



Genesis

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Inspector Egbeni stretched forth his two hands, and a sergeant locked the pair of bangles around his wrists. He felt what thousands of criminals and innocent citizens had felt a countless number of times when they ran afoul of the law under his jurisdiction, or when they directly crossed his path. The iron felt both freezing and suffocating. He tried to adjust his wrists into some zone of comfort, but each movement only tightened the metal, bruising his flesh. It hurt, so he gave up the effort.

He sat, not on the seat he would have chosen for himself, but on the one they compulsorily ordered him into. The atmospheric and social climate in the courtroom was hot and suffocating, leaving him no choice but to find an internal anchor to accept his reality. His mind raced in an endless, aimless loop, a frantic traffic of thoughts serving no practical purpose. By and large, the proceedings drew to a close, and he stepped down from the dock. He waited for a few more minutes for the sergeant to usher him to the vehicle that would convey him to his new home—not one of his personal cars or a hired ride, but a high-sided van with an open iron cage built specifically for people of his new status.

In that agonizingly long wait that stretched into an eternity, he finally found the discipline to anchor his mind, directing his thoughts backward to start journeying in a more predictable direction, which was the genesis of this position and how he had come this far. Like a film reel spinning backward, he saw the day he purchased his police recruitment form. He recalled the exhausting struggle to submit it, and the frantic networking required to secure influential signatories. He cursed that day and the entire endeavor.

Then came the day he had to submit himself for initial screening for the job at the State Headquarters, Ilóbah. He felt the detention, the struggle in the intense queues, and the bribes slipped to officials for express attention. He had almost died of exhaustion under that



unforgiving sun, and the phantom pains of those days of enlistment returned to haunt him—entirely unaware that decades later, under an even more unforgiving sun on a dusty tarmac, a single, desperate moment would seal his fate forever.

Then came the memories of success—the news of passing each of the three grueling rounds of interviews. Yet, try as he might under his present condition, he could not relive the joy of those breakthroughs; his mind stubbornly clung only to the ugly, suffocating struggles. There were the days of raw suffering after his training, a period of trial and error before he finally mastered the beat, rhythm, and unspoken body mechanics of the job. That was when he truly understood where survival led.

That was when the real hustle started—the endless maneuvering to be assigned outside to the lucrative lifelines of roadblocks, both legal and illegal. One had to "settle" superiors to secure a spot on those tarmacs. It was not that anyone genuinely loved standing under the elements, but the road offered a means of survival far beyond the severe limitations of a government salary. In a continuously bastardized economy devastated by maladministration, living purely on a basic salary was a suicide mission. Because policymakers and executors cut corners, eroding basic societal values, corners became inevitable for everyone else. The police force was left to fend for itself, even as immense societal expectations intensified. Then came the family obligations—the relentless cycle of marriages and burials that demanded financial participation or engulfed him directly.

The first of these cultural milestones to exert tremendous pressure on his finances was his own marriage. He had entered the holy estate of matrimony through the humble, quiet door of cohabitation when he was thirty-two years old. However, the union did not remain quiet for long. Over twenty-seven years, the household swelled with life, transforming his once silent home. They were now six in total—a family that had grown into an enterprise of its own, dependent entirely on his singular income. For years, the pressure mounted on him to formalize the institution and legalize the union that had produced the six great blessings who would carry on his name long after he left the stage.



But society viewed his quiet life as a moral deficit, painting him as an exploiter. His wife, Elizabeth, would frequently return home from women's meetings in tears, weeping bitterly as she relayed her humiliation.

"Even girls I senior in the village are pointing fingers at me," she had cried out during one heated evening, throwing her wrapper to the floor. "They stand in the church and boast because their husbands honored their families. But me? My father, my mother, and my community have received not a single kobo of bride price on my head. I am just a tenant in your house!"

The mockery followed him to work. In the office, his colleagues never missed an opportunity to tease him about his "credit marriage status." Even on the road, younger officers would deliberately raise their voices, ensuring their taunts carried over the noise of passing traffic.

"Look at some men," a junior corporal had jeered one afternoon while leaning against a patrol vehicle, winking at the others. "They are enjoying marriage on credit. Eating a father's food for twenty-seven years without paying the price of manhood. That is not marriage, o—that is broad daylight robbery!"

Whenever that spirit of gossip and trouble-making poured through the ranks, Egbeni would quietly withdraw into his shell like a tortoise, swallowing the bile of his shame.

The humiliation reached a boiling point, becoming the standard gossip of the station and the roadblocks. Even his parents-in-law eventually turned against him, issuing a chilling cultural warning: "Anyone who refuses to honor us with our daughter's bride price in our lifetime will never receive honor or a dime of bride price from his own daughters' suitors."

As if to validate the curse, their eldest daughter returned home from her National Youth Service assignment following her HND graduation, introducing an up-and-coming banker as her fiancé. Having fallen deeply in love, the young couple desired to build a home through the proper cultural and legal channels. It was a beautiful dream—the pride of any parent—but it collided directly with an immovable cultural obstacle.



Custom demanded a strict sequence: a daughter's head could not receive a bride price if her mother's dowry remained unpaid. For a father to collect money on his daughter while his own wife remained unhonored was an abominable taboo—an act of low-mating that insulted the maternal lineage.

Elizabeth wasted no time in delivering her ultimatum. "This time will not pass me by, Egbeni," she declared coldly, her eyes fixed on him. "Even if it means you robbing a bank to clear your debt, you will pay my dowry. I will not let you use your poverty to block our daughter's destiny."

Egbeni understood that if the mountain would not come to Muhammad, Muhammad had to go to the mountain. He instructed the young suitor to give the family time to investigate his background—a standard protocol—while privately telling his wife that they simply needed a window to put their own house in order and qualify themselves for the honor the young man was bringing.

Desperate, Egbeni called a meeting with a few trusted colleagues—men who knew how to keep their mouths shut but possessed the grit to face financial mountains. They did not sugarcoat the reality.

"This race you are about to run is no short relay, Inspector," his senior sergeant told him plainly over a bottle of local gin. "It is a financial marathon. But first, you must brave 'Marriage Town.' Go to your in-laws and demand the list of requirements. Just remember, you don't approach an elder's house with empty hands. You must go with wine, a few witnesses, and enough cash just to wedge the breaking of kolanuts. Money speaks before a human being even opens his mouth."

With the water now rising to his throat, Egbeni took the plunge. Closing his eyes against the sheer enormity of his financial inadequacy, he approached his wife's family. The resulting list of demands was heavy enough to make a giant faint. He took the document back to his closest duty-post confidants, who urged him to take the bold step. They grumbled about the excessive demands, as people always do, but reminded him that culture was an absolute monarch.



The real question was practical execution: how could a man with an empty pocket fulfill a list running into millions of naira? Seeing that he had committed himself by collecting the document, his colleagues gave him the standard advice of the force: do what everyone else does.

They steered him toward the Police Cooperative. Egbeni applied and successfully mortgaged his future, borrowing an amount equivalent to five years of his gross salary, structured to be deducted over the next fifteen years, just to clear his wife's dowry. Even those millions proved insufficient, but he consoled himself with the hope that wedding gifts and cash-spraying well-wishes from friends would bounce him back to financial stability.

The process was excruciatingly painstaking because of the compounding institutional demands in Ilóbah. One could not simply perform a traditional wedding and rest. The traditional ceremony, with its heavy spending on the collector's list, had to be preceded by an expensive introduction. After that, statutory provisions demanded a formal trip to the registry for a court marriage. To complicate matters, if the bride belonged to a mainstream Christian denomination, the Church demanded a full ecclesiastical wedding under its own strict tenets. The Church required holy vows, but those vows inevitably culminated in lavish receptions and heavy social entertainment that bled the couple dry.

It was a predatory cycle designed to keep the poor in a state of permanent financial servitude. In this society, a man could never secure a bank loan to launch a business or build a house; yet, institutional systems would gladly grant him a massive loan to empty his entire future into weddings and funerals. The traditional community and the religious authorities left the common man no liberty to choose a simpler path.

To choose between a traditional marriage and a church wedding was a false alternative; to abandon either was to lose one's standing as both an African and a Christian. If a man performed only the traditional rites, the Church treated him as a sinner living in wedlock; if he did only the church wedding, the community labeled him an irresponsible thief. No modern bride would tolerate a stripped-down ceremony anyway; she would interpret it as a lack of love and appreciation. These were the harsh realities Egbeni faced and succumbed to five years prior.



For five years, he had been making steady, painful progress, living off a decimated income—a financial existence he termed his "death account." He had successfully cleared five years of the debt, leaving ten more salary-free years ahead. Then, the inevitable tragedies of life began to strike.

Earlier that year, his father passed away. To pay for his share of the burial expenses and to entertain his visiting colleagues and friends, Egbeni was forced to borrow again, tacking on three more years of salary deductions. His reality adjusted: he was now facing thirteen years without a take-home income.

Then, three months later, his mother-in-law died. Her family issued a fresh demand for the traditional "in-laws' greeting"—a mandatory cultural fine and festival cost levied on sons-in-law to officially mourn a deceased matriarch. The standard required to match the family's list was astronomical, gulping an additional eleven years' worth of salaries. It was a cruel mirror image of the marriage list he had faced five years earlier; the extra year of salary required this time was simply the brutal tax of inflation on the local economy.

In total, Egbeni was now looking at twenty-four years of service without a single monthly salary. The timeline exceeded his remaining years in the force, meaning the debt would inevitably devour his gratuity and pension. Yet, his immediate concern was not the distant future, but surviving the next three weeks and getting the crushing weight of the burial demands off his neck. The roadblocks, he reasoned, would take care of daily survival and provide the financial windfall needed to offset the immediate funeral costs.

He was actively adding and subtracting these variables of survival, mentally calculating numbers and burying his anxieties, while manning an illegal roadblock three weeks ago.

With an already loaded assault rifle in hand, he tried to browbeat a commercial bus driver who refused to comply. In the heat of the argument, his finger, tensed by twenty-four years of accumulated debt and social desperation, pulled the trigger. The bullet struck a young student—a promising youth who was merely trying to escape dropping a five hundred naira bribe for an imagined traffic offense. That single, cheap explosion was what brought him to the dock.



By the time his mind returned from its long journey to Genesis, the heavy iron door of the Black Mary van welcomed him on board. It was a lifelong journey into inaccessibility. It was ironically and inevitably setting him free from the accumulated salaries in debt and the suffocating expectations of an ever demanding society. As the engine roared to life, he closed his eyes, offering a solitary prayer that God might forgive him for the blood of the innocent Amaoge, wasted for nothing.