

Secrets of Comet Hostel
by
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Yet another school, and once again, I find myself in the unenviable position of being the new student. I'm growing tired of this never-ending cycle of moving from one place to another, always at the mercy of my father's job. As we embark on this latest adventure, I can't help but hope that this school will be different from the last one.

The last school was a nightmare, with terrible cooks and even worse food. I still shudder at the thought of their meals, where the beans had a peculiar way of separating oil and water, while insects seemed to prefer floating on the surface. But what I dreaded the most were the wicked seniors who made life unbearable.

"Are you excited?" my mother's voice interrupts my thoughts. It's moments like this that make me believe I truly matter to them. I contemplate telling her the truth—how scared and tired I am of constantly starting over in new schools, defending myself against bullies who see me as an easy target simply because I'm the new kid. Making friends is a challenge, exacerbated by my status as an only child with no cousins or nieces. My parents are also only children, and we move so frequently that I've become socially awkward, counting down the days until the next relocation.

Instead of pouring out my feelings, I take a deep breath and reply, "How can I be excited?" I look out the window as we continue our journey.

"Oke, I'm sorry," my mother says, reaching over to rub my head. I want to challenge her, to tell her not to make promises she can't keep, as I've learned not to take her words seriously unless they align with my father's. But instead, I turn away and continue gazing out the window.

We've been on the road for nearly two hours, and I can't help but wonder why all my school's always end up so far from home whenever we move. Nausea creeps in as the sun begins to set. I ask my father if I can roll down the window for some fresh air. His sudden outburst surprises me. He accuses me of never appreciating anything he does, and of always finding fault. I suspect he overheard my conversation with my mother. I want to argue back, but I remind myself that they'll soon leave me at this new school, and I won't see them until visiting day. Maybe my father is already missing me, which could explain his anger. So, I apologize and face the window.

As we continue driving, the landscape consists of nothing but bushes, more bushes, and even more bushes. I yearn for something different. Then, on the horizon, a colossal pink structure in the shape of the letter 'H' comes into view. As we draw closer, it looms larger. In the center, an ugly blue and green logo proudly proclaims the school's name: "June Rose International Girls Academy since 2002."

Upon reaching the imposing pink gate guarded by five stern security personnel in lime green uniforms, I struggle to stifle my laughter. They look like clowns, but the gravity of their expressions warns against any mockery. They halt our car and scrutinize our purpose for arriving. My father promptly answers, informing them that we're here to drop off a new student.

However, their response takes us by surprise—they point out that the school started two weeks ago and it's past 6 pm, which violates their strict rules. My father insists on calling the vice principal, a friend of his, who is expecting us. He grows increasingly agitated as the security guards question him and his friend's failure to prepare them for his arrival. My mother intervenes, urging father to wait for the VP's response. After five minutes, a security guard returns to apologize and directs us to the hostel where the VP awaits. He warns us about the ongoing sports activities and advises caution while driving through the school grounds.

The drive from the school gate to the hostel takes about ten minutes, along a pink rose-lined driveway with signs urging drivers to proceed slowly. To the left, a vast field hosts girls engaged in various sports activities, clad in different colored sportswear. Students begin to notice our car, trying to peer inside to catch a glimpse of us. I'm relieved that my father didn't let me roll down the window earlier, as the attention is already overwhelming. We pass by a cluster of pink buildings behind another pink gate, which I'll later learn is the school area. After about three minutes, we arrive at more pink bungalows, each labeled with a name in front. A tall man with an oversized smile and tiny round glasses stands waiting. He resembles those inflatable balloons outside car dealerships.

The VP proves to be a friendly man. After exchanging pleasantries with my father, he turns to greet my mother, revealing that he and my parents attended secondary school together, where my parents first met. He teases my mother about following my father around, joking that she's been doing it since he was in SS1 and she was in JSS2. I've always wished my parents would share more stories from their youth, so I'm delighted to hear this one. The VP adds that he's never seen a couple as in love as my parents. I'm grinning widely, sensing my father's embarrassment. He playfully cuts the VP short, urging him to focus on my check-in, as they still have a long way to go before returning to Lagos that night. The VP assists my parents in the check-in process and provides a brief tour of the school. By the time we finish checking in, it's time for night prep. My parents prepare to leave, giving me a warm hug and 20,000 naira for personal use, although students are not allowed to carry cash. They also left an additional 50,000 naira with the VP and another 50,000 naira in my school commissary account. The unspoken message is clear: I should only contact them in emergencies. I return their hug and ask them to travel safely. After they depart, the VP instructs me to change into the bright lemon green dress he provided and leave my belongings in the matron's room for inspection. He intends to introduce me to her before I join the other girls for night prep. After that, I can organize my locker following the inspection.

I try to plead and explain that I'm uncomfortable with all the attention, that I'd prefer to quietly arrange my things and slip in unnoticed. However, he informed me that it's typically the house mother's responsibility to handle student check-ins, and he only did it because of his relationship with my parents. He assures me that his office is always open if I have any issues but urges me to go change and join the girls for prep. I reluctantly head toward the pink gate, through a bungalow, and into a common room. At the end of the common room, a door leads to a long veranda with flickering fluorescent lights. There are about five rooms to the left of the veranda, and one of them will be my home for the foreseeable future. The sight fills me with dread and

anxiety. My heart races, and I feel queasy. Being the new student is a familiar experience, yet it still ties knots in my stomach and leaves me breathless.

I manage to regain my composure quickly and retrieve the bright lemon-green dress, even though I find it unattractive. An all-girls school is a welcome relief for me, as I no longer have to worry about how my appearance accentuates my features. While the dress may be ugly, it liberates me from concerns about my body. I remember seeing a mirror in the common room, so I grabbed my purple Jansport backpack, which contained my essentials—lip gloss, journal, purple water bottle, transparent 12-inch ruler, and a purple Jansport pencil case holding two black Bic ballpoint pens, two mechanical pencils, two HB pencils, a large blue eraser, and a purple sharpener. I head back to the common room to check my reflection in the mirror, but as I arrive, the VP is waiting for me. I'm forced to rush outside.

The VP and I proceeded to meet my house mother. Along the way, he points out various buildings, but my anxiety keeps me from paying attention. As we approach the school gate, a woman in black leggings and a blue T-shirt, sporting a blue bandana on her head, stands with her hands on her hips. She has poorly drawn eyebrows. Despite that, she radiates warmth and introduces herself as Ms. Bridget. She asks for my name, and I tell her I'm Ajoke, though I go by Oke. She compliments my name and shares that she has been the house mother for Comet Hostel for almost three years. She expresses her love for shaping young minds and regrets not being able to meet my parents. The VP explained that they were in a hurry but will visit on a future occasion. She accepts this with a smile and proceeds to take charge of my arrival, promising to look after me from here on.

Ms. Bridget guides me as we head toward my class. As we reach JSS3 Earth, (each class within a year is named after a planet), all the students stand at attention, chanting, "Good evening, ma. You're welcome to JSS3 Earth - Class of Excellence." I suppress a giggle at their synchronized routine. Ms. Bridget enters the classroom and notices that two girls, Jemilla and Praise, are missing. She asks for their whereabouts, but no one responds. She grows insistent, asking again, but still receives no reply. That's when I noticed two girls standing behind the class bulletin board, hidden from Ms. Bridget's view due to the poor lighting. I point them out, and she asks them to step forward, questioning why they hadn't responded earlier. They scramble to explain, and something black falls from them. She instructs them not to touch it, and a tense silence envelops the class. I can't make out what fell from them, but the atmosphere suggests it's contraband.

Ms. Bridget bends down to pick up the object—a black BlackBerry Curve 2. She asks which of them owns it, but neither confesses. She sends both of them to kneel in the quadrangle in the middle of the school, where they will remain for the night. I feel uncomfortable, knowing that I inadvertently drew attention to them. My classmates' icy stares and palpable tension suggest that I made a grave mistake.

Ms. Bridget assigns me a seat at the back of the class and departs. I walk to my seat, aware of the hostile gazes directed at me. No one utters a word to me for the remainder of the night. I've

learned that at J.R.I.G.A, gossip spreads like wildfire, and the actual events matter less than the rumors. By the end of night prep, the story circulating was that the VP is my uncle, and I've been sent as a spy to report back to him. Allegedly, I saw Jemilla and Praise with the phone and intentionally reported them to the matron as a snitch. It doesn't help that the matron left the two girls kneeling in the quadrangle all night. When I walk into room 7, silence descends, and everyone stops what they're doing to stare at me. My bad luck ensures that the last unclaimed bed in the room is the top bunk above Jemilla's bed. JSS3 Earth girls are fiercely loyal, with Jemilla as their leader. She is fair-skinned with honey-colored hair, a generous D-cup chest, and a remarkably flat backside. Everyone fawns over her, and she seems to have our classmates under her spell. They do her bidding, making her appear innocent while they carry out her schemes. Jemilla quickly makes my life miserable. Our first clash arises from my habit of stepping on her bed whenever I descend from my bunk. She detests anyone's feet touching her bed, but instead of addressing me directly, she lets it become gossip fodder.

The next two weeks are hellish, as I'm shunned by everyone in JSS3. No one acknowledges my presence, and I'm invisible during school hours. Fortunately, I established a few unlikely friendships, including one with Auntie Risi, the school's tuckshop manager. The school's food is inedible and not fit for human consumption, making my relationship with Auntie Risi vital. I start each day with a Fun Time cake and a cold Hi-Malt, continuing with a sausage roll, coconut chips, and more Hi-Malt during short breaks. By lunchtime, I've amassed enough food from Auntie Risi's tuckshop to last me through dinner. Auntie Risi may seem cold on the surface, but she's an angel, caring, smart, and attentive. Her dream is to save enough money to attend the University of Ibadan and study Pharmacy. She rarely talks about her family, and I sense that it brings her sadness, so I avoid prying too deeply. My friendship with Auntie Risi provides comfort and companionship during challenging times.

Despite being a social outcast, I wake up at 4:30 am daily to shower alone before the 5:00 a.m. morning devotion. Comet Hostel springs to life at this hour, and my solitude allows me to prepare for the day ahead. On this particular morning, I rise from my top bunk at 3:20 a.m., unable to sleep. The lights in the bathroom flicker, refusing to come on. An uneasy feeling grips me as I make my way to another bathroom, one that I dislike due to its eerie atmosphere, dim lighting, and perpetual chill. This morning is colder than usual, and I hear water running from the farthest stall. I'm curious about whether someone left the water running or if someone is actually using the bathroom. As I approach the last stall, a chilling sensation of being watched washes over me. I dismiss it as my overactive imagination, but the feeling persists. When I peer into the stall, I see Jemilla's head, her honey-brown hair cascading down the window sill. Her headless body sits beneath. I attempt to scream, but no sound escapes. Jemilla turns her head to look at me, and panic sets in. I try to flee, but my feet refuse to move, and my body remains paralyzed. She picks up her head and reattaches it to her body, asking why I'm not sleeping. I want to scream for entirely different reasons. Is this what she should be asking? Is she alright? But I'm incapable of coherent speech. She pulls me out of my thoughts, and I finally manage to respond, apologizing for disturbing her shower and explaining that I was merely curious about the running water. She laughs it off, saying she's almost done if I'd like to use the stall next. I decline, claiming I've lost interest in showering and am returning to bed. She questions whether

my reluctance stems from what I saw, and I deny witnessing anything, attributing my unease to the bathroom's coldness. I hurry out of the bathroom, praying fervently for protection until daybreak when I can call my parents to pick me up.

"Oke, Oke, wake up! It's time for morning devotion," Jemilla calls out, rousing me from my sleep. She's been doing this for over a month now, we've become inseparable. She assists me with everything, even when I don't need Jemilla's help she is always helping me, she helps me secure a spot during all meal times, she waits for me every morning to walk to school together, during assembly she always saves a sit for me to sit right next to her, we even sit together during prep hours. Jemilla makes sure I receive the same level of attention and respect from our classmates as she does. Weekends have become something I look forward to, and my time at school is gradually improving. Jemilla and I never spoke about me walking into her headless body in the shower, I'm still not sure if it was a dream or if it was real but I know everything changed that day. Perhaps I'll stick around here a bit longer, as I'm starting to like it. Who would have thought that I'll enjoy my time here and with Jemilla of all people? And what's the worst that could happen?

To be continued.....