



KEREKOU

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When the passenger aircraft carrying one hundred and seventeen travelers crashed, Garba was glad.

Planes constantly groaned low over his neighborhood on the outskirts of Lagos, flowing into the landing pattern as they approached the local airport. Garba had often prayed that one of them would fall within sight of his home so that he could visit the wreckage and look upon the expensive Woodin and brocade clothes of the unconscious rich.

It happened near dawn; he was in the rift between sleep and wakefulness when he heard the sound through his window. “Sssh!” his girlfriend said fearfully, grabbing his fidgeting hand to her hip. “Armed robbers.”

He raised himself up on one elbow, blinking in the velvet dark. The crashing bang of the aircraft sounded to him like the noise of earth-sized china breaking.

“It’s a plane!” he whispered, jumping out of bed. “Crash!”

As he switched on the flashlight on top of the file cabinet, where they kept their fashionable clothes, and hurriedly pulled on his stone-washed jeans, she asked in a hopeful voice if he was going outside to urinate, scared he would get into trouble if he went to the crash scene.

“Urinate what?” he hissed, buckling his belt and pulling an empty bluebonnet bag from a nail on the wall. “I’m going to see the plane,” he said. “Continue sleeping.”

The smoking plane was a few streets away, near the swamp where restaurant owners often dumped spoilt *afang* and *jollof* rice. The

softening sky was the color of burnt gold. Garba saw people milling at the edge of the ruined airliner.

A small cutlass swayed in his bag. He had not been surprised when it occurred to him to take the cutlass, which he would wield as a poker; what remained confusing was how he had missed the signs all these years: all along his actual intention was to rob the dead, not stare at them.

He was not Nigerian. But was he now a kind of dormant-terrorist because he wished a planeload of Nigerians dead? His mother was, after all, a full-blooded Nigerian, even if his father was a former cow trader from Benin who had taught himself Ifa divination.

The aircraft was hacked into five parts. One wing was on fire. A thick coil of smoke rose from the wing. Garba smelled burnt rubber and jet fuel, and the coppery stench of flaming flesh. He prayed he would not see any badly burned bodies as he joined the bystanders.

Some men grimly watched the scene, as though they wanted to help but needed direction. Others were already looting the dead. Garba was thrilled, because he could fall into the easy company of these accomplices. He knew several of them from his neighborhood.

Baby-Cockroach, who ran a small canopy rental business, had brought a long ladder and was climbing down from one of the plane's smashed windows, clutching a heavy looking brown bag. Don P, who held a forked branch, walked along the broken left wing. Mandela, the local DJ, was pulling the shoes off an ejected passenger who lay in a heap of insulation fluff. Everybody screamed:

“The owners of money are dead!” “Instead of them to take bus!”

“Look inside their briefcase for pound sterling!” “American dollar!”

Garba felt a jolt of rapture.

“When did you get here!” he screamed, moving toward his friends.

They hailed him, “Garbaaaaa!” with scattered shouts of laughter. Baby-Cockroach asked him, with a wicked smile, how he liked the bonfire heat from the burning wing.

This put him in a jesting mood, and he scratched his paintbrush moustache and playfully cuffed his wide sideburns, for which he was nicknamed after Gabbar Singh, a character in an old Indian movie.

“I swear to God who made me,” he shouted, drawing out his cutlass and his flashlight, “the heat and smoke are much but I love the smell of money.”

He stepped into a section of upturned fuselage, hitting plastic and knotted cables out of his way. He walked across the ceiling of the shadowy cabin. A lifeless passenger hung upside down, trapped in his seat by his safety belt. Angular shapes searched bodies in the aisle. Garba heard a fierce scuffle of two men fighting over a gold chain.

The smell of death was here, something like the stench of onions buried in humid earth. He was unprepared for it, and felt the urge to turn away and run home. He had to be at work at 9 a.m. after all. But he had come here to root for booty, and it would be a shame if he did not meet opportunity with boldness.

With his cutlass he nudged the pocket of a man built like a shot put thrower whose belly ripped open above his belt. Nothing. So he unbuckled the man’s warm belt and threw it in his bag. The man’s shoes were missing. The luggage was gone, too.

Garba wondered when the fire service would get here. Not for a while. They probably didn’t have any water. As for the police, they were likely still asleep at their desks. Going into the cockpit, he struck gold. His flashlight beam found the pilot slumped backward on the ceiling, which was now the floor. The pilot’s face was covered in soot, and his crushed right arm sloped across his bloodied mouth, as though to protect himself from the onslaught of death. Garba read his tag: Kwesi Amoateng. A Ghanaian. For a moment he stood and gazed at the body, hesitating as though he waited for the crack of a race pistol.

Then he was peeling off the shiny Rolex and the belt. He pulled off the suede shoes. He stripped the titanium-white shirt with its golden epaulettes, and the creased poplin trousers, stuffing everything in his bag. He ran from the plane, sated. The watch looked expensive and would fetch a good price. The uniform was great couture for the church bazaar. This was the first crime he had committed since coming to Nigeria, and he gladly put the blame on his dysfunctional childhood.

Outside the crowd had swelled. People gripped their shoes in each hand, ready to bolt with lightened feet at the first breath of an explosion. Garba spotted two friends leaving: a young man called Incomplete

Injection (because he was rumoured to have escaped the federal psychiatric hospital, Uselu, without completing treatment), and another nicknamed Thank-God-For-Daniel, who had received a motorcycle through the poverty alleviation program of a governor named Daniel.

He waved his cutlass at them, then jogged to where they waited in the crowd. Garba praised his friends' better luck: Incomplete Injection carried a heavy-looking laptop bag while Thank-God-For-Daniel swung two denim-blue YSL suitcases cheerfully. They headed home. Thank-God-For-Daniel heaved one of the suitcases on his head.

"Do you know what crashed the plane?" Garba asked.

"I can categorically tell you," Incomplete Injection answered, with an eager look in his eyes, "the plane crashed because of the fraud at the International Aviation College in Ilorin. ATPL-3522 is a drug addict."

Garba wondered if Incomplete Injection was even more lunatic than supposed, an invalid whose brain sat in a morass of its own perfidy. He asked himself how the man consistently held his salesman's job.

The three friends joked about buying Hummer jeeps once they converted their goods. Garba put the cutlass away and grew serious. He said his room would wear a new coat of that expensive Dulux paint his girlfriend wanted, and he'd buy studio time to complete the twenty rap songs for his demo. Music was his true passion. He was going to join the hit-parade, and then take his rightful place at the top.

Incomplete Injection said he would buy Garba's album upon its release.

An anxious looking woman approached them on the snaking footpath. She asked Garba if the charcoal smoke that colored the sky came from a crashed plane.

Thank-God-For-Daniel discreetly slipped down his bag, as Garba nodded. The woman's ironed burnt-umber kaaba gown and the immaculate white lace wrapper she tied at her waist convinced Garba that she was well-to-do; and immediately he was offended by her superior luck. She was probably the kin of the lately dead. He saw how his friends hid their bags behind their bodies like clever three-year-olds, and felt annoyed that her presence made them timid.

As she zipped off in the direction of the accident, he scolded them for cowering before a rich outsider.

“I won’t lie, I thought she could also be a journalist,” said Thank-God-For-Daniel, heaving the bag back on his head. “I kept waiting for her to ask where we got the bags.”

“I wish she had,” said Garba in a threatening voice. The group filed down the path. “You’re acting absurdly,” said Thank-God-For-Daniel, stopping briefly to catch his breath. “If she had wanted to search your bag, what would you have done? Are we not thieves?” Garba glared at him and made a fist. He seemed ready to punch his friend. The three halted, jamming the path’s narrow throat.

Garba said with malice, “I would have slapped her. She is an... ah! I would not have allowed her!” This was not true and he knew it. Although he was perfectly capable of violence, like any adult in the world’s population, he excelled at reacting to violence rather than provoking it. But their recent adventure had made him giddy and he found himself playing the role of aggressor. What was there to lose?

“If I didn’t have a job to go to at nine,” he explained, pointing to his wrist, “I would have waited for the commissioner of police to arrive, and I would have stoned him!”

“Stoned him very well,” said Incomplete Injection, nodding. Thank-God-For-Daniel warned Garba to quit it, Incomplete Injection might actually carry out his wish; he wagged a finger at Incomplete Injection and advised him not to listen to Garba.

“Listen to me,” said Garba, enjoying his influence. “You don’t have a normal job like mine. You should go back there and wait for them. Once the commissioner of police arrives, you should rough-handle him. Slap him! Shout, stupid rich man! Do it!”

“Rough-handle him,” repeated Incomplete Injection with an indeterminate look in his eyes.

“Stop, Garba!” yelled Thank-God-For-Daniel. “When police catch him and find out he stole from the passengers, they will torture him and he will mention our names.”

The man of the moment gazed back toward the scene of the accident, as if he yearned to return there. Garba laughed.

He grabbed Incomplete Injection’s shoulder and said mockingly, “Don’t let your leg do faster than your brain, sir. Don’t go back there to fight police, or any étranger.”