

THE JOLLOF DEAL.

It is raining very heavily this night that I am stranded on the ever-busy streets of Lagos. Not because I'm a newcomer to Lagos; a "Johnny-Just-Come", no. Rather, it is because I am on a quest to redeem myself by recovering an all-important mandate - a recipe book which has the power to make or mar my career as a business executive.

"How could a recipe book possibly make or mar your career?" I'm sure this and many more questions are swirling through your minds right now.

Could a common recipe book really make or mar my career? Let's find out.

It all started a few weeks ago. My name is Isioma and I work for a PR agency as a corporate executive. It is not a large company, but we are doing so well that we are a force to be reckoned with in the corporate world. My job description is to handle the high-profile clients of the agency and I'm proud to say that I have successfully developed, from start to finish, public relations campaigns that feature the top brand influencers in the country.

When one morning, my boss Mrs Adeyefa called me into her office, I thought it would be business discussions as usual. I was in for a shocker. Mrs Adeyefa announced that morning that she was planning on taking a sabbatical and going on a trip round the world in order to relax, and here's the deal: she was going to hand over the company in my care for the time being and what's more, she was prepared to give me a 25% share of the company. I was so elated at the prospects, but it came with a condition that I was pull off a show-stopping campaign for our newest client, a senator contesting for a second term in office. This client gave us a blank cheque and the freedom to be as creative as possible.

This was an opportunity of a lifetime which I am prepared to grab with both hands. I spent many days and nights poring over my books which I called "My Ideahouse", trying to come up with a mind-blowing idea befitting for our client. Nothing seemed to be good enough and I would have died of hunger if not for Iya Barakat's jollof rice. Iya Barakat, whom I fondly called Iya B, is my elderly neighbour who regularly visited and offered me a bowl of piping hot jollof rice. Not just any kind of regular jollof rice that one can get at the closest "mama put" buka, but life-changing jollof rice. Spicy and cooked in a rich tomato-and-meat sauce that is to kill for.

I am no cook but I have asked Iya B to show me how to cook her heavenly jollof rice, but no matter how hard I try my attempts doesn't even come close. Iya B has told me that this jollof rice recipe has been in her family for generations and it is passed down from generation to generation. In fact, in her village, her household is known for their party jollof rice. She also told me that she has decided to put the cooking procedures into writing in a leather-bound recipe book that's she keeps in the safety of her bedroom.

One morning, after a long night of poring over "My Ideahouse" and peering at my laptop screen trying to come up with a great idea, I packed my remaining jollof rice for lunch and headed to my office. On my way to the office, I decided to get myself a cup of coffee to kick-start my day and that was when I saw him. Afrobeat superstar,

Grammy Awards Winner and the self-acclaimed "Nigerian baby boy", Damien, seated at a table, a cup of coffee in front of him and his manager sitting across from him.

"My time has come" I said gleefully to myself. Taking a deep breath, I walked up to them and introduced myself. He looked startled but I reassured him that I no stalker. I told him I had an amazing deal that I'd like him to be part of, told him about my company and about our client and asked him if it would be alright if I book an appointment with him. He told me that he had some time on his hands and he could follow me to my office right away.

Words could not fully express the giddy happiness that I felt. I honestly did not have a plan yet but I was confident that with Damien on this deal, it was bound to be a success. Damien and I discussed for quite a while before he turned to his manager to have a word with her.

While that was going on, I excused myself to go to the kitchenette to sneak a few spoonfuls of rice. I was so engrossed that I did not hear Damien walk in.

"That smells so good, he said and I whipped around so suddenly that my fork clattered to the ground. "I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to frighten you" Damien beamed and continued "but I must say that whatever you're eating smells so good".

"Thank you. I was just having an early lunch. Want to join me?" I said.

"Sure, I would love to". He said and grabbed another fork. I picked up the fork that fell to the ground, cleaned it and we dug into the rice.

"Oh my god", Damien said, his face contorting in pure ecstasy as he took a forkful of rice. "You made this?"

"Yes" I said shyly, tucking an errant strand of hair behind my ear while my conscience pricked me. But what would you have you do? Tell him that I did not cook it? C'mon now!

"I must say that you're a good cook"

"Thank you" I said again, shyly. A little fib, yeah? But I did not give it much thought until we all got back into the office and Damien suddenly said "Final offer. 85 million naira with you as project lead"

"Done" I said. Damien continued talking "But before we begin, everyone on my team would have to first taste that awesome jollof rice of yours. We would sign the deal next week "

"That won't be an issue at all". We shook hands and he left with his manager.

I put a quick call to Mrs Adeyefa who was very delighted. "Congratulations, I guess you're my business partner now", she said.

On my way home from work, I was so delighted. As for the rice? "Small issue" I thought to myself and laughed it off. If only I knew. I then called Iya B's number to tell her that I have a contract for her. I began to ask her, very nicely, if she would be available the following week to help me prepare a party-sized amount of rice, only for her to tell me that she had travelled.

"Travelled?" I said and panicked. My heart started hammering against my chest.

"Yes oh! I forgot to tell you sef. Barakat just gave birth and I'm currently on my way to Abuja to look after her" Iya B said happily.

"Okay, congratulations ma. Please ma if I may ask, when would you come back to Lagos?"

"I shall be away for about two or three months"

"Oh!" I said in a small voice. I began to feel dizzy.

"Isioma? Se o wa alright sha? Are you okay? You don't sound happy", she said.

I forced a small laugh. "Oh no Iya B. Nothing to worry about. Congratulations once again ma and please send my regards to Barakat"

"Kosi wahala. No problem, I will", she said and hung up, and as if on cue, it began to rain. It rained so heavily that it seemed as if the heavens were bent on submerging the Earth in water.

"I'm finished. What do I do now?" I said aloud as tears stung my eyes and my chest felt tight. I put my head on the steering wheel and began to cry. I was supposed to be truly happy for Iya B but I just couldn't bring myself to.

Just then, a thought crept into my mind. "But how do I do this? How do I break into Iya B's apartment and steal her recipe book?" I cried, and as if my mind was taunting me, the popular slang "Oya na, just dey play" started ringing in my head.

It took me a long time contemplating and deciding if I should and could steal Iya B's recipe book but I eventually made up my mind. I held the Holy Crucifix dangling in front of my dashboard and mouthed the words "Forgive me God, forgive me Iya B".

I would steal steal the recipe book and hope Iya B doesn't find out. My future depends on that book.

With that resolve, I drove home, stopping at a shop to buy a duplicate padlock that resembled the one on Iya B's apartment door. Sitting pensively by my window, I waited for the dead of night to reach before carrying out my plan. When my bedside clock chimed 12am, I dressed up in an all-black ensemble and a black nose mask. I looked at myself in the mirror and smiled to myself before stepping out. Picking up a heavy stone, I crept stealthily to Iya B's apartment.

"Thank God for the rains, everyone is indoors tonight", I said to myself and said a word of prayers that God should forgive me and guide me from being caught. Luckily for me, I wasn't caught. On getting to Iya B's entrance, I struck the padlock with the stone several times before it broke and the door opened. I hastily went inside, closed the door and headed to her bedroom. Luckily for me again, the book was on the top drawer. I hastily took a picture of the jollof rice page, got out and replaced the broken padlock with the one that I brought. Then I left.

"Thank God!" I breathed a sigh of relief as I plopped down on my bed. I brought out my phone to take a look at the picture of the recipe. But something was off. It appeared that she had omitted something. There was, in Iya B's scraggly handwriting "Item Ten: Secret To My Jollof Rice: Blank".

"Oh God, what now?!" I said and started crying again. "I thought every ingredients of this recipe would be in this book. Why does this woman have to be so secretive, eh? God please help me. Help my career please".

I cried myself to sleep and woke up the following morning with a dream where Iya B was showing me a local leafy spice and telling me that, that is the secret to her jollof rice. "Oh God, thank you! I've seen what I'm looking for!"

The following week that the deal was to be signed, I rushed to the market to get the ingredients for the rice and also the mystery leafy spice. On the day the deal was to be signed, I woke up early in the morning, prepared the jollof rice according to the procedures in the recipe page together with the leafy spice; dished it out and went to work. Damien and the rest of his team arrived shortly after and, after the formalities, I served the dice. Everyone complimented my cooking while I glowed inwardly. After the meal, Damien agreed to sign the deal and finalise plans on it, to the excitement of everyone present.

Thank you God, thank you Iya B. Your recipe book indeed saved my career.

