda home was built in a hood, but a different one. In this hood, your young lives and nascent, impressionable sensibilities were shielded within walls. And were you three blocked from escaping that hallowed sanctity!? You could only leave when going to school in the mornings or when you had to get *zobo*, *fura* or *kunu* to enjoy a midday snack. An event you recall was in the early 2000s when a roguish street kid named Toheeb, a troublesome one indeed, had come to despoil your isolation by calling you three out to play. Your mother hated him for a long time after his unsuccessful attempt in liberating you which, you think, ended with your mother heading to his home to report to his mother to leave her boys alone. And so you lived out of the real world. You boys were only spectators enjoying the madness that played before your eyes: the midnight killings of Hausa traders right on Agboyin street, the mobbing of a thief or two in Aguda market, and rumours of a rape in Adetola. You were, however, not a part of it in any way. You would then forgive yourself for tottering later in life between being a realist and an idealist as many of your friends were. You were given a choice. These boys were not exactly. You did not see yourself having the moral right to judge the sensibilities of the fighters in the ring you only spectated over, their skins blistering with decades of unhealed wounds.

You leave the hood, but the hood lives within you. It never leaves, really. You just take it wherever you go: to Austria, Germany, Scotland, the U.S., U.K., Malaysia, etc., wherever your dreams take you. And some take it to the grave, too. The stain of the hood stays strong and thick, never washing off of you. They die hard like old customs. You recall that day in the first house as you munched on boiled groundnuts. The family could have been watching a football match, father, mother, your two older brothers and you. You cannot readily tell how they sat or where they did in the large sitting room. You, however, noted a strange phenomenon as you bit into the purple seeds and ate in piecemeal as though you had all of life's time to eat it—and you will not deny the thought might not have crossed your mind: your legs did not reach the floor but dangled above the red rug. You remember finding this rather odd, and to beat this existential oddity, you set about finding a solution by sitting over the edge of the chair. You would be damned to believe the problem solved itself that day. A child never truly understands the dynamics of *privilege* until it is taken from them and the rug is swept fast away from their feet.

The second house was smaller. You would soon discover the erstwhile ignored fact that you had never lived anywhere else besides Surulere. You moved to different parts of the local government, your houses shrinking and shrinking until you came to the third house. The second house was a curious case for study. It had no large, constricting walls and fences. Had mother and father

become too old to care? Had they become tired? Had they made the choice because there was no more money, or simply confident that the old regiment would still serve them? This was true to an extent. The three of you did not need a fence to stay in there, at least the times you were not playing football with other compound kids and breaking occasional glass louvres with your leather balls.

Unlike the first house, you had a good number of neighbours in the second, and you made friends. As a youngster in the first house, the only friends you made was Andy, son of a woman living not far from your house who always loaded your mother with praises on how she raised three "good sons;" and Chisom, a light complexioned girl who fetched water from the well across your fence, and whose visits you would deliberately let coincide with yours so you saw her and watched her smile as pure as the water you got. The sitting room in the second house was relatively smaller, and now your teenage legs could comfortably reach the seat facing you when you sat opposite it. Yes, you still were in the hood, but you were shielded by the residual privilege of money and good privacy. These you lost when you moved into the third house.

The third house was exclusive, the Third World Hood, the Hood of Hoods. And the house did not help this description much. It was as open and public as the earth on creation day, with more than a dozen households living in more than a dozen small spaces like yours. The houses were so close to themselves that you could hear, from your room, a neighbour's private noise if you cocked your ears well. Olaitan Odularu street was an exclusive cult bereft of the usual old intellectual boys who read poetry from their souls. There were just *agberos*, mechanics, robbers, *oloshos*, barbers and restaurant owners who filled the gutters with spoiled foods. There was a gin bar just outside your house, close behind a gutter where the gin drinkers urinated and sometimes excreted into. This hood stopped you from being a spectator and plunged you into the real deal. It presented afresh all you had missed in your almost three decades.

There is the unspoken need to adapt to this new house, to the bathrooms and toilets which are in one large smelly block, both row of cubicles divided by a narrow line perpetually filled with dirty bathwater. Each cubicle is for four houses in the compound, and it quickly becomes a messy business when a usually unknown user forgets to or refuses to flush properly or flush at all. Spoken or unspoken, curses fly in this third house. The first time you used the toilet, you recalled wallowing in vows to not stay here for more than a month. The sad, heart-breaking news is that we get used to everything, good and bad. Naturally, you fell in line. Now, when you use the toilet and bathroom, you are reminded of the morbid power of the human will to absorb itself into the most terrible conditions. And so every day, you find yourself pouring water from the large drum into two buckets: one for bathing and the other for flushing the toilet after your business. It is startling that you no longer see it as odd—however uncomfortable you can be of it, going twice across the line of neighbors' rooms to the toilet, half naked, your towel strapped around your waist; nor do you see it as strange brushing your teeth in public anymore. Here, you learn how swallowing your phlegm for the sake of decorum is not only prudery taken too far, but an action that amounts to

plain foolishness.

Your father returns early from work today. When he enters, the youngest girl greets first followed by the first daughter. Your father responds to them both. You wait seconds more before you greet him. He responds weakly, and you understand. He, too, like you all, is sad to be here. He no longer responds the way he did in the first house when the three of you would jump on him yelling, "Daddy oyoyo!" as you took his bags from him, expecting gifts of *suya* and Speedy or Digestive biscuits. The times have changed. You are no longer three kids but six. Izundu and Ebuka, your older brothers, have left home, but you stick with the kids to perhaps guide them in this new hood, to remind them of the first hood, that this home had it better; to give them hope.

You step out for a haircut, and the barber, Collins, an Igbo man of about forty, is ready with his clippers.

"How much?" You ask.

"Three hundred *only*, oga," he responds.

"That's too much. Take it down."

"Nothing I fit do. Na so e be."

"You no fit give us Christmas bonus, abi? You no fit do free cut for all?"

"I would have, but I never even see the money wey I chop."

"How much you chop?"

He shrugs, applying spirit to the blade of the clipper. He must have won big. No one reveals the small wins.

"Twenty-eight thousand. Small change."

"Yeah, it is." He missed the sarcasm and starts cutting your hair.

"Wetin man get for hand better pass the one wey him never see o. If you win bet, no think say you don get the money until you see the money for hand."

"Yeah, a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush." He considers this a while and continues talking as he cuts.

"I no go support make anybody gamble. I no go like my pikin to gamble. But this Nigeria go force you." You hum in support, listening to him attentively now. Collins is a man in constant need to let things off his chest. He is a man with vivid dreams. Besides, he is nice and polite, and so you listen.

"No be say I wan dey barb hair. You think say na barbing bring me come Lagos? Na visa! I dey go Austria next year." You ask why Austria and he says something about having people there.

"Na this barbing I dey use hol' body till next year and I go comot here. But

tell me, how much I dey make from barbing? I get wife and pikin. My friend wey dey Italy dey get 5k when him work for only eight hours. You know wetin that wan be for end of month? But how much I dey make from barbing? Life hard. Na why I dey gamble. No be say I like am, but at least e dey give me hope. When I play am, I go dey wait for when I go win. And if I no win, I go play again until I win. Na when man no get that kain hope him dey commit suicide. Gambling dey give me hope.”

His voice is just one out of a hundred here. You hear some, and you feel others with their negative or positive energies. The quest of hope takes many faces. To some, the hope of the next swindle or robbery keeps them going. To others, the visa lying in their bag—an assurance of a brand new life elsewhere, gives them hope. Hope is central in the psyche of the Lagos hood, in the country, really. Hope is a badge, and you wear it proudly because it is the only thing that keeps you going, living.

Days later, Munachi, the youngest girl sits on the chair in the small sitting room, her feet dangling from the chair.

“Sit out, baby,” you tell her. “Let your legs touch the floor.”

She is puzzled at your strange request, but she obeys. To you, to us, hope is in knowing that after this third hood, there would be another one, a better one, equipped, once again, with the capacity for us all to keep hoping, to keep dreaming.



Nzube Nlebedim is a Nigerian fictionist, reviewer, journalist, dramatist, poet, critic, and editor. He holds a BA in English Literature from the University of Lagos, and has radio journalism training from the Nigerian Broadcast Academy. He has been published on Counterclock Journal, The Journal, Kalahari Review, The Lagos Review, The African Bard, YNaija, African Writer, Children, Church and Daddies; Liberation Now, and The Shuttle. He is the founder and chief editor of *The Shallow Tales Review*, an online literary magazine that curates African content. He lives in Lagos, Nigeria.