

When she was summoned by the Examination Malpractice and Ethics Committee vide a letter asking her to report to the committee in a week's time, she tried to do what every law breaker usually attempted to do when caught; she tried to find ways around the rules. She couldn't.

The established law of EMAL was so clear that most students when caught would simply pack their belongings and leave the school and go and sit for another qualifying exams to another university. That is, they would seek admission again through JAMB to another school. Most did not even bother to honour the summons of the Examinations and Ethics Committee. They would just leave since in the end they knew the outcome. Most universities had zero tolerance for examinations malpractices.

But when you were in the last semester of your final year, the desperation goes deeper than that. Leaving the school would literally have to be the last thing you would want to do.

Salma therefore went and met Tomiwa and confided in her predicament. Tomiwa was genuinely sympathetic and asked Salma what they should do under the circumstance.

"I was thinking of talking to Labaran to talk to Habib who would put a word for me in ears of the Committee Chairman or the Vice-Chancellor or someone higher up. You know these politicians, they have their ways.

They are very influential." Tomiwa nodded, knowing indeed that Salma's condition was desperate at the same time doubting whether the strategy would work. Somebody higher up? Could she be referring to the Visitor to the University? That is the President for crying out loud! But in her situation, one would try almost anything. Desperate measures, so said the sage, required desperate remedies.

Salma did as she told Tomiwa she would. Habib asked Labaran to bring her to his office.

It was the first time she was there. Tomiwa herself had been to the office only a few times. As she sat on the sofa opposite him, Salma took in the magnificent office in one glance. It was simply luxurious. It was tastefully furnished and had so much space, Salma wondered what they would be doing there. Then she espied a collapsible conference table linked to the wall facing the office entrance. The name on his desk read, HABIB LAWAL, SPEAKER.

Salma heaved a sigh of relief. Habib was indeed no ordinary honourable. He was the Speaker of the House. After the State Governor and Deputy Governor, he was the next most influential figure in the state. And to imagine that this was the man she gave fake number to and settled for his driver? God, what kind of bad spirit was pursuing me?

He sat resplendent behind the huge mahogany desk and was turning from left to right and then left again on his executive swivel chair. Salma could not help admiring the power and influence behind that desk. She reckoned, if anybody was going to get me off the hook, this guy would.

He was very professional and business like when he said, "I heard your message from Labaran, dear Salma. What exactly do you want me to do for you?"

"I have to graduate, sir. Sorry, honourable. I just have to graduate. It is not just one lousy General Studies course that would see me expelled from the school. No, sir. You have to do something."

"I understand. You see, the only person I know, who can assist us is

Professor Dabo."

Salma felt her stomach sink. She fought the overriding desire to rush to the toilet and empty her bladder.

Why must this Professor Dabo keep appearing and reappearing in her life

like a recurring decimal?

"Honourable," she began and paused.

“Yes?”

“There has to be someone else.”

“Like who do you have in mind?” the honourable reclined on his chair and took a long look at Salma. Then a thin, mischievous smile played across the corners of his lips.

He pressed an invisible button on his desk, and the entrance door automatically locked. Salma did not notice this surreptitious movement..

“Like the Chairman of the EMEC, that is, the Chairman of the Exams Malpractice and Ethics Committee. He is a professor of Biological Sciences.”

“What makes you think he would agree to our request?”

“Because they said the man likes money a lot.”

“Chairman of the University Ethics Committee being susceptible to financial underhandedness? That is a laugh.” Honourable Habib actually laughed out loud.

with him.

Salma.

“When it comes to money, every man has his price,” Salma said, laughing

He stood up from his chair and came to sit on the three long sofa nearest to

"I like that philosophy about every man having his price," he said. "But

what of every woman."

"Ours is a given. But sometimes who is doing the pricing matters," she said meaningfully.

"Like, do I matter?" Habib said

She said, "If you do not lose the matter at hand."

"I will not. We were talking about the Chairman of your committee." "Yes. I made my own research and people said he can sell his mother's soul

if the price is right."

"So like how much do you think we could offer him?"

"Two, may be three hundred thousand."

"And if I give you that amount, what do I expect in return?"

"When I gave you Tomiwa, what did you give me in return?" "You didn't give me Tomiwa, remember? She was to be your escape route because you didn't like me. It turned out that she did not mind going out with me. So the benefit is all hers. Now, the deal is different."

"How different?" Salma asked.

“You want two or three hundred thousand naira. And I said what do I get in return?”

“Don’t be mischievous, Honourable. First, you know that the money is not for me. Secondly, you know how we are with Labaran, your friend. And thirdly you know my relationship with Tomiwa, your girlfriend. So if what I suspect you are asking is true, you would know that it is not proper.”

“We are not talking about propriety here, my dear. However else you choose to look at it, it is me who is going to lose money. I have no intention of trading arguments with you. But why would I want to give money to the Chairman of the committee? You. Why would your relationship with Labaran affect what we are doing here? Did he not himself bring you in here? And Tomiwa? Who would tell her? Me or you?” Salma shifted uncomfortably. She was thinking quickly. Would he really give her that kind of money? If he did, would she be stupid enough to hand over everything to the Committee Chairman? If she didn’t, what would she have to lose? But wait. Let’s cross the bridge when we get to it.

“I understand you, Honourable. But would you give me the money?”

“Sure, if you cooperate.”

“But your door is open, Honourable.”

“No. It is locked.”

Salma was surprised.

The most interesting thing was that even after she got the money from Honourable Habib, Salma found it hard put to give it to the Chairman directly. She met one of the members of the committee who introduced her to the chairman outside the school. The chairman asked her if she was guilty. She said she was guilty but that she wanted him to temper justice with mercy.

The chairman agreed and asked her to meet him at a designated rendezvous, a hotel very far away from the school. She went there all right but declined sleeping with him. She however offered to ransom herself. "Just how much do you think you are worth under the circumstance?"

"You tell me, sir."

"You know that I am not the only member of the committee. There are four other members. And their palms would also need greasing."

"I know that. And that is why I do not agree to what you were suggesting earlier. If the whole thing is cleared, we can come here again and celebrate. Just the two of us. What do you think?"

"That is very smart of you," the Chairman said enigmatically.

"But you still haven't told me how much you have in mind for your people."

"Maybe two hundred thousand would do," the Chairman said.

"If I have two hundred thousand, I would use it to get admission in of any of these private universities

, "alma spoke with a confidence she did not know she possessed. She knew they were in a hotel all by themselves. And the man was talking freely, not minding the risk of being secretly recorded by her. Maybe it did not matter to him one way or the other. He knew she was the one whose life was hanging on the line.

"So how much are you parting with?" he asked.

“I would give you one hundred thousand. And it had better work. If it does not, I would so scream and you would not hear the last of this. Remember, you have more to lose than me, when the chips are down.”

“No problem. But subtle threats would not help you under this circumstance. You are hardly in a position to make bargains. I just agreed to the sum because I know you are a student who needs help.”

She dipped her hand into the handbag she carried and gave him the money.

He collected it, divided the bundle into two and thrust them in his trouser

Suddenly a strange thought occurred to her and she voiced it out.

“Sir, I do not even know your name.”

He laughed. “Of what use would my name be to you?”

“If you are not divulging your name, then we might as well...”

“Okay, okay. Dr Kabir. Mohammed Kabir.”

“Okay. I would be leaving now.”

“Be seeing you,” he said and opened his arms for a hug. She declined and offered her hand for a handshake instead. Thereafter, she walked calmly out of the hotel and went home.

When she was called to defend herself before the committee, she was first shocked to see that the person seated on the chair facing her, was not the person to whom she had given the money in the hotel.

Dr Kabir was not a member of the Committee.

This was not possible. She looked again, peering closely and without shame at each member of the committee, still she could not see him. She did not start crying until she discovered that the man whom she hardly knew, who claimed to also be a member of the committee and who introduced her to Dr Kabir was also not there.

I have been duped. She told herself and began to cry.

The man who was at the helm of affairs and other members of the committee mistook her tears for remorse and perhaps repentance. They advised her to calm down and narrate what transpired at the examination hall that day.

She calmed herself and told them the whole story.

In the heat of her agitation, she did not know when she told them that she actually received the cheat notes from Kolawole Abdul.

“And who is Kolawole Abdul?” a member of the committee asked.

“He is my classmate.”

“Is that all? Just a classmate? And he would risk his academic career, discounting the possibility of rustication, for just a classmate?”

Salma's stomach sank. In fact she did not know the implication of dropping Kolawole's name. Why did she make a slip like that? She pestered the boy to help her the way he pestered her to go out with him and she declined saying she preferred they remained good friends. He had agreed and kept his word and distance. In the end, however, she gave in because he was giving her private tutorials. And he was the brightest. But for him to risk his academic life for her? And this was the way she was repaying him? It was not fair. It simply was not fair.

It was also not fair what men were doing to her. No man ever treated her for her essence; they all related to her based on her looks. And all they ever seemed to want from her was dating her. That included Kolawole. She mentally ran the whole gamut of the men she knew in her life and came to the conclusion that except for her father, no man, indeed no man, was worthy of being called a man.

So to hell with Kolawole, and Habib, and Labaran, Dr Kabir and all the others who claimed they were helping her by exploiting her. Hahahaha, she laughed inwardly. And Dr Kabir was going to pay. He was the one who took money from her.

Instinctively she knew now that she was not going to escape. She was going to be expelled. She knew that.

"Miss Salma?" the Chairman prompted when he saw that she was lost in her unpleasant reverie.

"Yes, sir?"

"Are you telling the committee that this Kolawole of a fellow who supplied the notes to you just did it because you are classmates?"

"Yes, sir."

"You have to tell the committee the truth. We do not believe anyone can be that stupid. Just tell us the truth. Your secret is safe with us.'

“Sir, with all due respect, I do not see the relevance of your prying into my personal life. This is an exams malpractice committee. It is not the Student Disciplinary Committee. Moreover, I do not see how my relationship with him one way or the other has any bearing on this case.”

There was total silence among members of the committee.

This was unbelievable. How can a girl be this cheeky? Perhaps she had something up her sleeve.

“We know that,” the chairman said, his voice faltering in spite of himself. “All we wanted to establish was that there was no monetary motive behind what happened. Students have been known to collect or give money for academic collusion.”

“I didn’t give anybody any money.”

“Okay. Can we have his number?”

“Yes,” Salma said and gave out the number.

“We are very sure you know the implication of what you did?” “What did I do again?” Salma raised her brow in affected innocence.

“I mean, you know the implication of examination malpractice?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Well, that is about all for now. You may go.”

Salma hesitated.

“You will hear from us,” the chairman said.

Salma walked out solemnly though she managed to walk out with a gait of desperate dignity.

“Mum, what did she mean by saying Dr Kabir would pay for it?” I looked at Omar and smiled.