

HAPPY BOY

Sitting on the dusty floor, with back against the wall and knees propped up, shivering in the dark, Happy Boy could see the sky, but there were no stars, no moon, only gloomy clouds moving indecisively. There were noises coming from the lower parts of the uncompleted building, raised voices of other shady, illegal squatters. Then, silence fell for a while, followed by suspicious whispers. Intermittently, pleasurable moans from rogue lovers would waft through. Uncompleted buildings like this one could be found all over Fair Weather.

At that moment, something small, wrapped in black polythene landed on his arm. He observed it closely, unwrapped it in utmost haste to see that it contained half a loaf of dry bread. Looking to the side, in the direction from which the bread was tossed, he saw Go-Slow staring down at him.

“Eat it! We will move out soon.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Voraciously, he began munching the bread without paying any attention to the fact that it may have been a few days old. In no time, the bread disappeared. Despite the biting cold, he felt strengthened. As he stood up, he walked over to Go-Slow, who was staring down through a window opening, which overlooked the unfinished balcony and the empty, night-time street. *What could he be thinking, or is his mind as empty as the street?* The little boy thought.

“When I was a little child like you, I usually runaround in a neighborhood, just like this one”

Happy Boy looked at him eagerly, excited to hear that bit of information. Go-Slow rarely talked about his past. Perhaps, some experiences are better left buried. Slowly, Go-Slow turned around and rested his gaze on Happy Boy, whose eyes twinkled in the dark. He tossed his half-smoked cigarette through the window space and watched the light brighten momentarily, and then die on its way down—brief moments of illumination, then darkness. *This is the way of all life,* Happy Boy thought.

“As we set out, when I turn left, you turn left. When I turn right, you turn right. If I stop moving, you stop too!

“Yes sir!”

“Do not look back; do not look to the left or right. I don’t want to hear you make a sound, simply walk on the same path I walk.”

“I will walk just like you, sir.”

“Alright, let’s set out.”

To the sound of barking dogs and unsteady illumination of distant flashlights from local vigilante, man and boy walked the quiet streets in the piercing cold, doing well to keep away from the major roads. Dressed in his famous, striped, over-sized shirt and shorts, Happy Boy quivered uncontrollably as he struggled to keep pace with the fast-moving man. Years of roaming the streets of Fair Weather as an errand boy for anyone who cared had equipped him with sufficient knowledge of the neighborhood. However, this dark night, with Go-Slow making quick turns into street corners and moving so fast, he felt at a loss.

Soon enough, they were walking in an open field. They had left the cluster of houses that was Fair Weather behind. Happy Boy heard the sound of running water. He realised they were already at the stream. The stream, as the major landmark, separated Fair Weather from other communities to the south. He had never gone beyond this stream; never had reason to. His abductors, who brought him and a few other children from the north, were shot at by rival gangs, and everyone had to run away. Running as fast as he could, sleeping in the open fields at night, and begging for food in the day time, Happy Boy walked his way for many days and weeks until he arrived at Fair Weather.

His heartbeat accelerated, as Go-Slow bent low to roll up the legs of his trouser. Go-Slow had on rubber boots that reached all the way to his knees. Without a word, the slim, tall man deftly picked him up, slumped him across his shoulder like an empty bag of grain, and began to cross the stream. In the slow-moving waters, Happy Boy could see the moon bobbing gently. The waters came just above the ankles of Go-Slow. *What fate awaits me? What is Go-Slow up to?* The boy thought.

He had only known Go-Slow for two months now. The older man had saved him from a group of bullies in a quiet street at Fair Weather. Since then, he had followed the man everywhere, running errands for him in return for a meal a day and a place to sleep without getting roughened and beaten up by bigger boys. He had never seen Go-Slow engage in theft, or waylay innocent passers-by for their phones or belongings like other petty criminals occupying the uncompleted building. Everyone knew to stay away from Go-Slow. He was vicious and notorious for making people disappear. ‘Disappear’ was his favorite word.

“Unhand the boy immediately, or will you lot prefer to disappear and never be seen?”

Aside brandishing a vicious-looking dagger, that was the only thing Go-Slow said to the bullies for them to unhand Happy Boy that fateful day. Although Happy Boy had never actually seen where Go-Slow made a person disappear, a secret, high-profile syndicate was suspected to be behind the numerous cases of kidnap and murders, and in the small underworld of Fair Weather, all fingers pointed to Go-Slow. He kept to himself, didn’t say much, but was hardly seen at night times. Sometimes, he would disappear for days, and while he was gone, the news would be rife of a recent kidnap or murder. No one ever had the courage to confront him. Nearly 7ft tall, his hair falling in locks, thin eyes, thin lips, and coal-black complexion, Go-Slow had no known family.

After fording the river, climbing up a little hill, and taking two turns through narrow bush path, they soon arrived in front of what looked like the entrance to a market area. The brilliant beam from a flashlight blinded them momentarily, and they both raised their hands to protect their eyes.

“Who’s out there?” a thick voice behind the beam of light roughly demanded.

“Go-Slow,” Go-Slow confidently responded.

The light instantly lowered to the ground. A man in what looked like a security uniform walked up to them. Happy Boy instinctively stood behind Go-Slow.

“What do you want? and who is this child?”

“Let them pass. The boss is expecting them,” another burly voice, concealed in the darkness, interrupted.

The security guard observed Go-Slow suspiciously. Straight-faced, Go-Slow walked right ahead, unperturbed by the security guard's scrutiny. The place wasn't a market after all. It was a mechanical garage. The light from the moon was sufficient enough for Happy Boy to make out the shadowy shape of unusable cars pillaged for their relevant parts. Junk cars were piled, one on another, and in-between the skeletal remains of dead cars, they walked, Go-Slow and Happy Boy, following a big bearded burly man who wore a faded fez cap, washed-out, baggy jean trousers, military boots, and a very light singlet. In no time, they arrived at an iron door nearly concealed by scrap metals and old worn-out electrical wires. Their guide suddenly turned around and roughly ran his hands through Go-Slow's pockets and trousers. They had no idea what he was searching for. Aside a jack knife which he quickly confiscated, he found nothing. Feeling satisfied, he looked at the little boy suspiciously, shook his head slowly in affirmation, turned around, and gave a single hard knock on the door. He waited for 3 seconds, then he repeated the knock; waited another 3 seconds, then supplied four knocks in quick successions. In no time, the cranky sound of metal against metal filled their ears, and the door flew open, unbolted from the other side. The burly man stepped inside, while Go-Slow nudged Happy Boy to follow him.

The duo stepped into a badly lit room large enough to accommodate a little over a hundred persons. There were two malevolent-looking men at the door, who were dressed in mostly black and had on over-sized, leather jackets, with riffles hung over their shoulders. They regarded the new entrants coldly. Under the lone flickering light bulb, Happy Boy could immediately see little boys about his age sitting on the bare floor in a corner of the room. They were about 20-30 boys, all poorly dressed and looked weary. Some had no shirts on. An atmosphere of terror hung over them. Although he couldn't see their faces clearly, Happy Boy felt their eyes on him like a warning. Away from them, on a huge pile of car wheels, a man sat. The smoke from his cigarette blurred his face. Through the smoke, he took a long, indifferent look at Go-Slow, glanced at the watch on his wrist and smiled. Happy Boy recalled the face. This was the same man in the house that Go-Slow had taken him to. The man was dressed in a black T-shirt, black, fitting jackets, blue, jean trousers, and hard, military boots.