

I took a sip of my zobo and continued with the tale. Teemah was hardly moving. Indeed, she was hardly breathing. That was how much she loved stories. I looked directly at her and reminded her that Moral Philosophy was usually one of the easiest subjects in the university and it was also a general studies course taken to the end of the examination timetable. In the case of Salma and her mates, it was the very last paper. It was considered easy because the course content involved all those things that their parents had been telling them since they were children.

This, plus what their imams taught them in the mosque or their pastors preached to them in the church. Moral Philosophy was sure going to be a walk-over. May be that was why the school authority took it to the last part of the time table. To kind of pacify the students, if you will.

Surprisingly, it was also this same Moral Philosophy that Salma found very difficult. She never attended the classes because she believed, as most students did, that they could pass even without going to class. What further guaranteed her passing the course was that for three years going, the lecturer had been foolishly recycling the same questions with very minor modifications.

This year they resolved to tackle the subject head-on and had series of tutorial discussions concerning all the topics. Indeed they were so well prepared that they knew the answers of virtually all the past questions off hand.

On the day of the examination, Salma came out more stunning than all other days and looking ravishing and decidedly more beautiful. Her roommates had asked her what the occasion was, she told them that her course mates had planned on final class pictures to be shot with most of the lecturers after the paper. And she wanted to come out looking her best. She picked her examinations card and went, as the law required, thirty minutes before the examination time. They were all searched and allowed into the examination hall.

As soon as the question papers were distributed, Salma knew she was in deep trouble. It was strange. It was not true. It was unbelievable. It was impossible. None of the topics for which they spent the whole night preparing had come out.

She looked around and was further dismayed to see her other course mates furiously writing on the answer scripts. It was as if they had all along been prepared for the eventuality of that happening. They must have read beyond the questions they practiced.

The guy next to her, Kolawole Abdul, famed to be the brightest was downloading pages upon pages of information from his head to the answer script. Salma on the other hand could not write anything. She kept looking from the invigilator to her paper and helplessly to Kola.

The invigilator was female and she made a studious note of avoiding eye contact with Salma. Unknown to Salma, she was the only one not writing. Consequently, she arrested the attention of the lecturer. Her outrageous dressing did nothing to endear her to the heart of the teacher. On the contrary, the teacher felt silently intimidated by the ostentatious appearance of Salma. She took an instant dislike in Salma. But she did not show it.

As time wore on, Salma was able to use the student magic on Kola. The student magic was a trick students developed of speaking to the next person without moving their lips. The strangest thing was that the person spoken to could hear or more precisely infer what was being said and act accordingly.

Kola was not just academically smart, he was also ever conscious of his life in the university. He did not want anything or anybody to jeopardize his career as a student. Especially not now, when it was this last paper that stood between him and graduation. All the others had been a walk-over. This one too would be. He did not like the way Salma was disturbing him. He stole a glance at the invigilator and noticed that she was not paying attention to them. He wished Salma would stop.

But Salma was persistent. So Kola scribbled some coded responses to the first two questions and stealthily, surreptitiously, slipped it into her hands.

The lecturer did not notice this movement.

As fate would have it, however, the teacher made a show of going out briefly only to come back immediately. That moment she went out was all that Salma wanted. She opened the paper Kola slipped into her hands and furiously began deciphering the code and writing on her answer booklet. She was so deep in this unholy act that she did not notice the lecturer had come back.

Now, the female teacher was amused to see that Salma who had not been writing for more than thirty minutes had suddenly received inspiration to start writing like there was no tomorrow.

She walked quietly and calmly to Salma's desk and stood behind her. For about two minutes Salma was engrossed with the business at hand, she did not notice that someone was standing behind her. She was busy copying from Notes of Salvation, the euphemism they had for Cheat Notes.

The teacher touched Kola silently.

He almost died.

Then she touched Salma.

Salma heard herself shouting, "What is it? What have I done? Did you see me with anything?"

Meanwhile, the cheat note was still in her hands.

The teacher turned to the front of the class and addressed the man in security uniform, asking him to bring the EMAL form.

"That is the Examinations Malpractice Form," Teemah said.

"Yes. Big Mouth. Mum had told us the meaning earlier," Omar said. "I just mentioned it for some Salma brained listeners who might have forgotten." Teemah was making faces at her older brother. I ignored them. But I was glad nonetheless to discover that they were all following the story. By the time the security man brought the EMAL form, the teacher had confiscated the cheat note from Salma.

Salma was asked to fill in the form and Kola was to sign as witness.

At this point Kola felt an instant surge of relief since the teacher did not actually see him hand over the note to Salma. Now exams malpractice was one offence. Failing to fill the EMAL form was another offence all together. When Salma finished her long harangue about her innocence and refused to sign, she was persuaded to sign by the security man who assured her that no one would stop her from continuing to write her paper. And that he was sure they would resolve the matter at the office of the Head of Department.

After she signed, some calm was restored in the examination hall and all the students wrote till they finished. A female student who was sitting on the other side of Salma was also asked to sign the second witness form. She did. The lecturer assured them that if Salma was lucky the whole incident would not go beyond the HOD's office.

When they were done writing the Moral Philosophy paper, Salma followed the teacher to the HOD's office.

One thing she was not so sure about was that though she did not know who the new HOD was, students were full of praises for his goodness and compassion. She had been in the school for four years and she never had any altercation with teaching staff. She did her best to avoid them. She made sure she had no relationship of any kind with any of her teachers. Most of the friends she had among the academic staff were in the other faculties. This particular HOD, her own HOD, they said he was very kind. So she was sure she would find compassion in his eyes.

But the thought of what would happen if things went the other way was heart-wrenching. Salma found herself shedding tears even before anyone reprimanded her. She knew what she did was wrong. But students were doing it all over. So why should she be this unlucky. Exams Malpractice at final year, in the last semester and while writing the last paper... Was this a curse or something? Please God, let this cup pass over me.

The invigilator told Salma not to worry. "Our HOD is a benevolent man. He is kind and loves the progress of his students. This is not the first time I take cases to him. Usually he would admonish the students and warn them never to repeat what they did. And the matter would die there. I do not see how your case would be different." "But, madam" Salma said through her tears, "You should have allowed me be. You

should have ignored me. You should have just seized the paper and the matter would have died in the class.”

“And I would have lost my job. You have no idea how many years I put in to get to where I am. In any case, what did you do to warrant that kind of action from me? You know the rules. With or without me, the security man would have noticed and he would have reported. No, my dear, this is the best way to handle it. Let the Head of Department who has authority to handle this matter handle it. Believe me, you have nothing to worry about. You will see.”

As they walked towards the office of the HOD, Salma was in prayers as she had never prayed before. She knew she would never be counted among the holiest people. But still she had faith. She knew, particularly in this regard, and where it concerned the issue of exams malpractices, she was a first offender. And even in courts first offenders were treated genially. She resolved never to misbehave again if God gave her another chance. University was not a life or death affair. But when you came to 400Level last semester exams, it looked like it – a life or death affair.

Please God do not let me be rubbished like this. I have not been a very good girl, I know. But I also know you are all forgiving and merciful. Please God, in the name of all that is holy, deliver me. Let me look at this wicked woman and laugh. I know she is laughing at me inside.

Generally, I know that women don't like me, especially my lecturers. But is it my fault, God, that you made me this beautiful, this youthful? I know their problem. Envy. My looks and age are killing them. Please, God, do not give them chance to kill me too. I promise to renew my ways. I will re-establish my relationship with you. . I know where I was wanting. You made us, and you made us fallible. So please forgive our trespasses.

Salma kept praying silently till they reached the office of the Head of Department. The last time she was there was two years ago when she had issues with her add and drop forms. Even then she did not see the HOD. The secretary attended to them. In any case, even if she had seen him, he would not have been in a position to help her since a new HOD had taken over about six months before the examinations started.

Whoever the new HOD would be Salma prayed she would find compassion in his eyes.

The secretary asked them to wait so she could tell her boss that they wanted to see him.

She went in, announced their arrival and came out.

“He said you could go in, ma.” The secretary addressed the invigilator. She went in after instructing Salma, Kola and the other witness to wait. “Good morning, sir.”

“Good morning, Dr Amina.”

“Sir, we have one case.”

“EMAL?”

“Yes.”

“Final Year?”

“Yes.”

“Boy or girl?”

“Girl.”

“That’s rare. How bad?”

“Very bad.”

“That means you caught her with the cheat notes and all?”

“Yes, sir.”

“She has signed the form?”

“Yes, sir”.

“And the witnesses?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. Let them come in.”

The lecturer opened the door, stuck her head out of the door and motioned with her head for them to come in.

They all trooped in into the HOD’s office.

Salma was the last in tow.

The lecturer closed the door after her.

As they entered, he looked at the invigilating lecturer and said, with coldness in his voice, "Doctor, prepare the documents for the Exams and Ethics Committee for further processing. I am sure you know this is beyond me."

"Okay, sir." She said and went out.

"I can just imagine." Omar was beside himself with excitement. "Mum, this reads like a story of fiction. Honestly, if you were not the one telling us, I would have said you made it all up."

I smiled at my son without saying a word.

"Then what happened to Salma?" he asked.

"Sadly, when she was summoned by the committee, she implicated Kolawole Abdul. He too was also expelled."

"Mum! How wicked can this girl be? You mean..."

I extended my hand and touched his shoulder. "Rules are rules, my son. If

you do not want to get caught, then don't break them."

Omar looked at me strangely and I knew what the unasked question

"You see?" I told him, "Salma knew what she was doing all along. And she meant.

did not just go down without a fight.



