

Salma casually walked into the office holding her registration files firmly across her chest. She was barely twenty years old then and doubtless in the prime of her youth. She was endowed as a woman and was too willing to flaunt her elegance.

She was always dressed in tight-fitting jeans trousers and body hugs top that stopped just short of being indecent. Salma was a reckless dresser and she was all too aware of the femininity she exuded and the effect this had on members of the opposite sex.

She revelled in the hunger she saw in the eyes of men as they shamelessly ogled her body when she walked past them. This was called freedom. She thought. The university had a lot of this and no one could reprimand you for daring to dress the way you wanted so long as your attire stopped just this side of decency.

Doctor Dabo was a highly disciplined lecturer and he was never heard to engage in any form of underhandedness with any female student, or any student for that matter. Today, however, as Salma walked towards him with her registration files across her chest, he felt a lump rise in his throat.

He had never seen a girl look so alluring and beautiful. He swallowed hard and chided himself not to disgrace himself. He must not put his reputation on the line. He had been in the university for more than a decade and many students graduated in his hands. They all had singular respect for him. He ensured that he treated his students justly. He was a stickler for time. Consequently, he was always punctual to lectures.

His rule was very simple, "Don't come in after me." If he entered the class before you, you did not bother entering. The students knew this. In fact, his punctuality was phenomenal to the extent that the graduating students warned the incoming students beforehand that there was a no-nonsense lecturer who never allowed students into his class once he was there before them.

As for consorting with the female students, God banish the thought. It had never happened. So when this fateful day Salma walked into his office looking seductive and all, Dabo could not explain the sudden palpitation of his heart. The weather was cold outside, but he was sweating inside. What was happening to me? He asked himself. He cleared his throat and promised himself to dispose of her registration case as quickly as he could before he did something he would regret for the rest of his life.

“What can I do for you?” he asked briskly.

“I am a 100Level student coming for registration. They said you are the Level Coordinator and that you are to sign my forms.” Dabo marvelled at the confidence of the girl. 100Level and she was exuding such confidence. She must be a special breed. Almost sassy, he thought

inwardly. Dabo’s heart was still beating fast.

“Yes. I am the Level Coordinator. Have you been screened?” “Yes, sir. I was screened. It was from there that they directed me to your office.”

“All right then. Let’s see if the forms are complete.”

She handed him the forms and he studied them carefully. They were complete. He signed the appropriate columns on the forms and reluctantly pushed the files to Salma.

She hesitated before standing up and walking towards the door.

It could have been her sheer beauty, her physical appearance, or some other inexplicable signal the devil had sent to Dabo’s mind. Whatever it was, instead of allowing her to go, Dabo heard himself say, “Wait.”

She turned slowly and faced him.

“Sit down, please. Just want to ask you a few questions.” Surely that last sentence was not complete. But he wasn’t bothered.

Salma sat down.

“Where are you from?”

“I am from the north. Is there a problem, sir?” “No,” Dabo said and hesitated.

It was not normal for him to be short of words. But he seemed suddenly tongue-tied today. The girl waited.

“May I know you, please?” he said. Even to his ears that sounded clumsy. “I am a student here, sir. I think that should be knowledge enough.”

“I mean I want to know you more intimately.”

Salma instinctively knew all along that this was coming. Why it had to come from this sleazy looking lecturer who had nothing to offer was what surprised her. Indeed, it made her angry. What kind of intimate nonsense was he talking about? University lecturer? From what she heard about the man, they said he was highly disciplined and serious.

It was never in his character to have anything to do with his students particularly the female students. So why her? And for God’s sake, why now? Well, you never know with men.

“What do you mean more intimately?”

“Don’t get me wrong. I simply mean I want us to be friends.”

“It most certainly didn’t come out like that.”

"I know," he said. "So can we be friends?"

"No, sir. With all due respect, that is not what my parents sent me here to do. In fact, you should be ashamed of yourself asking me out. You are old enough to be my father. So what kind of morality are you guys inculcating in your students when you cannot see a beautiful girl pass by without you making advances at her?."

Dabo was pained beyond measure. He hated himself for his display of masculine weakness and hated her even more for reminding him of that weakness. But the fault was his.

"I am sorry," he said.

"You had better be." Salma hissed and added, "Even if the world is bereft of men, I would never go out with a man such as you. What kind of girl do you think I am?" she stormed out of the office, leaving him in confusion.

Dabo was in deep thought long after Salma had gone.

What kind of trial was this, oh God? Something I have never done! What drove me into disgracing myself like this? For more than ten years I struggled and overcame this temptation, now such a small girl was sent to try us. What kind of life was this? Please, God, let this cup pass over me.

Please God, let her not talk. She was so cheeky, this girl. She could do almost anything. Luckily, Dabo thought, I did not do anything that would warrant a serious chastisement from the school authority. I didn't even ask her out. He told himself. He just said he wanted to be friends.

What was wrong with that? Everything was wrong with that, an inner voice answered him. Then he remembered he used the word intimacy. Now, that one was serious. How do you defend yourself before a committee when they asked you to explain what you meant by wanting to know someone more intimately? God, please, let it never come to this. What kind of devil prompted me to let my guard low so? But the insult... The insult was painful. It was deep and painful. But he had it coming. If the bird

chooses to fly in a cloudy weather, it should expect its flight to be cut by the rain. For a long time after Salma left, Dabo was lost in supplication. Please,

God, clothe me in the garb of your holy prophets. Let not this mishap have impact

on my life. If you guard me from this, Lord, I promise to be more dedicated and pious in the discharge of my duties and responsibilities as a moral custodian of our children here. Now and in the future. Thank you, Lord, for answered prayers. On her own part, Salma did not even spare a thought to the fumbling old man who could not even articulate himself properly when trying to ask a girl out. He did not belong to her class. People with no confidence in themselves hardly fit the category of those she would consider her friends.

So, as she went out of Dabo's office, so did his thought go out of her head. She walked briskly to the hostel and concluded her accommodation registration.

The registration for the hostel accommodation itself had its own problems. She discovered that she did not take to any of her three roommates in the beginning. There were four girls in the room, Salma herself from the North, Tomiwa from the West, specifically from Ibadan, Ngozi from Umunze in Imo State and Ada from Benue State or Middle Belt as she insisted people called her place of birth.

In the beginning Salma did not want to stay in the room. No, it wasn't because the hostel was not beautiful; it was the most coveted. It was the famous Queen Amina Hall. It was every female student's dream. It housed girls with savvy. Happening babes, as they called themselves. Sophisticated ladies. It was not the hostel she did not like. It was the room.

What Salma particularly did not like about the room she was allocated was the composition of her roommates. It was as if there was a deliberate design to offend every ounce of her accommodating sensibility.

So, understandably, when her accommodation registration was done, she was wondering what accursed devil chose her roommates for her. She hated chance and happenstance, but she knew, that no one deliberately worked out whom she should share her room with. The room allocation procedure was

simple really. The student was required to make the payment online and indicate their chosen hostel depending on availability and their chosen room.

You just clicked the yes button on your chosen room. And the computer screen would show transaction completed, if you secured a room, or transaction cancelled if the rooms were occupied. It followed then that the roommates were not any the wiser whom they had chosen by that simple click to be their roommates. Therefore, you were stuck with whoever you chose for the next two semesters. At least.

By the time she brought her things into the hostel and the school calendar resumed in earnest, Salma discovered that her roommates were not so disagreeable after all. Tomiwa was the brightest in the room and perhaps in her class. She was also the cleanest. Tomiwa's ambition was to become a singer. So she was always abreast with the latest information on the musical and the entertainment scene in general. She was in the know of the latest and craziest fashion outfit. Salma became close to her.

Ngozi on the other hand was quiet and reticent. She appeared to have never left her village, spiritually speaking. She was always reserved and withdrawn. But she was also generous to a fault. She would never cook food just for herself alone. Whether her roommates ate or not, she would still invite them to come and join her while she was having dinner.

Sometimes they would decline, other times they obliged her. When they saw that this attitude of sharing her food with them would not stop, they gave in and they started cooking as one small family. This cemented their relationship and they became their sisters' keepers. Sisters was the correct expression here.

They were cooking in turns. The day it was Ada's turn to cook for the first time, Salma said she wanted to see all the ingredients she was going to use to make the indomie jollof.

This indomie jollof was a sort of staple food among students irrespective of sex or parental status. It was a noodles meal prepared in such a way that within ten minutes it was ready for consumption. Because it was easy to prepare and cheap to acquire, it became students' favourite.

"There is nothing special that we are using," Ada said.

“You don’t understand,” Salma said, “we do not want to find a leg of rat in our indomie.”

All of them laughed it off and Ada knew that Salma was teasing her as rat is her people’s delicacy. It was their loss, she said. Tomiwa on the other hand asked if they would like her village food for the kings”

“What is that?”

“Snail.”

“Snail? You mean you people eat snails?”

“It is not the kind of infantry snail you see up north. In the west, they grow real big. And they are a special delicacy. We actually farm them.”

Ngozi said, “We eat snails where I came from too.”

“Well, in this room, no one eats snail. But we can do it this way, any day any one of you misses home and she feels like eating mama’s food, you can warn us in advance so we would make our own arrangement for feeding that day.” They all agreed to this.

As God would have it, and as time went on, the only thing they as a group did not gang up to eat was rat, which in any case was never readily available in the school. As for the snail, they all indulged in its delicacy whenever Tomiwa’s parents came visiting. Again that was also not frequent, because she was from Oyo State, more than eight hours drive from the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. Salma on her own only introduced them to the danwake delicacy which was delicious and also easy to prepare. It was a special delicacy of the Hausa up landers. All you need is flour, the normal flour they used for bread be it from wheat or maize, mash it into a paste using ground baobab leaves to mix, then you drop it into the boiling water in small balls where it would harden and a few minutes later, it was ready for eating. You could use either groundnut oil or stew to eat the danwake with.

It sounded strange and looked even stranger to the eyes of her roommates. But the day Salma prepared the dish, she knew that sometimes there was no proportional relationship between what the eyes saw and what the mouth tasted. That northern delicacy was delicious.

Food was therefore the common factor that strengthened the bond of friendship between Salma and her friends. In spite of their diversity, they came to discover that there was more in their humanity that held them together than those things that pulled them apart.

Salma and Tomiwa were Muslims while Ada and Ngozi were Christians. But this was never an issue. They did everything as one. Of course there was the funny incident that happened that almost separated the intimacy Salma shared with Tomiwa. But on the intervention of Ada and Ngozi, it was resolved amicably.

Salma was coming back from home one evening. It was actually late in the evening. It was around eight o'clock in the evening. There were no vehicles. A black Mercedes Benz car slid to the sidewalk where Salma was standing and stopped.

Salma did not budge from where she was standing.

The driver engaged the reverse gear and came to stop just beside Salma. He pressed the control button and the passenger window slid down. "Are you going our way, beautiful?"

Salma saw that there were two men in the car and she was not comfortable. It had nothing to do with their dressing. They looked decent and affluent. Indeed, if they had not stopped to offer her a ride, she would have said they were almost respectable. Still she was not very comfortable. If it was just one man in the car, maybe...maybe... just maybe. But this one that there were two of them? Well, thankfully, the distance from here to the school was not far. They could not try anything. She had nothing to lose. She shrugged.

"I said are you going our way, princess?"



When there are two men in a car and one appears too voluble, you can rest assured of two things; either he is the one who has the car or he is the one who is interested in you. They would have discussed that before they stopped. Salma did not answer. She just opened the door behind the passenger seat and entered. She closed the door gently behind her.

“Good evening, gentlemen,” she said. “I do not know where you are going. But this is Kwangila and I am going to my school, Ahmadu Bello University Zaria.”

“Then it is our way you are going. My name is Labaran.” The man behind the wheel said, as he changed gear to drive and move on.

“You have not told us your name.” “I will tell you when I am getting off.”

About ten minutes later, the car stopped at the Main Gate of Ahmadu Bello

University.

“Or would you prefer we take you right in?”

“Sure. If you do not mind, that is.” “Habib, what do you think?”

“” “By all means let’s take her in.”

Habib appeared to be less voluble than Labaran and Salma instantly decided if any of them was the owner of that car, it must be Habib. Not that she was particularly thrilled by the prospect of being asked out by Benz owner. But it would certainly be a story worth telling that a certain big man in a big Mercedes Benz had asked her out and she declined.

That would make additional name in the entries of the influential people she had consciously turned down. So now, it was immaterial who asked her out, she knew she would say no. To hell with their flashy and expensive car. What kind of girl were they thinking she was? You just gave someone a ride and you were looking for a relationship that would last eternity? Big deal.

The Benz pulled to a stop outside Queen Amina Hall, but none of the male occupants attempted to step out and open the door for Salma. This bravado, stupidity actually, that exemplified who the gentleman was in Europe had no place in Africa.

How can a lady whose limbs are in perfect working condition wait for someone to step out of a car, come round to open the door for her before she steps out? The whole thing smirks of waste of time. In any case, Salma was not expecting.