

The first time I met her, she had a bowl of licki-licki on the floor next to her. The black velvet shell of the fruit matched the black velvet of her soul.

In retrospect, PraiseGod is probably the worst person I've ever met. Emphasis on met, not that she's the worst person ever. There's still Bin Laden, Trump, Buhari, and so on. But I've never met them, so she ranks high up.

When I saw her, she was sitting on the floor in my cousin's apartment off campus, wearing a blue, orange, and white patterned boubou gown that swallowed her small frame as she put the cracked shells and seeds of the licki-licki in a makeshift bowl made from her dress.

She offered me some and I refused them for no reason in particular. I had just transferred schools, not by choice, I was studying a course that confused me and I had zero interest in, and I had nothing figured out. Vitamin C in a shell wasn't going to solve my problems. But she thought otherwise.

"Have some," she insisted, carrying a handful from the bowl next to her and stretching her hand out to me. "They're really good." She smiled a kind enough smile that made me reach out, my palms cupped to receive her gift.

"Thank you," I said and looked into her eyes. That was when I saw those eyes looking at me with an uncomfortable intensity and so much curiosity. I ignored it. I shouldn't have.

The second time I met her, I had just finished a lecture and I had no idea what was happening. I couldn't wait to get back to my room and fall asleep. Sleep was my only friend. I didn't care if my roommate played loud Hausa, Bollywood-esque music, or if the stench coming from the other one's shoes circulated the room like incense. I could block out my ears and even though I couldn't block my nose too, the heavy warm hands of sleep would pull me to its bosom in no time.

Running down the stairs from class and ignoring my coursemates, I almost had a head-on collision with someone. It was her.

"Oh! Sorry," I apologised immediately.

She smiled and recognition bled into her eyes. "Ojay's cousin right?"

I nodded. “PraiseGod, right?” I don’t know why I said that. It’s not like my name is Ojay’s cousin and it’s not as if I could forget her name. When Ojay told me her name was PraiseGod, my mind went ‘Hallelujah!’

She had a tight-lipped smile on her face. “Just Praise is fine. Where are you going to now?”

“Back to the hostel, I’m exhausted.”

“Really?” She looked down at her watch, making a show of it and letting the sun catch the small crystals bordering the watch. She frowned and looked back up. “It’s 10:30 am. How are you exhausted?”

When she said it, I felt bad for admitting I was exhausted. Am I not meant to be a young, vibrant girl full of soul and all of that? I murmured something unintelligible because I didn’t have a reply and made to leave. But she stepped in front of me.

“You should join me for our community service meeting. We talk about steps we can take to move our community forward,” she paused. “And then we do it.”

I couldn’t believe she just said that statement in the most dramatic way possible. I had no interest in helping out our community. My main goal was survival. And I could achieve that by doing the barest minimum and sleeping my way through life.

“I’m fine, thank you,” I said and tried to sidestep her, but I should’ve known PraiseGod doesn’t let things be that easily.

“Wait,” she said as frown lines appeared on her forehead. “Don’t you want to make a difference in the lives of the widows and orphans of this community?”

No, I thought in my mind. I wanted their lives to be better but not necessarily with active and direct help from me, it’s not my thing. “Is there a way I could donate?” I asked instead of saying those words aloud.

She looked at me, another tight-lipped smile on her face, annoyance dancing in her eyes. “Yes, of course.” Her lips twitched and she looked away for a second as if to calm herself. “But it’s not the same as being actively involved you know?” I didn’t know. “It’s not the same as giving your time, effort, attention.”

“Hmm,” I said and nodded my head because I had no idea what to say.

“It’s fine though.” She shrugged. But the way she said it, her eyes, her posture, her smile, all told me it wasn’t fine. At the time, I didn’t understand why she was trying to guilt trip me, a stranger. Later on, I would realise the problem was that I told PraiseGod no. It was a subtle no, without actually using the words. But it was still no.

“Okay,” I said and nodded while I squeezed myself between the small space her body and the wall created to get away as fast as I could before she could say anything else.

For the rest of the day, I thought about the community service club for no particular reason. I had no genuine interest in it but it’s like when she plants an idea, whether it’s watered or not, it sprouts and grows and grows until you give in because you can’t ignore all this greenery in your mind.

The next week, I found myself asking for directions to the community service weekly meeting. When I entered the small hall, PraiseGod’s eyes immediately spotted me like they were magnets and I was metal. She smiled the smile of someone who knew they’d won.

After I joined the club, I was tethered to her. She was the president and after our meetings, she’d tell me to ‘walk with her.’ The first time this happened, I was amused but found myself following her.

We went to eat at her favourite amala joint. I don’t like amala. But she loved it. She couldn’t accept my dislike for it.

“Who doesn’t like amala?” she asked with an expression on her face that made it look as if I said I didn’t like babies and I killed them in my spare time.

I shrugged. “I don’t hate them either, I just don’t get the hype. I don’t think there’s anything special about it.” I lied. I hated it. I hated the way hot amala felt in my mouth. The texture irritated me. I don’t know why I didn’t tell her this. I chose the cowardice of neutrality.

She gasped. Literally. “I think it’s just because you haven’t had *really* good amala, that’s why.”

When her order arrived, she cut a small ball of amala with her fingers, dipped it in her ewedu soup, and held her hand out to me.

She expected me to eat from her hand. “Uhhh,” I said.

“Don’t be shy,” she urged me on with a smile on her face. “Try it.” She brought her hand closer to my mouth.

I wasn’t shy. I just found it weird that someone was feeding me with their hand. And worse, someone I wouldn’t even call my friend. Maybe I’d call her my president. My president was feeding me food.

She kept looking at me expectantly and I opened my mouth as she guided the swallow and soup into it. I liked the ewedu but the amala was the same as I thought it’d be. It just felt off. I swallowed it and smiled. “Yum.”

She nodded her head. “Right? I knew you’d like it. Would you like to order some?”

“No,” I rushed to say and she frowned. “I’m okay for today, maybe another time.”

I spent the rest of my time there watching her eat two wraps of amala, lick her fingers clean, destroy the meat and I was an audience to all her weird eating noises.

I have eaten one wrap of amala every week since then. I swallowed it fast and didn’t let it sit on my tongue for too long.

Soon, I started following her to the market to stock up on groceries. I’d been content with paying the errand people to go to the market on my behalf. I hated all the hassle. But she insisted that it was better to go yourself because the errand people always cheated you.

Apart from that, I was in awe of the way PraiseGod interacted with the sellers and loved watching her in her element.

“Customer, you no go reduce for me?” she asked a pepper seller she had probably never met before as she held a bowl of tatashe which the seller said was three hundred naira.

“Aunty wetin I go reduce? Na the price be that now.”

PraiseGod brought out two hundred naira and handed it to him. Then she started pouring the bowl of pepper into a black polythene bag.

‘Ahn ahn, aunty. Pity person small now,’ the seller said when he opened the two hundred naira note and didn’t see a hundred naira note folded into it.

She smiled and started to back away. “Till next time, customer.” And a small smile crept on his face as he shook his head and watched her walk away.

She only did this with men. They got easily distracted by her smile. With women, she had to try harder.

Sometimes the story was of her husband who never gave her enough money or her starving sickly child at home. When the sellers recognised her tactics, she resorted to purely aggressive pricing where she constantly asked, ‘How much last?’, talked about the places she could get things at a cheaper price, and pretended to walk away until the vendor, annoyed and exhausted from the back and forth, gave in.

It confused me at first because it was obvious the girl had money or at least her parents did. Then I realised what she loved was drama. PraiseGod never went to the market and came out without drama. She loved any chance to prove she got what she wanted, that she got her way in everything.

There was a time she argued with an invigilator in the exam hall, eating into her time just because she didn’t want to sit next to the window. There was nothing wrong in particular, but she hated sitting next to windows during exams.

The invigilator was furious. “Are you the one in charge here?” He was panting as if he had run a four-hundred-kilometer race and came in last place. “This is my hall and you do what I say.”

“Sir, I can’t sit next to this window. I won’t be able to concentrate and I have the right to sit where is comfortable for me.”

They both weren’t backing out. I and the other students had already started writing our exams. It wasn’t until the second invigilator arrived and diffused the situation, thirty minutes later that there was peace. Of course, PraiseGod got her pick of where to sit.

It was always thrilling to watch her in these situations. It made me think of what life would be like if she could cut me a bit of that vim and courage she had for going for what she wanted and not accepting what she didn’t.

My life would be totally different. I'd probably not be in this school, studying this course. I'd be able to coax my parents into paying for culinary school and investing in my interests.

I'd also probably not be friends with PraiseGod or be in whatever this relationship we have is called. Whenever I'm with her, I'm aware our bond hangs precariously over us and won't stand the test of time. Things will fall apart and I can't wait for that to happen.

I don't know why I'm waiting for it and not inducing shit myself. Maybe if I was PraiseGod, I'd be able to cut people off without a backward glance. But me, I've been dancing in this toxic relationship, waiting for my legs to finally give out and for my lungs to have no air in them anymore.

My best attempt at inducing shit is constantly calling her PraiseGod so I could see how her lips tightened and the crease between her eyebrows formed. So she would smile rigidly and say, 'Praise,' and I'd smile back and say okay but ignore her correction.

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The first time I blatantly told PraiseGod no and stood my ground regardless of her cajoling and persuading was the final crack in the fragile glass of our relationship.

It wasn't a big monumental decision. She wanted me to accompany her to the dispatch office to pick up a package. I had had a long day of classes where as usual, I had no idea what was going on and I had been fantasising about coming back to my room to crash for as long as my body required.

So, when PraiseGod burst into my room with the request as I laid on my bed facing the wall, I hummed a no.

"What?" She asked and I could sense the confusion in her voice.

"Ehn ehn," I said, still facing the wall. I didn't need to see her face to know what it looked like. "I'm exhausted, abeg."

Silence. For a second, I stupidly thought she was gone. Then a huff. "It's just like five minutes away, guy. It won't even take time."

I turned then. I wanted to shout no means no. But that didn't necessarily fit the context, did it? "It's not about time, PraiseGod. If I stand up now, I fit collapse."

She frowned. "I'm just asking you for a little favour. How many times do I ask? And it's not even something big, I can't believe you're being like this."

My mouth dropped open. Again, I wanted to say, you're right, you don't ask, you just take. But instead, I just said, "I'm sorry, but I really can't" and turned to face the wall.

"Wow, it's good to know who is really for you," she said before barging out the same way she barged in. I laughed at how dramatic she was and hoped the way she barged out of my room would be the way she barged out of my life.

But of course not. She sent a long string of texts that said she couldn't believe how selfish and self-centered I was and how she would never do to me what I did to her. That I needed to do some self-reflection and grow as a person. Maybe try therapy.

I blocked her.

Then I unblocked her and replied, 'Have you ever stopped to think maybe YOU are the one who needs therapy, PRAISEGOD?'

Then I blocked her again. Inducing shit and all.