

YOUR LIFE JACKET IS UNDER YOUR SEAT

By-Bianca Odumegwu Ojukwu

Today, 10th September is the anniversary of an incident which took place in 2006, (which coincidentally was also a Sunday), and which is recorded in my diary as the day Lanli died. It was also the day one of our popular politicians (who I will protect his identity for privacy purposes), learnt a bitter lesson. The politician was based in Abuja where he had been seriously jostling for a political appointment. He also had a guest house in one of the highbrow areas of the Anambra State Capital City where he used to stay whenever he came in from Abuja for the weekend to attend the usual functions like weddings, thanksgivings, funerals, etc. He had this sleek looking and obviously imported, purebred Alsatian that he loved to show off to his friends. The politician's neighbour, and our mutual friend was a certain Mr Ugonabo who was a small-time businessman engaged in buying and selling at Onitsha. Before he bagged his most recent executive appointment this very politician used to be on very friendly terms with Mr Ugonabo his neighbor, visiting him next door from time to time to share some glasses of palm wine, even to play the card game known as 'WHOT' in those days which he enjoyed so much, and to engage in the usual banter about happenings in town.

Once his latest political appointment was announced and he assumed his duties he gradually started pulling away from Mr Ugonabo. First, he would come into town with the usual convoy fanfare and would make no attempt to contact Ugonabo. When Mr Ugonabo would walk over to the Politician's compound as he used to do, the security personnel stationed there who came into town with their boss would refuse him entry, telling him to 'call Oga' to instruct them to allow him access. To cap it all, he stopped taking Mr Ugonabo's calls.

Mr Ugonabo complained to my husband Ikemba Dim Ojukwu, about this and when he broached the topic with the Politician, asking him if there was an issue between them, the Politician made some excuse about having a hefty work load and a tight schedule, and that besides, he knows that the man might only be calling to disturb or pester him about giving him 'contract', and that he didn't want to deal with that kind of stress. Things would, however, take an unusual twist a little over a year later when, on this ill-fated Sunday, after his usual weekend



visit, the politician and his motorcade set off on the return journey to Abuja. His compound which was always manned by an able-bodied gateman who doubled as a caretaker and the fierce looking purebred Alsatian, was also firmly secured by an automated gate. On this particular occasion, once the politician and his motorcade left the premises, the gateman ushered the Alsatian into a room in a bungalow behind the main house which doubled as a kernel and promptly hopped on an 'okada' to go visit some friends in town. It was the barking noises coming from the Politician's compound later that afternoon that caught Mr Ugonabo's attention. He looked across from the small balcony of his duplex and he could see smoke rising from the building in the politician's back yard. He panicked when he shouted the gateman's name repeatedly and no response came. His phone was also switched off. Mr Ugonabo then tried several times to put a call through to the politician who as usual, snubbed his calls. Since he could not reach the Politician, he was left with no other choice but to call the politician's sister who lives in Lagos and when she answered, he relayed what was happening to her.

The sister called the politician who by then was halfway to Abuja and he took the call. She told him what was going on in his premises and that the caretaker was nowhere to be found. It was at this point that the politician was faced with the prospect of having to return to his vomit by having to call, Mr Ugonabo, the same man he had been shunning all the while and who he had even refused to take his earlier calls to alert him of the crisis. It had dawned on him at that moment that Mr Ugonabo, being his neighbor was closest to the scene. His other options would take too long to get to the house. According to Mr Ugonabo, the Politician called him about a half hour later and after the rushed niceties the Politician begged him to use a ladder or find some other way to scale their common wall which was quite tall, so as to be able to enter the compound and see what could be done. He requested him, most importantly, to save his prized Alsatian dog which he had by then been informed, was barking inside the back room of the building. The Politician also called an official to alert the fire department of the development. Other neighbors and passersby had noisily congregated in front of the imposing automated gate but clearly clueless at what steps to take besides the usual alarmist exclamations.

Mr Ugonabo on his own part was torn between what he later recounted to us as his 'conscience' and the need to take his revenge after the way the politician whom he had considered (albeit erroneously) to be a friend, had treated him since becoming more 'important' and even as he tried to alert him of the fire situation. Luckily Mr Ugonabo's 'conscience' got the better of him and he managed with the help of a rope and ladder held up by some residents of the neighborhood, to scale the common wall to get into the politician's compound.

By this time the entire roof of the bungalow was on fire, but he was able to trace and unlatch the door of the room where the dog was confined. The dog, Lanli, now whimpering limped out of the room. It had sustained burns coupled with extensive smoke inhalation and died not long afterwards. It took a while for the fire truck to show up, but the automated gate posed a major challenge and the gateman who knew its code and how to operate it was still nowhere to be seen. The small gate door which was locked with a padlock was broken but the main gate remained sealed and the fire truck could not come into the compound. Within the hour the entire bungalow was razed by fire. Fortunately, the main house was spared.

The politician had been making frantic phone calls to Mr Ugonabo throughout this time to ascertain the situation on ground. Yet, this was the same man whose calls he

had shunned, for no just cause, for an entire year! He was unhappy when he was told that the bungalow block had burnt down and even more traumatized to learn that Lanli had perished as a result of the fire. When we called to commiserate with him, he lamented that Lanli would be difficult to replace as well as most of his vital documents, records, legal documents and files which had been packed away inside one of the rooms in that block. He complained that the fire could have been put out before it became an inferno if only his caretaker had stayed at his duty post or someone had accessed the premises shortly after it started. But then, whose fault was this? After all, Mr Ugonabo (his neighbor and erstwhile friend) had tried all he could to alert him but as usual, he snubbed the calls on account of his 'I'm a big man, I don't need your disturbance' Syndrome.

The sad reality today is that most people once they assume important positions become unreachable, even to bosom friends and relatives, and hitch on to newfound 'status friends', on the assumption that old friends and many of those who used to relate with them definitely now need 'something' from them. But when in crisis or in emergency, especially of the domestic kind, it's often these friends and relatives they have relegated and detached from, that they can turn to for emergency interventions. This, they often realize, only when it's too late. Whenever one gets on a flight and the safety procedures are announced prior to take off, you are always informed that 'Your life jacket is under your seat'. I think this episode sums this up rather well. It is oftentimes those who you overlook or disdain that might end up being the ones close enough and available to intervene on your behalf or to save you from unforeseen and unfortunate circumstances....much like the life jacket in the event of a flight mishap. Treat them with a little more consideration. They are not all necessarily always looking for a favour from you. Many folks, and most especially many of our government officials are guilty of this deplorable attitude and are quick to forget that they are on transient official missions. They need to learn a thing or two from this incident because they rank an impressive A1 when it comes to jettisoning old friends and acquaintances upon assuming any 'important' and even 'not so important' official position in the delusion that only they, hold the keys to an imaginary treasure trove.

Keep in mind, Sir (and Ma), that reality is always subject to change and your potential life saver. that one that you had all the while considered irrelevant and bothersome, might just be right under your upturned nose.