

THE LONG WAY HOME

Written by Uno

I am hoping the doors are still open. Or maybe there is a delay. Maybe today the driver is not as punctual as usual.

I ran toward the bus stop on the slippery, winter-hardened ground.

“If I fall now, wahala go dey ooo. God forbid!”

For a second, my mind drifts. Then I snap back — breathing hard, coat half on, my bag tightly held in one hand. The contents must not scatter on the ground. Not the documents. Not the small hope inside them.

Not today.

At the intersection, the crosswalk light refuses to cooperate.

“Wait. Wait,” it seems to command.

I stand there helplessly as the bus glides past on the other side of the street. These drivers are like clockwork. No delay. No mercy.

As it passes, my eyes meet the drivers for a brief moment. Not apologetic. Not empathetic. Just a look; the kind my father would give me when I failed to listen and faced the consequence of my own delay.

I feel twelve years old again.

The bus disappears.

Now I have twenty more minutes to stand in this wicked freezing temperature. The cold enters quietly first through the fingers, through the ears then settles in the chest like it has paid rent.

Winter flattens the city. Everything looks the same under white. Sometimes I think it is beautiful in a distant way. Sometimes I think it is a lie, covering everything until nothing stands out. Streets repeat themselves.

My phone dies somewhere between two bus stops.

I walk longer than I should, pretending I know where I am going. Pride can make you walk extra blocks. The cold presses against my face like it is personal. I think about sitting down. I don't.

Inside my folder are résumés, my life reduced to bullet points, subheadings, measurable outcomes. Nine years of building something summarized in black ink. Paper light as a feather. Corners are already bending.

"You should drop some off in stores," Rod, my neighbour, told me. So, I do. The first shop I enter, the warmth embraces me before anything else. Then comes the silence. The kind that measures you before you speak.

The man behind the counter does not look like me, although he too must have crossed oceans at some point. When he finally speaks, his accent is different. I relaxed without knowing I was tense. There is something comforting about seeing another outsider behind the counter.

"Apply online. The manager is not available." His voice is neutral. Practiced.

He does not look angry. He does not look kind either. Just tired. Polite in that rehearsed way that protects him from stories like mine.

I want to explain that I am serious, that back in Aba my shop did not lack customers, that my hands were trained, that I supervised workers, paid salaries, and solved problems. That I am not starting from nothing, only starting again. But he has already looked past me. So, I leave.

Outside, I slid the résumé back into my Akwete print tote bag like it has not already failed.

Paper is light.

Rejection is not.

Back in Aba, Nigeria, my hands were never idle. My sewing machine responded when I touched it the steady hum like conversation between us. Fabric moved under my fingers with obedience. Measurements became confidence. Customers called me by name with respect.

There, my skill had weight. Here, my hands feel suspended. Waiting for permission. Waiting for someone to say, yes, you can begin. Skill without tools becomes memory. Memory, if left alone too long, begins to sound like exaggeration.

On my way back, I retrace every step carefully. I cannot afford to get lost now, not with my phone dead and daylight already thinning.

A bus appears suddenly, headlights cutting through the grey. For a second, I almost laughed.

Is this the right bus? I hesitate only briefly. Better inside a warm bus going somewhere than outside pretending I am fine.

I step in. The driver turns slightly. It is the same man from the bus I missed earlier.

“Nna, kedu?” he says, eyes resting on my Igbo-themed tote bag. For a moment I forget the cold.

“Odima,” I reply. He smiles wider. “You are new.” “New as a newborn baby,” I answer.

“I saw you running this morning,” he says. “Where were you going?” There is no judgment in his voice this time. “Just to some shops in the central mall,” I say. “Dropping my résumé. Hoping.” He sighs — not tired like the shopkeeper but knowing. “Times have changed. Almost everything is online now.” I nod slowly.

“Have you heard of the Global Gathering Place?” “Are they employing?” I ask quickly, hope rising again before I can stop it. He chuckles gently. “Not employment. Settlement help. Guidance. Resources. Go there. It will make this place easier to understand.”

Easier to understand. That sounds bigger than a job. Advice from a countryman thousands of miles away from home. On a random bus. On a random day I almost gave up and sat down. This cannot be a coincidence.

The bus slows. “That is your stop,” he says. “Dalu,” I reply as I step into the snow. He waves.

Time does not move in straight lines anymore. Some days stretch long and empty. Some days surprise you. Some days you miss the bus. Some days you find your people.

I do not want to be known only as an immigrant. Or as someone unemployed. Or as someone waiting. I want to be known as someone who kept moving — even when the map disappeared. Even when the snow covered every landmark.

The city is cold.

But it is not heartless.

What are the odds that you meet an Igbo bus driver in Saskatoon on the day you begin to doubt yourself?

I walk home slowly now. Not rushing.

I may not know exactly where I am going.

But I know I am not lost.

And I am still here.