

Tomorrow

Josiah Ikpe

In Brooklyn, the morning comes too soon. The air becomes covered with thickness. The cold then transforms into suffocation. But however, the day becomes warmer as time flies by and as the clock ticks into midday. He still hasn't gotten familiar with how the weather works over here. As he stands on the terminal of the subway station waiting to board a train to Manhattan, he thinks of home. He thinks of Nigeria and how the weather works over there. He thinks of Lagos. He thinks of how busy and noisy the streets would be at this time. He thinks of how hazy the early morning city would be — workers racing to their respective destinations and offices, students hurrying to schools, bus drivers endlessly calling out to passengers at the top of their voices, and roadside vendors displaying their wares on any available pavement and platform. And most importantly, he thinks of his mother.

What would she be doing at this time? He asks himself. Perhaps, she would be sitting at the edge of her bed, at first, weighing past memories and streamlining what the future would present. And then, offering her prayers and petitions to the one above. Ever since papa died or even way before he died, she has been a figure of perseverance and an icon of hard work. She believes that the synergy of both could and would produce great successes. She would say that a wealth gotten without hard work will not last long or that a wealth gotten too quickly will vanish before time. She believes in the hopeful prospect of tomorrow. And she believes that the morning of everyone differs.

When he was still a boy, he would come back home from school grumbling that his food wasn't as rich and savory as compared to his classmates. He would further give instances and examples of how everyone's food was better than his and what his mother should do to make his more presentable and a bit enticing. And the next day when his mother would fail to do all he had requested, he would cry and mumble and even refuse to go to school that morning. On some days she would plead with him, promising him endless things, and other days she would whip him and say that he wasn't like his older siblings and that jealousy leads to covetousness and then to destruction.

Over time, he had gotten used to that discipline instilled on him and his older siblings by his mother. He had been built, or rather, forced into being that person that his mother wants him to be. On some occasions, he had thought of doing otherwise, but the heartaches and constant pains it would bring to his mother flushed such desires out of him. Sometimes he had wondered what it would be like to be the opposite of how he had been brought up, of how he had been trained, and what his desires had been fashioned into. He had imagined himself becoming that and doing that which was termed morally and socially and religiously wrong. He had even imagined the horror that would bring to his mother's face and how her tears would wash clean all the dirty linens in their neighborhood.

As the train screeches to a stop, he adjusts the straps of his bag and then walks into the train. He walks down the aisle and sits by the window. A white man holding a plastic cup, perhaps in his early forties, sits right next to him. He peeps into the cup and wonders why anyone would decide

to drink this early. He decides to ask the man if it is real alcohol, but later resolves not to. Whether it is real alcohol or not does not concern him, he thinks, he is in a different social context anyways, and his opinion or judgment more or less does not matter.

Good morning, he says to the man instead.

Hello, the man replies back. Where you headed? The man asks.

To Manhattan precisely, he responds back.

A college student? The man inquires.

Yes, he says, I'm a graduate student.

You're new to the States, I suppose? The man asks, clenching the plastic cup tightly.

Yes, I am. I arrived here only two weeks ago, he says, feeling a bit weird that the man would care to ask.

What's your major? The man asks, this time staring right into his eyes.

English, he says, English.

The man, already staring at him, stares even more. He could feel the man's gaze on him. This makes him a bit uncomfortable and quite unsure of what next to say. He adjusts on his seat, brings out his phone from his pocket, and types his pin digits, his hands trembling slightly. Maybe the man would shout at him or, even blurt out some kind of racist words, he thinks. But that isn't where his fear is. It is the man's look and sudden blankness that frightens him. The man's face, his look, and how his nose sits are stunningly similar to that of the visa interviewer's face at the American embassy back at home.

He remembers his first day at the American embassy and how words became too heavy for him when the interviewer's questions lingered above the air. That morning before he left for the embassy, both he and his mother had prayed that the interview would go well and that any question he would be asked, he would respond to them quite speedily. But as he sat facing the man, the words wouldn't form. At that moment, he remembered the exact words that his mother had said. *Lord, God, this interview that my son would be going for this morning, Lord, let it go well. Let the visa be given to him quick quick. And any question the people there would ask him, let him respond to them very fast and very well. He will not stammer and his mouth will not cease to function, Amen!* Much to his amazement, his lips parted and the words took form and he responded to each question spontaneously. Later on, as the man congratulated him and handed him the green card, he came to acknowledge that his mother's prayers had been his savior.

You know, I never had the wealth or chance to go to college, the man says, his words come out smoothly, as if his tongue had flattened every word. I dropped out of high school. Finishing was actually a war for me. I just had to get my GED much later. Thank goodness I did, if not it would have been way tougher for me, the man says, his countenance undecipherable.

He looks at the man and wonders what GED means. He would look it up, he mutters to himself. Later he'd come to learn that GED is more like the American equivalent of the Nigerian GCE or SSCE.

Why? He whispers. Why didn't you go to college? He asks, feeling uncertain that he didn't ask the question the right way.

Well, things that we don't understand happen, the man begins, certain things that we have no control over happen, and for me, not going to college was something I had no control over. It was a decision that was not mine to make. Things were bad, and that itself showed that going to college was out of it, the man pauses, and then stares into vacancy.

With the corner of his eyes, he looks at the man and wonders how life would have been for him if he hadn't gone to the university. Back in Nigeria, the employment chances for university graduates were slim and the competition for one was an eyesore, and a person with just a secondary school degree was totally out of the option. But here is America, a land of hope, where the system in various ways has a place for each person.

However, beyond all of that, is the air and fluency of how the man speaks. It is the confidence the man exhibits as the words fly out of his lips, and the grace in which his chin moves when he speaks that puzzles him. Here is a man with just a "secondary school" degree speaking with such confidence, and here he is, a university graduate, currently running a master's degree in English, not sure of his words or even how to pronounce them. Well, the cultural settings of both countries surely played a role, he mumbles to himself.

The man then tells him that America is a land suffused with hope and with promises. The man tells him that every aspiration and desires that he brought with him to America would surely be fulfilled, only if he keeps at it. He says that with only just his GED he is doing well and that he just purchased a condominium in the heart of Brooklyn. He further says that honesty matters in everything that one does, and that whatever it is, honesty and hard work should be his emblem.

Why are you heading to Manhattan? the man further asks.

First, he tells the man that he would do as he said. He tells the man that his mother always says the same thing back at home. Then he tells the man that he is going to Manhattan for the first time. He also tells the man that he is going to check out the job that his friend had gotten for him in a café down the East side of Manhattan.

The man looks at him and asks, Work and study, right?

Yes, he says to the man. He tells the man that that is the only way he can afford to pay the rest of the tuition fees and to gather some money and probably pay back the money his siblings had lent him for his travel expenses.

The man acknowledges this and says that that is good. He tells him that American offers so many opportunities to migrants, to students, and to all her citizens. He says that the opportunities are wide and diverse. He also adds that as much as America provides these opportunities, she also

has her own flaws. He then tells him about people who came to America with great aspirations but got carried away by her activities. And about people who got lost in the system and thereafter couldn't find themselves.

As the man says those words, he believes that his mother would agree with the man, and with his words. Even before he left Nigeria, his mother had advised him to concentrate on his studies and his books. She'd told him to attend church regularly, and not to go about chasing and kissing girls anyhow, as she had seen in most American movies. He had laughed and promised to do as she said. But now, as he sits right next to this man, on a luxurious train with well-fitting leather seats, he doubts if he would do as he'd promised. To promise is one thing and to fulfill is another. Moreover, this is his life, and making mistakes should be part of it. He should be allowed to make a mistake and possibly learn from it. How on earth would he be the man that he wants to be if his decisions are always founded on people's advice? No doubt, some mistakes cannot be recovered from, but those that could be learned from, that he should be allowed to make.

The man continues and tells him to concentrate on his studies and work. He says that everything has its time and that using one time for another means replacing it with another time. He says that time and opportunities when utilized effectively here in America guarantee a stable and successful future. He further tells him that shit would happen but it wouldn't define him and state who he is. Bracing oneself up for disappointment is more or less how to handle them. He then tells him that tomorrow is pregnant.

Those last few words the man said, strike him. This time he believes that this must be his mother inhabiting another human body. The same exact words, the manner in which they are said, and the same countenance thereafter. His mother often says those words. She would say that tomorrow is pregnant. It is the certitude and assuredness with which she says them that makes him to always believe.

He nods to the man. He believes in his words. He believes in his mother's words. He believes that his tomorrow is pregnant. Before he could make any attempt to formally thank the man, the loud rustling of the train fills the air. Immediately, the man rises to his feet and says that they're in Manhattan.

What's the name? the man asks.

Kenneth, he says, my name is Kenneth.

It's nice to meet you, Kenneth. I'm Joe. The man says, stretching out his hands towards him.

All mine, he says, the pleasure is all mine. He smiles at the man, receiving the handshake affectionately.

Well, I've got to go now, the man says. It was nice speaking with you, Kenneth.

Likewise, Joe. Thank you for the time and for the conversation, he says, locking eyes with the man.

Take care then. The man says and walks away.

He stands up to his feet and watches as the man walks straight up and out of the train. As he himself makes his way out of the train, he thinks of his job prospect after he's done with his graduate program. He imagines himself being successful and rich. He imagines himself living in one of those stately apartments with large spaces for the kitchen and the living room. He imagines himself owning a nice ride. He imagines his mother's face when he invites her over to America for the holiday. He also imagines her dancing and glorifying God for his breakthrough and then questioning him why he hasn't yet gotten a woman for himself.

His mouth curves into a smile. He gets down from the train and sees his friend, Steven, strolling towards him.

Josiah Ikpe loves the Lord. He is a writer, one who is constantly evolving, and a book lover, born and raised in Lagos, Nigeria. Right from childhood, he had always nursed this crazy fantasy of being a character in books, and writing is just one way of seeing to that. Ikpe's work has been published by the *Kalahari Review*, *Nnoko Stories*, *the BALA Africa Initiative*, *The Journal of Expressive Writing*, and is forthcoming in *The Lanke Review*. He is presently a Law student at the University of Ibadan.