

By eight o'clock in the evening the next day, Tomiwa's phone rang. She jumped at the first ring as if she was not expecting it. The truth was that she had been waiting for that call all through the day. She had never been on a blind date before and she never knew how she was expected to behave.

The whole thing sounded crazy. But she was curious. In spite of her apparent social exposure and her confidence which was borne out of her desire to become a celebrity, Tomiwa was emotionally empty. She was beautiful no doubt about it. Indeed she could beat Salma in a contest except that she was dark where Salma was fair.

Otherwise they were slim, busty and definitely attractive. So how was it that no boy ever attempted to go out with Tomiwa? The answer could be summed up in one word – overconfidence. She exuded such charismatic air around her that people, both males and females alike, rated her far above her station.

Which station nobody knew. Consequently, all of them felt intimidated in her presence. And she was an expensive dresser. It was not that the materials she sewed were out of this world, it was the style. That was definitely out of this world.

Her phone rang again for the second time.

"Hello," she said turning on the speaker so that her roommates, all the three of them, could hear what was being said.

"Is this Tomiwa?"

"Yes, who is speaking, please?"

She looked up at her roommates and they gave her the thumbs up sign, indicating that she was doing well.

"My name is Habib. We gave you a ride yesterday from Kwangila?"

Tomiwa paused, unsure whether to go ahead with the lie or to tell the truth and forget the whole thing. "Hello?" the voice at the other end was hesitant. "Are you still there?"

"Yes, I am."

"Can you come out, please?"

"Okay. Where are you?"

"We are parked where we dropped you yesterday."

"Er, er, yes. Okay. I will be with you." There was silence at the other end.

"Go, my friend. They won't eat you. If I know men, they may not even know the difference between you and me." Salma was very confident.

Tomiwa on the other hand was hesitant. Indeed she started developing cold feet about the whole thing. What if they turned out to be some kidnapers or cultists? Who would come to her rescue if she entered a car with total strangers who formed the habit of visiting girls in the hostel only when it was night time? These thoughts were passing through her mind even as she picked her handbag and casually walked out of the room to meet her unknown visitors.

She saw the black Mercedes Benz parked directly in front of the hostel. The passenger side was empty so she went and entered the car without prompting. It was strange. There were supposed to be two people in the car. "Where is your friend?"

"Oh, my beauty, I am here," Labaran said from the back seat. "I made space for you in the front so you can seat near your heartthrob."

Far from being reassuring, this unexpected utterance and seating arrangement made Tomiwa even more uncomfortable. She had read so many thriller stories, particularly Mario Puzo's Godfather and she knew how enemies were easily garrotted when they are made to sit in the passenger side while unbeknownst to them their killers were seated directly behind them in the car. She did not let her fear show. Instead, she just opened the front seat, stepped out of the car and asked Labaran to come to the front seat. Meekly, he obeyed.

As she entered the back seat, Habib took a long look at her and seemed to be convinced that there was something wrong about the lady who just entered their car. She was more resolute and a trifle more confident than the girl of the previous night. But he told himself, he would wait and see. There was a game plan somewhere, and he did not want to spoil it.

"Shall we move from here? It is rather too open."

"Where are we going?" "To a restaurant."

"I am not hungry." Tomiwa was really ill-disposed with the whole set up.

She felt the stab of Habib's long stare as she entered the car and she knew the man was not dumb even before he said anything.

"Let's go to Frizzlers then." Habib said this as he manoeuvred the car to face where it came from so they could drive quietly to the Fast Food Restaurant which was surrounded by many grocery shops within the school.

He parked the car near the shop of a man who proclaimed his shop the

Faculty of Suya. This meant that his shop was the best place where steaks are made and sold. As they parked, Habib asked Labaran to go out and get them fried rice, chicken, milk, tea, beverages, sugar, and any other thing that he considered important to a boarding student.

“Yes, Honourable.” He went out of the car without collecting money from Habib. This Tomiwa noted as strange. But she also knew instantly that authority had been established. She knew now who was the boss. Salma was wrong. Labaran may own the car, but he most certainly was not the one calling the shots. Habib was. And he appeared very perceptive. Tomiwa instinctively knew that Habib was not the kind of person you trifled with.

“You are not Tomiwa.” Habib said this categorically when Labaran was out of earshot.

For some reason the statement made Tomiwa angry. “Look here, Mr. Honourable. I do not care who you think you are. But you cannot just wake up this evening and declare my name fake. That is very insulting. If you had said, “Hey, you are not the girl I picked yesterday.” I would gladly say, “Yes, I was not.

Since you are an expert at picking girls by the roadside. My name is Tomiwa. And I am not the girl you gave ride to yesterday.” She added this last to soften the venom she knew her words must have caused. “I am sorry, my dear. I didn’t mean to sound like that. And believe me picking girls is not my habit. As you can see, it was Labaran’s idea. He is my driver.” “I do not have any issue with you or your driver. I would not insult you for anything if you do not look down on me.”

“I said I am sorry.”

“Okay. Just so long as we understand each other.”

“I think I like you already.”

She didn’t say anything to this.

“So, tell me what happened?”

“Nothing happened. My friend didn’t feel like giving you her number so she gave you mine instead. I was supposed to reject your call or, tell you wrong number, but my curiosity got the better part of me. I decided to come and see who it was that had my number.”

“And...?”

“And here we are.”

“I just declared that I liked you.”

“I heard you.”

“And what are you saying to that.”

“Nothing.”

“Why?”

“Because I do not go about declaring likeness or otherwise to people whose faces I can hardly recognize in the daytime?”

“Fine. That means you want to see me tomorrow in the afternoon.”

“Yes.”

“Is that why you told my driver to come to the front seat?”

“No. I just did not want to take chances. What of if he sprang on me and strangled me from behind?”

“You have a very wild imagination.”

“Thank you.”

There was another long silence.

“If we have nothing left to say to each other, I guess I should be going in,”

Tomiwa said.

“You didn’t even ask me who I am.”

“Your friend or is it your driver has said who you are. Indeed, I am not sure if I like politicians,” Tomiwa was in her element. She never gave a thought to what she was saying. If it went down well with her listeners, fine. If it did not, also fine.

“Why don’t you like politicians?” Habib asked.

“They are like a spindle. Nobody knows the direction they are facing.

They lie a lot. A lot of misguided people think the politicians are the solutions to our problems.”

“Are they not?”

“On the contrary. They are the problem.”

“And on a personal level?”

“I do not judge a person based on his affiliations.”

“You don’t?”

“No. I get to know who you are and judge you as such.”

“So there is hope for me, after all?”

“Hope for what?”

“For becoming your friend.”

“I wouldn’t be sitting in your car if there wasn’t.” Habib was so elated, he laughed out loud.

“How many of you are in the room?”

“Four. Why?”

“You take this.” He handed over to her a bundle of five hundred naira bills.

She collected the money slowly and placed it on her laps. “Put it in your bag. I do not want Labaran to see it.”

“He won’t.”

“Ten thousand for each of your roommates and twenty thousand for you.”

“Thank you. We really appreciate this gesture.”

Just then, Habib’s phone rang.

“Yes, Labaran?”

“I am done with the purchases.”

“Then bring them over.” “Okay, Honourable.”

Labaran came with so much provisions and beverages that Tomiwa thought they were buying things for their children in the boarding school. But no. Habib said it was for her and her roommates.

Tomiwa was gratitude personified. She thanked Habib profusely and did not know when she started calling him Alhaji.

Habib too was very happy. He drove her to the entrance and promised to call her regularly.

As soon as Tomiwa entered the room, they started shouting and ululating. The shout turned into a scream of joy when they saw what she brought. It was Ngozi who had the presence of mind to stand up and lock the door.



This simple act is one of the most valued rituals of students who cook in the hostel. It effectively blocks out all those professional hangers who go about with spoon in their purses looking for the pot that had just been brought down from the stove. Before you start eating you lock the door and if it was night, you switched off the light.

If they knocked you ignore. When Ngozi came back from the door, they opened the bags and saw what was almost beyond belief. Even if they had come to the school with nothing, what the Alhaji had bought for them would have lasted them through another semester. They jumped some more and were embracing Tomiwa. And thanking her.

When the excitement died down, Salma said, "You guys should be thanking me. It was I who brought this matter here, you know?"

"But if we had followed your counsel we would all be without these. It is Tomiwa we should thank. It is her boyfriend who supplied all these."

Somehow Salma was not happy with the turn of events. "Stop disgracing yourselves like this my friends. Is it suya that you have not seen or chicken or beverages?"

"Or these?" Tomiwa said dramatically as she dropped the bundle of fifty thousand naira before them.

They were all stunned. For one brief moment there was total silence in the room. Tomiwa savoured the moment and used it to divide the money the way she was instructed. Ten thousand naira for each occupant. And she held unto the remaining twenty thousand.

This was all too much for Salma.

In the silence that followed, she was heard to have whispered, "It is not fair. It is not fair. Finders, keepers. It was me they gave ride to. Tomiwa, you are not a good friend at all. I just showed you a guy and you went ahead to make him your boyfriend.

You behave like a chameleon and can therefore adapt to any situation to meet your personal desires.

“This is not a fair comment, Salma,” Ngozi said.

“You shut up there, money monger. All this one that you are standing for Tomiwa, is it not for the money she brought? We have been in this room for how long now? Yet, we have never seen you display so much love and camaraderie towards Tomiwa as you are doing this evening. If not the money, what else is accounting for this sudden friendliness? You do not even have shame all of you.”

“Salma, you do not have to be this aggressive, you know.” Ada tried to be conciliatory.

“You too shut up. How are you different from them all?”

“It is not about being different, it is about being rational.”

All this while Ngozi had been fuming silently. She knew what Salma said was unreasonable. Was there any man on earth who did not like money? “Ada, allow Salma to finish disgracing herself and displaying her foolishness. Who else but a daft person would see money by the wayside and instead of picking it, he would show someone else the money to pick, yet when that person picks the money he would start raining abuses on the person? Who else?” Ngozi hissed. Ada was suddenly concerned. “Please, let this matter not degenerate into something else. We have been living in peace all this while. I do not see why these sentiments should be raising their heads in our midst. I thought the essence of education was for us to live as one and seek out what unites us rather than what separates us?” Salma was heaving like someone who was about to have asthmatic seizure. She could not say anything. She just stood there glaring at one roommate after another.

Suddenly, there came a knock on the door.

All those speaking kept quiet. There was complete silence in the room. They did not say anything. Neither did they move.

The person outside knocked some more. The roommates refused to budge.

They looked alarmingly at each other, as if chiding themselves that because of their attitude another party was coming to partake in the harvest of a farm produce they never lifted their hands in farming.

When they heard the footsteps of the knocker receding, they sat down quietly around the roasted meat and chicken Tomiwa came in with.

At a signal from Salma, Ada went and switched off the light in the room. Thereafter, they used light from the inbuilt torch on their phones to see what they were eating. It was strange to see this total cooperation among the people who a few seconds before were at each other's throat. The herd instinct was indeed real. A situation which no entreaty could settle, was suddenly resolved by a single knock on the door.

They ate silently and for a long time.

They discovered that they could not finish the meat and the chicken. So Ada was instructed to keep what was left in her fridge so they could use it the next day while cooking their meals.

When the room was cleared, Ngozi switched on the light after unlocking the door.

She told the other girls that there was no point for them to harbour any ill feelings over what had transpired. If truth be told, didn't they all enjoy themselves as a result of the recklessness of some silly old men who could not resist dropping their purse at the sight of a bra?

"That is hardly the way to show gratitude to people who just fed us without asking for anything in return." Tomiwa said this light-heartedly.

Ngozi however read something serious underlying the statement.

“My sister, just mark my words. No man spends this much money on you without asking for something in return. Just wait and see. Men are not stupid, you know. Sooner or later, they would ask for their pound of flesh. This was just the first day, and see what he spent.”

That was precisely Tomiwa’s thought. It was just the first day, and see how much she gained. If this went on, she had nothing to say to Salma but gratitude. Let Ngozi talk on about the pound of flesh. I would give them fifty pounds of flesh if they asked. How much were they getting from Ngozi’s stupid campus boyfriends? They gave nothing and yet they kept asking for pounds of flesh! Make I hear word, jareh! As these thoughts were passing through Tomiwa’s mind, she did not hear what the other girls were saying. For a while.

Then Salma asked a very strange question. “When did they say they are coming again?”

“Who?”

“Labaran and Habib,” Salma said, looking very serious.

“Are you kidding me? Salma? What the hell comes over you?”

“You won’t understand. Are they not two?”

The others burst out laughing. It was indeed amusing, what Salma was attempting to do. It appeared desperate. But under the circumstances, who would blame her? Just one evening outing and you came out with over ten thousand naira. It would require a highly disciplined heart not to give in to such temptations. And Salma’s heart was anything but disciplined. What however she would not take was to be forced to do anything she did not want to do. In consequence, she resolved to go out with the Labaran who, to her dismay, really turned out to be Habib’s driver.

The strange thing about the honourable and his driver was that they grew up together and while Habib went to read up to university level, Labaran went to a driving school. And sometimes with his meagre earnings as Local Government Driver, he doled out a little from his money to his friend.

So when Habib became a politician and was elected into the State House of Assembly, he called upon his childhood friend to be his driver, paid of course by the House. What was interesting however was that along this incongruous journey of life, their friendship never suffered any setback. And that was how they met Salma that fateful evening.

Anyhow, that was how it went. The problems created by Tomiwa's visitors were soon forgotten by our sisterly roommates and life went on as usual. Indeed those problems turned out to be a blessing in disguise. The roommates became more united than they were before.

School routine resumed in earnest and soon the session was over. Before they knew it, they were in their final year. The last exams timetable was out. Our four roommates held the record for being the only people who began as roommates and ended as roommates through to their last semester in the school.

What was even more remarkable was that though they were reading different courses, they were all performing very well. They were all B students and were certain to graduate with a Second Class Upper degree in their various disciplines. They were the envy of almost every girl in the school.

They never allowed their relationships with men to interfere with their academic performance. They were so fixated with graduating with a very good degree that they swore nothing would stand between them and the actualization of that dream.

So it was that when exams came they read like their lives depended on it. This went on successfully. Most of the papers were almost a walk over. And, even though they were studying different disciplines, they were sure of making excellent grades.

In any case, with the semester system, the students virtually knew what class of degree they were likely going to graduate with from their cumulative grade point average, CGPA. The genuine apprehension and excitement came when you were writing the last paper.

Incidentally, the last paper this year was Moral Philosophy which all of them were required to sit for because it was a General Studies paper.

I paused in my story when I noticed Bint whispering into Omar's ear.

He laughed silently and whispered back.

I looked at him my face questioning?

He stifled a laugh and said Bint was telling him she did not see how Salma's relationship with men or her roommates contributed to her leaving the school. I smiled and said, "My daughter, just be patient. We are almost coming there. And that is why I want you to pay attention. Jamila? My zobo is finished. Get me some more."