



The Gambler

by Adetokunbo Abiola

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When Bamidele turned 40 in June, his wife, Iyabo, showed him Nigeria's latest promotion as a birthday gift. The promotion consisted of just three lines on her cell phone. Bamidele remembered all he had to do was send a text message costing fifty naira to the organizers for a special mix of caller tunes. Each text message had a code and the winner was the person who had the selected number. He got a prize of one million naira, much larger than Bamidele expected.

Bamidele was excited because it was his first opportunity to be a millionaire. He worked as a photographer in Akure, in a narrow dusty street, in a house that belonged to a retired civil servant. His assistant, Gbemisola, was a pleasant-faced girl with dark hair resembling thin sticks, and she went out to snap photographs, except Sunday, when she attended service at the First Miracle Church of God in Oke-Aro. She was amused over Bamidele's interest in the promotion, and she handed over a manual where Bamidele could study the tricks of the promotion, promising to introduce him to Owolabi, a friend who won it six months ago. After going through the details of the promotion again, Bamidele opened Gbemisola's manual and browsed through it.

He read stories about men, women, and children becoming millionaires by spending as little as fifty naira. A text message reply said they were winners and entitled to one million naira. After they went to the office of the organizers, they were given the money or a *tokunbo* Toyota Camry. Some of the women narrated stories of how they participated in other promotions and did not win. A man said a promoter tricked him to participate in one for nine months. "I spent eight hundred naira everyday," the man said, yet he did not win a single dime. Another woman said a marketer told her the only way she could become rich was to participate in his promotion. The man had shifty eyes and wore a frayed coat. She said she was so desperate she spent a lot of money on the man's promotions yet did not win. Now she owned a Toyota Camry after she participated in the latest promotion for just one week.

Bamidele could not blame himself for wanting to participate in the promotions - and no one would blame him. Winners at the promotions were regarded as superstars. They appeared on television during NTA's 8 o' clock news, smiling as they took delivery of one million naira or a Toyota Camry. They gave thanksgivings at churches, and the congregation erupted with cheers while the band boys beat at the steel rims of their drums with excitement. Even photographers took part in the promotions. Bamidele remembered one of his rivals for jobs was said to have been lucky. He was named Remi and had the ugly face of a hound. He drove a Toyota around town and was said to have laid the foundation of his house.

Apart from this, Iyabo quarreled with Bamidele for not taking part, saying he wanted to make her a laughing stock on the streets of Akure by remaining poor. She reminded Bamidele of Tunde, his classmate in primary school. Tunde was an 'area boy' at Old Garage and pinched young girls on the

buttock at night. Tunde joined a truck carrying pumpkin to the North then boarded a lorry taking him to Niger Republic. Crossing the Sahara through a caravan of camels, he arrived Spain and acquired a work permit by saying he escaped the religious riot in Kano that killed two hundred people. He came back in May loaded with money, repaired the roof of his former church and feted everyone for two weeks. No one remembered he trekked across the Sahara Desert. Inspired by this and other stories, Bamidele pushed his camera aside and decided to take part in promotion.

A few friends advised him against his intention. One of them was called Kola. He was a tailor and rented one of the shops along Bamidele's street. When he learned Bamidele wanted to invest his money on the promotion, Kola called him to a corner and told him the promoters were like money doublers who collected money from hard working people like Bamidele and left them broke.

When he got home, Bamidele told his wife Kola's comments, but she would not hear of it. She said there was nothing wrong with a 'promotion approach' to their problem. She rendered a monologue on Kola, how illiterate and lazy he was. She brought up the issue of how Kola delayed them for days when he refused sewing their Christmas clothes after they paid him; or how he did not sew the dress of her beautiful cousin, Fumilayo, and called her a prostitute because she painted her lips, delaying her so much she stormed his shop in the rain and demanded for her dress.

After discussing with her, Bamidele decided to contact at least one winner so he could learn the secrets about winning the promotion. He remembered Gbemisola promised to link him with Owolabi and went to meet her. But Owolabi traveled to Accra, so Bamidele questioned Gbemisola for any scrap of information.

"Luck?" Gbemisola said, "No, it's not luck. Owolabi was not a lucky person. Mostly, I think it's because he had vision."

"Vision?" Bamidele asked, "Look, if Owolabi had vision, you can tell me something about his vision. There's no reason why I can't get it from you. I need it so I can win this promotion." He grabbed Gbemisola by the hand. "Tell me about his vision."

Gbemisola, amazed by Bamidele's interest, opened her mouth in wonder. Finally, she smiled and said, "Owolabi played without losing hope. He sent text messages once every two hours." Bamidele took a piece of paper and wrote down the information. After he got everything he could from her, he went home to meet his wife.

She stood up when she saw him. She had been washing the children's clothes. She had a saying, "When there is hope, there is life." She was a devoted member of a Pentecostal church, a choir member, but she believed people could never become prosperous if they worked hard. She also believed Bamidele could only become successful by taking part in quick-rich schemes like pool staking, lottery, and promotions.

Staring at him with her hard eyes, she said, "Send text messages once every two hours? Then you have to do that. I don't see anyway else out of the problem. And talk to more people." Bamidele nodded. If he did he would not reconsider his methods and retrace his steps often like a prodigal

gambler. And he would know the steps he should avoid.

So while other photographers in Akure toiled at their work, trying to make ends meet so they could take care of their families, Bamidele, assisted by his wife, by the process of elimination, came up with some secrets for winning the promotion. Bamidele jotted down every information, not allowing any fact escape his notice. He and his wife guessed there were very many things to do when it came to winning. So they divided their information into sections. They decided to be systematic about their moves to prevent failure. They agreed they would discuss each section after trying it out.

"It remains one thing," lyabo said. "We must meet a native doctor so he can fortify you to win."

Bamidele met a witch doctor living close to their house. His name was Ogundele. He had a badly groomed beard and his mouth stank of bitter kola and local gin. People said he made his clients drink magic cow urine. When they did, they became successful. Women became pregnant if they were barren. Armed robbers were successful when they carried out a robbery operation. Accountants were successful when they stole from government coffers. Sometimes, Ogundele advised his clients to sleep by the Ala River, the biggest river in Akure, for seven days. After the exercise, the evil spirits troubling them were driven away, or the witches and wizards standing in their path to progress were chased away.

"Won't I die?" Bamidele asked the witch doctor after he recommended Bamidele should drink cow urine for seven days.

Ogundele assured him he would not die.

"Instead, it'll deliver you from the spirit of failure," he said. "You'll become a candidate for wealth and prosperity."

Confined to his room, Bamidele drank the cow urine for seven days. The liquid tasted like milk gone sour, and it smelled of urine, cattle, and goat. Every time Bamidele drank it, the liquid burned its way down his throat before it settled in his stomach. It made Bamidele smell of urine; the odor was so disturbing lyabo spoke to him from the other side of the room while his children wore questioning looks on their faces. Within two days of drinking it, Ogaga vomited twice; and when the family dog smelled the green substance on the ground, it barked and bolted from it. An unwary hen that pecked on it grew ill at the end of the day. lyabo, who knew what happened, cleaned the vomit before the children asked questions and clued in to the urine. At the end of the week, Bamidele looked as thin as a broomstick.

He rebelled when Ogundele said he would have to sleep by the Ala River for seven days.

"If you don't, you won't get prosperity and wealth," the witch doctor said.

When Bamidele told his wife he would not sleep by the river, she would not hear of it. She sneered at Bamidele and said she was a laughing stock for sticking with him, and yet he did not want to solve his problem. Did he think she was Job, fated to be patient and long-suffering? She did not threaten

him but he had to do something or he should forget about the marriage.

Ala River was small and bordered by thick trees, grasses, and swamps. At night, frogs, crickets, and other insects made an unbroken music lasting till the morning. The banks of the river smelled of a combination of fish, dead bodies, swamp, human feces, and other indecipherable materials. It was chill-cold in the night, and people rumored ghosts, goblin, and water spirits moved along the banks in the dark.

Bamidele slept on the bank at night. When the June breeze blew over the river, rustling the leaves of the shrubs and bending tree branches, Bamidele shivered with cold, pulling his thick coat over his body. Frogs and toads croaked from different areas; and when a bush dog barked too loudly, Bamidele jumped to his feet. Unearthly sounds came from the nearby bush, and Bamidele looked at it, expecting a ghost or water spirit to emerge and attack him. Had it not been he was desperate to win the promotion, he would have given up the idea of sleeping by the river.

After the seventh night, Bamidele was ready for the promotion. He bought a hundred recharge cards, loaded them into his cell phone, and sent the text messages to the organizers. The process took much longer than he expected, and he felt sick and weary when he finished. An unexpected sense of fatalism overwhelmed him, and he realized the experience he prepared for - relief, exhilaration, joy - had nothing to do with the promotion. He put the cards into his bag and kept his cell phone at a corner of his room.

He remembered his disquiet when he threw the bag under his clothes rack. He remembered it for years afterwards, the sensation unseen conspirators would push him off course, thwart his move so he could fail, fail, fail.

Despite this, week after week, Bamidele spent most of his money to buy recharge cards for the promotion. By the end of the first month, he started acting differently. He no longer gave a monologue, as soon as he saw a new promotion, on how people were ripped off. He did not mumble promotions were a symptoms of a larger malaise of laziness and search for miracles. It was as though he stood more chance of winning if he did not criticize promotions.

And he waited for the text message announcing him as winner. His heart thumped every time he heard a phone call. He also listened to Positive FM every hour whether his name would be announced on air. When he came back from town, he sat close to the television. But the hours turned into days, and days into weeks. His name was not called and he was filled with worry.

Meanwhile, he faced other problems. His youngest son, Muyiwa, complained, saying the family ate cornflakes, ice cream, and Nasco biscuit before Bamidele started buying recharge cards. Now it drank pap for breakfast, ate tasteless catfish soup for lunch, and ate nothing for dinner. What was happening? His eldest son, Lola, said Bamidele used to pay his school fees on time but had not paid for the present term. He said his teacher threatened to drive him from class if he did not pay by the end of the month.

One day two months after Bamidele began his new job, he came home late, the thunderstorm outside bending the branches of the guava trees in the

courtyard. He went to his clothes rack and saw his bag on the floor, the hundreds of recharge cards spilling to the floor. He stared at them, shocked. He did not know he bought so many cards, that he spent so much money on the promotion. The grandfather clock chimed quietly. Bamidele felt fear go through his body as he stared at the cards. He shuddered as though he was hit in the heart by a bullet. He felt he might have a heart attack if he continued to look at the cards. As he turned away, he shook from head to toe, not knowing when he pissed in his pants.

When he got to the office the next day, he asked Gbemisola, "Do you have any other ideas about the promotions? Anything at all. I've noticed my recharge cards are piling up. I'm losing ground." Bamidele saw nothing but a blank look on her face. "Come on, anything at all."

Gbemisola sighed. "There's something else Owolabi used to do," she said. "Perhaps it's what made him win."

"What is it?" Bamidele asked. "Can't you see I'm desperate here?"

"Well, I notice that Owolabi would buy many recharge cards. Before he used any of them, he would take them to the church for blessing. I once saw him do this. At the end of the week, he won the promotion. Though I can't say for sure, but I'm sure when God blesses the recharge cards they work."

Bamidele nodded, pleased. He stood up, patted Gbemisola at the back, and looked at her. "The only way it's going to work is if I carry it out." After he left her, he brought many cards from his pocket, went into an inner office, and prayed over them with a bible. In the evening, he went to the church for the first time in two years – he was not as faithful as his wife – and looked for the pastor. When he got to his office, Bamidele was told he had gone to the toilet. One hour later when he did not appear, Bamidele stood and went to look for the assistant pastor. But his secretary told Bamidele he was praying and did not want disturbance. Desperate, Bamidele ran back to the office of the pastor but saw him driving away in his Toyota. As he stood watching the car and thinking this was another example of conspiracy, the assistant pastor called him for the prayers. Bamidele gave him a small offering after the exercise and went to the front of the church. A bell rang somewhere in the compound. Bringing out his mobile phone, Bamidele loaded it and started sending more text messages. As he did so, he felt confident the promoters would choose his code and name him the winner of the promotion. After he finished, he left the church grounds, whistling as he made his way home through the gathering darkness.

Shortly after Bamidele entered his room, he received a text message from the promoters. At first, he did not believe it, but after looking at it for a few minutes, he knew it was an invitation from the promoters he should come to their office the next day. His wife, excited, gleefully said the trick to success was the seven nights Bamidele spent by the side of the Ala River. Bamidele said it was because he took the cards to the church and prayed over them. Both were delighted and agreed they would exchange the promotion money for the Toyota Camry, lyabo's dream car. They would hire a driver and sit at the back seat like VIPs, giving commands to the driver and dismissing him if he disobeyed them.

He would wonder for years after the subsequent events whether the world did not conspire against him, whether there were no forces around him that

could identify him, and even if they could not, forces that located him and made it their business to thwart every move he made. Bamidele feared unseen forces, the reason he recoiled at the mention of witches and wizards.

The organizer's office was in a large white three storey building at the center of Akure. Canopies and tents stood in front of the building. All around men, women and children milled about while some of them sat on the white chairs placed under the canopies. Staff of the promotion company wore yellow vests and black trousers and walked about the premises. Bamidele smelled coca cola, buns, and cakes in the air.

Watching the scene, he was convinced he would be given the award. Consequently, he smiled, went under the canopy, found a chair at a convenient spot, and sat down. He took a brochure from one of the passing girls and read through it. According to the document, the promotion was meant to increase the number of millionaires in Akure.

As Bamidele's dream of winning and owning a Toyota soared, one girl served him buns and a bottle of coca cola drink. Soon the master of ceremony, who also wore a yellow vest, began to read the names of the winners of the competition. There was a main and many smaller winners. The main winner was a dwarf who wore trousers patched at the buttock. Immediately his name was announced, the crowd erupted, and the standby musician hit the steel rim of his drum. The dwarf's wife leaped out of her seat, ran to the microphone, and embraced her husband.

A man who sat close to Bamidele won a giant television. A man next to him won a ceiling fan. Many people did not win anything. The master of ceremony graciously presented Bamidele with a cheap rubber basin, telling him tomorrow was another day, that the moment of triumph for the loser would come. Filled with disappointment, Bamidele returned to his chair and sat down, listening to comments made around him.

One came from a dark complexioned man called Ebalu. He had been buying recharge cards long before Bamidele started. He bought at least fifty recharge cards daily, and his bedroom was half-filled with them. Ebalu fasted and prayed every day so he could win and become a millionaire. Despite his efforts over many months, he did not win a pin.

Another comment came from a man named Kunle. To win, he became a born again so his sins would be washed away by the blood of Jesus Christ. He then pledged a huge donation for the repair of the roof of the church if he won and climbed the mountain at Idanre three times. Just last week, he bought recharge cards worth ten thousand naira and sent so many text messages the skin of his forefinger peeled from constantly pressing the buttons of his phone Yet he did not win.

There was a third person, a widow called Fatimatu. She took a loan so she could buy as many recharge cards as possible. She then joined the choir of the Saint Joseph's Catholic Church so the blessed Mary may take pity on her and make her become a millionaire. In fact two days ago, she fasted the entire day, not taking food or water, yet she did not win.

Bamidele learned thousands of other people took part in the promotion, their only passport to wealth and riches. Far less than one per cent of them won,

while the rest ended up losers. One man, angry at losing month after month, packed his recharge cards into a polythene bag, stormed the organizers' office, and threw the cards on top of the tables. He started scattering the chairs and breaking glasses on the office windows as though they made him lose the promotion. Policemen were called to hurl the man into a cell.

After the event, Bamidele went home, his ego bruised and his dreams shattered, the cheap rubber basin abandoned at the organizers' office. His wife was not at home, having gone to the market to buy foodstuff for lunch. As Bamidele lay on his bed, he spread his hands over the pillow and stared at the ceiling. Behind him, afternoon shadows slid across the chairs in the room.

Bamidele's one coherent thought was to stop buying recharge cards and taking part in the promotion. But he realized if he stopped he stood no chance of winning the one million naira and owning his wife's dream car. He agonized over the next step to take.

But sometime after, his children came to his bedroom. His eldest child asked him when they would start eating cornflakes, ice cream, and drinking tea again. Muyiwa said they were always hungry in the evening when there was no dinner, that he heard noises in his ears, and that he was the laughing stock among his friends because he told them he no longer ate *jollof* rice and fried chicken. He said his teacher caned him at school because his sandals were old and spoilt.

Unable to shake away the guilt coming from his children's comments, Bamidele decided to take his bath, so he took off his clothes and headed for the clothes rack. As he hung them, he saw the bag, the used recharge cards spilling out of it to the ground. He wanted to ignore them, as he usually did. But when he saw their large number he was shocked. He shuddered as though he was hit in the heart by an invisible bullet, and he put his hand on his chest. But he could not control his panic, and he split inside with confusion, his jaw becoming tight with tension. He thought he was going to die and go to his father's house in heaven. To prevent this, he held to the door to the rack, working his way to the bed. He sat on its edge, stared ahead of him, not bothering to touch his trousers because he knew he had pissed on them.

As he stared at the bedroom door, he thought of the success he still hoped might come if he continued with the promotion. The Toyota Camry and the driver. He grew angry with the thought. Standing up, he went to the rack and packed the recharge cards. The evening was warm, and the cards smelled of dust. He stuffed them into the bag and got to the feet.

He went out the room to the corridor, taking the jar of kerosene on the table by the door. He made as little noise as possible and could hear the muffled sound of the television behind the door to the living room. He went to the backyard, threw the bag to the ground, and poured kerosene on it. He lit a stick of matches and held it over the bag, watching the yellow flame spreading over the cards, papers, and promotion receipts spilling out of it. He heard a sound behind him and turned. His wife stood on the doorway to the door, staring at him.

"Did you win the Toyota Camry?" she asked.

“I didn’t.” he said. “And that’s why I’m burning everything concerning the promotion. It’s a waste of time. I’m not taking part in it any more.”

He did not want any argument, so he began to walk away. Bamidele would wonder years later whether this marked the beginning of the end of their marriage, which crashed five years later in Lagos, four hundred kilometers away, in another nondescript house. He would wonder whether he made her a laughing stock by burning the cards and turning his back on prosperity. He would wonder whether his wife, disappointed, gave up on him when he gave up taking part in the promotion. As he walked past her, he heard her sigh, but he did not stop. When he got to the middle of the corridor, he opened his bedroom door, got in, and searched the room for his camera.

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