

He was one of the passengers who had to join us from the other bus because it was going to a different destination. I noticed that he didn't have any luggage—not even a cross bag—on him, and I wondered how anybody could be traveling such a long distance without luggage. He made me curious, but I didn't say anything.

Somewhere very close to Ore, our bus stopped. The brake pad was bad, or at least that was the driver's explanation. I was too irritated to pay any attention. As I got off the bus to take a walk, I saw him standing behind it and took that as an opportunity to start a conversation.

"Please, do you know what the driver said is wrong?"

"No idea," he said. "It looks like we'll be here for hours."

I told him that I was tired because I had been on the road since the previous day. His expression changed to that of keen interest. "Where are you coming from?" He asked.

"Accra."

"That's where I'm also coming from, but I passed the night at a friend's in Lagos. Even the clothes I'm wearing are his," he told me.

"Oh, really?" I asked casually, trying to suppress my curiosity. He looked at me, like he was trying to decide if he could talk to me. I waited.

"It's a long story," he continued. "I had to run for my life. I was tired of the constant beatings with machetes, so I escaped."

"That's a lot," I responded.

He explained that he didn't have a choice. If he had spent one more minute trying to get his phone or laptop, someone would have caught him and reported to his Chairman. I understood.

I knew his kind. I had seen them before. I had even lived with them. So, I asked an obvious question: "Are you coming from an *office*?" In Ghana, there are an uncountable number of *offices*, and an unbelievable number of young Nigerians living in them.

He went ahead to narrate his story. How he sneaked out of the office through the backdoor when the senior boy mistakenly left the key to the back door in the kitchen. And how he ran until he had gone far enough to not be caught. When he found a Nigerian store, he borrowed the lady's

phone and called his sister who sent money to the store owner who in turn made a quick exchange for him.

Again, I wasn't surprised. I've heard his story a lot of times. I knew about boys who jumped over fences in the middle of the night, escaping from offices for fear of being beaten at the slightest mistake. We spent the next few hours talking about life in Accra—the life for Nigerians who go there in search of greener pastures. What I didn't tell him was that I had lived his story—that I was also coming from an *office*. Even though I felt a subtle connection towards him, I wasn't willing to share my tale with him.

Having that conversation triggered the memory of another conversation I had suppressed.

On my first night in Accra, my Chairman was outside to welcome me. He called all the boys to the sitting room for an introduction. There were 10 boys.

"I'm Gabriela," I said, and wondered what was so difficult about pronouncing Gabriela when they all started calling me by their constructed derivatives of the name—Gabala, Gabrala, Gibreala. *Who are these weirdos?!*

They looked so strange; nothing like the kind of people I would ordinarily let into my space. But I wasn't about to express my discomfort, so I switched on my hard girl persona. My chairman addressed us. His first instruction was that nobody was allowed to make passes at me and that anyone who touched me inappropriately would be sent back to Nigeria. If Chairmo was creating an atmosphere of safety for me, then I didn't have much to worry about—or so I thought.

"This house is a warzone. We are all soldiers here. Are you sure you can cope?" he asked me after he was done issuing the warning.

I swallowed hard.

"Yes, Chairman."

"Are you aware that we don't sleep at night?"

"Yes, Chairman."

He went on to tell me about our prayer routine: 4am every morning—right after office hours. Office hours were between 10am–7pm and 12am–4am WAT. I wasn't worried about that because I've had a terrible sleep routine for years.

Yahoo boys pray, too? Wow.

I was assigned to the kitchen to cook. I love cooking so my duty was perfect.

That night, I was asked to get enough rest to recover from the long and stressful journey. I was exhausted, so after texting my younger brother to inform him that I had arrived, I slept until the next morning.

The next morning when I got to the office—situated in one of the rooms downstairs—with my laptop, our senior boy gave me a seat in between two of the boys who were my roommates.

“Have you *hustled* before?” he asked.

“No,” I replied. The boy sitting by my left offered to teach me.

The first task was to hack Facebook accounts owned by Tanzanians. When I asked why we were hacking Tanzanian accounts and why we couldn't hack or just use our Nigerian Facebook accounts, the boy explained that Tanzanians are less exposed to the digital world so their accounts were less secure, and that Mark Zuckerberg was more strict with Nigerian accounts because of the rapidly increasing rate of Nigerians who are internet fraudsters.

It's funny how fast life comes at you, yeah? One day, you're a clothes vendor anxious about how to pay your rent, and the next day you're saying yes to a suggestion to travel to Accra and *hustle* in an *office*.

A strong wave of sadness engulfed me. I wanted to walk out of the office, pack my luggage, and leave. Instead, I inputted the first Tanzanian phone number I had been given and started hacking Facebook accounts which I would edit to look like that of an American. By the time the office closed, I had hacked and lost three accounts. I told myself I would go harder that night—the harder I worked, the faster I would *catch work* and leave the house. I didn't want to be there for long.

The first shock hit me four days later. That Sunday morning, while waiting for some of the boys to get ready for church, I was outside taking photos when I saw a policeman walk into the compound. I turned around and saw that the boy who was holding the camera had disappeared. It dawned on me that we were being raided by the police. I stood still and remained calm. I had

never experienced being bursted by the police, but I knew if I wanted to save myself, I had to be calm and feign confidence.

The second policeman called at me and I walked to the van. “Are you a Nigerian?” That was his first question.

“Yes, sir.”

Crime—especially cyber crime—was a strong stereotype that was associated with being a Nigerian in Accra—in most countries of the world.

“How many people are in this house?” he continued.

“I don’t know, sir. I came in last night to spend a week with my friend’s brother,” I lied. “I only just woke up to prepare for church.”

He looked at my face to see if I was lying. I stayed calm and expressionless, not giving away anything. Being constantly cautious of getting mugged by thugs in Nigeria taught me how to hide my fears.

“Enter the van.”

“Why?” I retorted.

He hesitated, then ordered me to follow him inside the house where the other officers had gathered most of the boys—except the ones who had locked themselves up in their rooms. They took a photo of us and threatened to publish it as “wanted.” That statement made my fear diminish instantly. Maybe it was the way he said it, or the look in his eyes when he did, but I knew in that instant that he was blabbing.

They took my Chairman and two of his friends away and didn’t return them until late afternoon. Chairmo’s friend said they didn’t take them to the station, they just parked the van somewhere and made them pay about 2000 cedis. I wondered what these police officers thought made them better than the Nigerian police or even the fraudsters that had invaded their country like ants. Sinning differently?

Nobody besides my brother knew I was in Accra, so when I texted Johnny on Instagram two days after the police raid, he was livid. It took hours to convince him that I was in a safe place—that I wasn’t going through the horrible things he went through. I had to tell him I eat

twice a day, and that my chairman is a kind person before he gave in. I knew about his terrible experience in Accra two years ago.

Up until that point, nothing inhumane had happened in the office. Aside from the mental exhaustion that came with being around many people who weren't my friends and the constant contact with annoying personalities, I was okay. There was also the physical exhaustion from cooking often (I was cooking more frequently than I had imagined), but that was made easier by the two boys who were assigned kitchen duties—cleaning, preparing ingredients, doing dishes, and making me laugh. Those two boys were my favorites. They were young too—barely 19.

Also, save the constant texts from Sarima—his ex-girlfriend—about the misbehavior of my Chairman, his constant pestering even when he had his wedding coming up, and a long list of sex workers who spent the night in his house in quick successions, he was still a good man in my eyes. I didn't think he was a wise person, but he was kind nonetheless.

Then Osama came.

The first time I saw him, I felt a wave of uneasiness. Something about him felt off. I decided that the smart thing to do was to be mindful of him, and since I sensed he didn't like me either, we stayed civil to each other. Sarima had once told me that he caused a lot of trouble the last time he was there, before she ended her relationship with my Chairman and left the house. What exactly he did, she didn't say. I noticed that her demeanor changed every time I mentioned his name, and she always found a way to change the topic.

That wasn't his first time in Accra. He had been there three other times. He had *cashed out* enough money to set him up for life, but everything had gone into living as a poseur. There are many others like him who, after working so relentlessly, got the greener pastures that they sought, only to return to Nigeria and spend lavishly on women and other frivolities. They would either return to Accra to start again or find an *office* in Nigeria.

Up until Osama's arrival, I was comfortable. The challenges were bearable, and nobody was making my stay miserable. Even though I was the last "Jedith," I wasn't being bullied the way jediths get bullied in other *offices*, and aside from the occasional tension when Chairmo was angry at someone, the house didn't feel like an *office*. One couldn't tell who the senior boy was. In many *offices*, a senior boy could eat your meal, and you would be in trouble if you complained.

The only mild discomfort aside from the tedious work routine came from one of the boys who started making passes at me. He said he was attracted to me, and that my waist beads were getting him aroused. I laughed it off as a joke.

But Osama's constant hurtful remarks were beginning to get to me; I had started to question how much more I could take. I decided that I would channel my discomfort into working harder. If I worked harder, I would find a *paying work* faster. I stopped sleeping during rest hours although it was affecting my health negatively. *I need to get out of this place fast.*

Everytime Osama said something hurtful to me, I took solace in the fact that even if he was my Chairman's brother and Chairmo wasn't horrible. I still had two meals a day. I still went to him if I was sick. The only day he had beaten anybody—ordered for anybody to be beaten—was the day he went through our phones and found that two of the boys were doing a job with someone who wasn't in our *office*. He believed they were going to *mafia* him. In his fury, he instructed 11 of us to give them four strokes of the cane, each. I didn't partake in that.

With Osama, nothing prepared me for his plot twist. I mean, I knew he didn't like me but that much hatred when I hadn't offended him? It was difficult for me to process.

We were all in our rooms that early morning when our senior boy came and instructed us to go downstairs to the office. He said the Chairmo wanted to have a meeting with. I thought it had to be something very serious if Chairmo was calling us from Nigeria amidst the stress of preparing for his mother's birthday.

When he called, the first thing he said was; "Is Gabriela there?"

I answered in the affirmative.

Then, he said; "You are a very ungrateful person, Gabriela." I was too confused to respond so I waited for him to continue.

"So you think you're smart. Is this how you want to repay my kindness?"

I was livid. I didn't understand any of it.

"Chairm" —

"Keep Quiet!?" He barked.

I looked at everyone, searching their faces for a clue.

“So Gabriela, you want to *mafia* me?” He ordered Osama to search my laptop. I wanted to scream when I saw what was on my screen: someone was having a conversation with one of my *works* about a secret payment.

“Chairman, I didn’t type that. As you can see, it’s on a guest chrome. Why would I use a guest chrome for my own laptop?” I finally found my voice.

“Gabriela, you’re trying to *mafia* me and you’re still calling me dumb? You that I treat differently from everybody because you are a girl?”

“Chairmo, that’s not me.” I tried again. “That wasn’t me. I didn’t have those conversations. I can’t *mafia* you.”

For a split second, my eyes caught Osama’s, and I thought I saw a smirk.

I knew there was nothing I could have said that would have changed my Chairman’s mind, so when he asked me to leave his house immediately, I didn’t beg. I fought the tears with all the courage I could find.

On my way to Sarima’s house that early morning, I sent her a message on whatsapp threatening to cut her off if she didn’t tell me what it was that Osama did during his previous stay. Somehow, I knew that his hatred—no, insecurity—for me was connected to the fact that I was her friend and that my stay in that *office* was a threat to him.

I didn’t realize that I was talking out loud until he tapped me and asked; “Who is Osama?”

“Osama?” I feigned ignorance.

“I just heard you say Osama killed a boy,” he insisted.

“Oh, pay me no mind. I just remembered a film I saw,” I lied.

If he knew I was telling a lie, he didn’t show it. We eventually got to Onitsha after 8 hours. I had to take another bus.

GLOSSARY

Cashed out: To get paid by your work.

Jedith: Anybody who goes to the office after you is your Jedith.

Mafia: Stealing from your Chairman.

Paying work: Anybody who you have duped.

Office: A house where a group of people, mostly boys, lived and worked under someone who is called the Chairman. A larger percentage of every money they make while living in the house goes to their Chairman as he feeds and houses them.

Office: A room in the house where the work was done. This is where they keep all the laptops with which they work

Work: Anybody you are trying to dupe, mostly foreigners.