A close up of text on a black background

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**Excerpt: Aralola Will Be Absolutely Fine**

by **Oluwaseun Oluwatosin Akinsiku**

shortlisted for the 2022 SI Leeds Literary Prize

Aralola wished the ageless sun were a little kind, and not so audacious, and that her skin’s pores did not seep out water and sweat did not patch her cleavage. Standing at the roadside at New Lagos Road, cars honked, bare-chested young men lazed and preened in the middle of the wide road on the concrete lane divider, as though in an abdominal six-pack-contest, a small towel previously soaked in water - now sucked dry by the open air and inflammable sun with its candescent energy - draped across their chest or over their baseball caps, in an exhibitionism of bottled water, canned juice*,*recharge cards, shoes rack and books. The brief early morning downpour cooled the temper of the humid air a little. Her phone’s screen showed thirty-four degrees. Every passing car added to the ocean of traffic, sometimes totally stagnated, or moving at a snail’s pace. *Okada* riders probed their commercial bikes in between the rows of traffic. Commuters stood singly and in groups by the roadside, the worries on their faces telling silent stories about how long it would take them to get to work this morning; how their bosses and lecturers would hear none of their coming late, how perhaps they should have come out early, but nothing could be compared to wrapping oneself in between sheets especially with early morning rainfall spanking one’s window in large pellets.

This was Benin City, a city she had come to love despite its quirkiness and eccentricities; the city where she heard the most exasperating stories and laughed till her tummy raged with a gamut of emotions untold. It was the unmistakable flavour of spoken Pidgin in this city, the ubiquitous plantain, the bus stops and areas and scenery she knew as intimately as she knew the corners of her own name.  Knowing Benin City was like scraping from a bottomless storage, every layer yielding a different knowledge each time; the only Nigerian City that had ‘City’ in its name; the city where you could not get lost, as long you got to Ring Road, where you could get a bus going to Italy or to heaven. The joke about Benin was that you could call the popular name ‘Osas’ or ‘Ehis’ on Ring Road and everyone would look back.

She gave her glasses a gentle push in the middle and manoeuvred her way through the expletive-murmuring drivers, and impatient car owners to be apart from the crowd. The leering *Okada* riders said what she could now say with them, as though rehearsed. ‘Aunty black, Aunty my colour, black and shine, where you dey go? I go carry you o,’ and tried to keep abreast with her.

The demarcation in the middle of the road now had a new shining lemon religious banner: *We are taking over Benin City by fire.God of Israel, answer by fire, my evil mother-in-law must die today!*

Aralola was already running late for work on a Monday morning.