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Manifest.

Illustrated essays on building things that last.

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ESSAYS TO COME

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01

My Father's Jacket

I was fifteen years old, and I was wearing my father's suit jacket.

It was too big for me in every direction. The shoulders sat somewhere below my own. The sleeves swallowed my hands if I let them. I had rolled the cuffs once that morning, then thought better of it and rolled them back, because a man does not turn up his sleeves at an interview, and that day I had decided I was a man. I was applying to be an art director.

A few months earlier I had been moving around with a couple of older guys who worked for a man with a production company. He was looking for animators and illustrators, for anyone who could draw and meant it. I could draw and I meant it, so I found a way in. That is how I ended up working on what I was told was the first animated music video made in Nigeria, for an artist called Lagbaja. I was a teenager with my hands on something that had never existed before. Nobody had to explain ambition to me after that. I had already felt it move.

The advertising idea came to me secondhand. My father had a friend who, as far as I understood it, worked somewhere as a graphic designer. I never learned the details. What I took from him was a single phrase, art director, and the sense that it was a thing a person could actually be. Then one day, reading the newspaper, I saw it printed in an advert. A company called Tequila wanted an art director. I read it the way you read your own name in a crowd. I applied. I genuinely believed I could do the work, which at fifteen is its own kind of qualification.

They called me in.

So there I was in my father's jacket, sitting in a room full of people who, to my fifteen-year-old eyes, looked about sixty. They were probably thirty. They found me funny. I could feel it, the warm amusement of grown adults around a child who has wandered into a room children are not meant to be in. I sat with it. Then they handed me the test, and I did it without thinking too hard, the way you do things before you have learned to be afraid of them, and I left.

The call came the week after. I was stunned. I went back.

This time I met the managing director. He looked at me for a long moment, then asked how old I was. When I told him, he laughed. Not a polite laugh. A big one, the kind that comes up from somewhere real. But underneath it he was already saying the other thing, the thing I had walked in hoping a stranger would say out loud: that there was no question I was talented. He quizzed me. He asked whether I had a laptop, what I had, what I could actually do, and I explained all of it.

Then he did the most generous thing anyone had done for me up to that point. He told me no.

Tequila was the wrong place for me, he said. It was more of a PR and brand outfit. What I needed was somewhere that would foster the thing he had just seen, train it, sharpen it, a properly creative shop. He had one in mind, inside his own network, and he sent me there.

The company was TBWA. That is where I got my first job, as an intern. That is where it began.

I have thought about that laugh for years. At fifteen I heard a man laughing at a boy in a jacket that did not fit. Later I understood it differently. He was not laughing at the jacket. He was laughing at the distance between how little I had and how much I was asking for, and then he closed that distance himself by pointing me somewhere better than the place I had aimed at.

Nobody starts with the right clothes. You borrow a jacket that does not fit, you walk into a room where everyone is older than you, and you ask for the job anyway. The asking is the whole thing. Almost everything I have built since came from the same move, repeated in better-fitting suits. A boy in a jacket too big for him, saying yes, I can do this work, long before he has any real evidence that he can.

02

The Calendar

I still have the calendar. It is more than twenty years old now, maybe closer to twenty-five, and I have carried it through more offices and houses than I can count. I still have it.

At TBWA my first real account as a lead creative was Virgin Atlantic. The airline was coming into Nigeria, opening the route, and I was the first art director to work on the launch. There were senior creative directors above me, people who had done this many times before. But I was the one who got to put his hands on the brand from the beginning.

Somewhere in the materials they handed me was the brand manual, and with it a calendar, both produced by a company in the UK called Spark Creative. I have forgotten a great many names from those years. I have never forgotten that one.

I opened it and something in my head rearranged itself.

I had never seen work like that up close. The level of detail. The discipline in every margin and every rule. The way nothing was accidental and nothing was wasted, and yet the whole thing felt effortless, even the calendar, which is the kind of object most companies treat as a giveaway and forget. This one had been made by people who refused to treat anything as a throwaway. I sat with it the way you sit with something that is quietly informing you the bar is far higher than you thought.

That book gave me an appetite I have never lost. After it, good enough stopped being good enough. I began to believe that the way a thing is made is part of what it means, that craft is not decoration applied at the end but evidence of how seriously you take the people who will receive it. **Beauty made properly is a form of respect.** I learned that from a calendar.

I should be honest, though. The reverence never made me precious.

When Virgin restarted the route from Lagos to Port Harcourt, I wrote the line for it. Port Harcourt carries a certain local reputation, its women said, with affection, to be a little wild, and I could not resist. The headline read: *who says there is no Virgin in Port Harcourt*. It was tongue in cheek and it knew exactly what it was doing. It worked. It is still one of the campaigns I am fondest of.

The two things have always lived together in me. The hunger for work made as beautifully as that Spark Creative calendar, and the cheek to write a double meaning and run it in public. Craft and mischief. I have never thought of them as opposites. The same attention that makes a margin perfect is the attention that makes a joke land. Both come from refusing to be careless. Both come from refusing to be boring.

I still have the calendar. I take it out sometimes. It still expands my head.

More to come.

Manifest. Illustrated essays on building things that last. Written and illustrated by Ola Olowu. Set in Helvetica, written between Lagos and London, slowly and on purpose. A book you finish in a weekend is rarely worth the weekend.