

“Madam, you dey go church?”

The first time I heard this question, I was a passenger on a motorbike, in the middle of nowhere, just before midnight.

I looked around, trying first to ascertain if the brutal pictures my mind was spinning were a valid cause for concern, and also to decide on my best escape route.

We were in a bush path because the driver had taken an alternate route to avoid running into warring villagers. Two neighbouring communities were at war again with each other. Somehow, I had missed that part of the news before leaving home. I wonder how.

I noticed some houses, but they were in clusters of about two or three, and they were far apart. My mind, still irritated that I'd deliberately ignored the voice of reason and common sense, continued to spin those wild pictures, as though it were torturing me for choosing to share knowledge with poor village children who might otherwise remain in the devious bliss ignorance offered.

“Madam, you dey go church?” As I had ignored the question the first time, the driver asked me again.

I muttered an incoherent reply and then I began to pray.

I didn't even know where I was. I only knew I was on my way, somewhere in the western part of Nigeria, to serve where I'd been posted after I volunteered with Teach for Their Future, an NGO that seeks to provide education for children who might otherwise be without it.

I began to pray because I didn't know why this man was asking me such a question, out of the blue.

If I tried to run, even taking into account adrenaline and other bodily functions that would try to facilitate a successful escape, how far could I run from him — with his bike — and where would I go? I didn't know the area.

I prayed earnestly that night, and I didn't even try to stop the tears when they came.

My mind continued to be merciless, reminding me of everything that could go wrong and letting me know that I only had myself to blame.

“E be like say you dey go Church”, the driver's words finally cut through the wall of defense my mind had reluctantly put up, “Because I no just know why I decide to help you this night”.

I continued to pray.

As he helped me with my bags when we arrived at my station, he asked if I was running from my husband.

I couldn't tell if he was joking so I ignored him and paid my fare.

He observed me for a while, shook his head, and said, “Madam, I sure say you dey go Church. Abeg, pray for me”.

I was tired.

My mind was plotting a mutiny with aggrieved body parts.

So I couldn't comprehend why this man was giving up the one thousand, five hundred Naira we had bargained.

When I insisted, he got on his bike, wished me a successful stay, and said the money was seed.

It was only a matter of days though before I began to wonder about the kind of harvest he was hoping for — he'd charged me more than double the fare the villagers would have paid.

And this whole time I thought he'd done me a favour.

I've heard that there are many reasons why people volunteer. I wish I could say my aim of one of the nobler ones.

I did not have a life-changing experience that filled me with a zeal and passion to bring some form of light and hope to these children.

In fact, I had no idea where I'd be sent or I probably might not have come.

I had hit a wall back home and was just looking for a distraction from my life that had, all of a sudden, begun to spin in myriad strange ways.

So I did not know what I was hoping to get from this experience — a point my mind did not stop hammering on and bringing to the fore whenever I began to consider leaving. I did have some expectations, though.

But as we all know, expectations are just fuel to keep us going. Life would still happen.

I learned how to draw water from a well, even though I'm terrified of heights — or in this case, deep depths.

It was a child who taught me how to use the water pumps they had in the village. You had to work it manually first, and then you'd get brown water.

I was told to use alum as a purifier, but then the water became almost sticky to the touch.

And just like my bike man, the villagers would charge you an arm and a leg for even a sachet of pure water if they knew you were a stranger.

We wore our Teach for Their Future badge everywhere — do these people not know that we were here, doing them a favour? I mean, not all the teachers who had volunteered were running away from their lives. Some of them had given up actual privileges, because they wanted to make a difference, and had come to this place where you had to get to a certain spot sometimes before you could get any signal on your phone. And we lived in mud houses, although they were painted and roofed with zinc.

The children we taught were eager and hungry for knowledge, which was a good thing, otherwise, I might have conceded to my mind's constant imploring to go home and stop wasting my time. "You can't run away from life", it would remind me, "Life would still be here when you return".

I taught English language, Verbal reasoning, Christian Religious Knowledge, and Basic Science. Most of them couldn't read even though they were already in school, so we

took time to work on that. And I would ask them what they wanted to be when they grew up. Their answers changed as time went by. It was encouraging to note that the change reflected the seeds we were sowing.

The more I got to know the children, the easier it was for me to wait until the program ran its course. As volunteers, we could leave whenever we wanted, but most of us stayed.

I gave up trying to learn the language and culture of these people though because they had curious ways — the ones around me, at least.

The NGO didn't have space here so they rented rooms for us. We were encouraged to be friendly with the villagers. But they also warned us to be careful in our interactions with them.

One of my neighbours showed up at my door one morning with a rubber of garri. She didn't say much. She mostly just smiled, and I'd assumed it was because she didn't speak much English.

I was ready to leave for work so I thanked her, kept the garri behind the door, and left.

Weeks passed and I still had no desire to do anything with the garri.

One day at work I heard a teacher complaining about the cost of garri. He was spending almost half of his monthly allowance on garri. I mentioned that I had garri that I didn't know what to do with. I told him a neighbour had given it to me but he could have it if he wanted it.

He woke up that night writhing in pain and was rushed to the hospital.

“Madam, you dey go church?” one of the nurses asked me when we visited, “Na God save you o”.

She told us our colleague was lucky that he was not the intended victim.

My neighbour stopped talking to me.

Since I was no longer interested in learning about our host community, I didn’t take part in most of the activities the NGO organized to help us achieve that aim.

I decided to learn a new skill instead.

One of my friends, another volunteer, thought it was a good idea so we went around, trying to find out what options were available to us. That’s when we met Rhoda. She made knitted sweaters and caps, and sold them on market days.

We became fast friends since, I suppose, we were around the same age.

She was a new wife to a man with an older wife. As she’d just had her first child, she was at her father’s house so that her mother could help take care of her. I wondered about that sometimes because most mothers here look forward to going to their daughters’ matrimonial homes to help take care of them and their children after childbirth.

Rhoda told us she’d just returned from Lagos, one of the biggest cities in Nigeria, after years of serving in the home of a woman who she said had promised to sponsor her education to whatever level she desired.

“So why did you come back?”

She had no solid answer to that question.

She had learned knitting there and had gained mastery of the craft. Now it supported her.

We didn't learn much from her because she turned us into workmen of some sort. All we did was couple what she already knitted so she could take them to sell on market days. We were happy to help and did not protest too much at first, but as she continued to take advantage of our kindness, even acting as though it was her right to do so, I stopped going for the classes. My friend gave her a piece of her mind and gained a few more lessons as a result. I refused to go back, despite my friend's imploring. We only had a few weeks before we would leave, and I could forgo what I'd paid Rhoda, without malice in my heart.

Really.

When we first met her, while she was in her father's house, it was beautiful to see her husband visit with gifts and dote on her. Sometimes, I even thought maybe she didn't lose everything by forgoing the chance to get an education. I thought she gained a husband who truly cared about her and together, they could chart a course to the future they wanted. There was still hope. It gave me some sort of relief because I'd been concerned about the life I believe she had given up. At the time, I didn't know she was a second wife.

It was only a matter of weeks after birthing their child though, that Rhoda became just the other wife.

My initial concern returned with more fervor while I was returning from the market one day and saw Rhoda. Her husband was at a bar drinking with some other men, probably his friends, while she was trying to get his attention. Her efforts were useless as he was already spent. She looked ready to cry.

I was so embarrassed, I did my best to pass without being seen.

Where did all that doting care go?!

Does a person's environment have so much hold on him that he would continue to indulge self-destructive habits even when he sees how other men pay for this vain indulgence?

Here, men work hard all day. And then they drink their daily earnings away at bars. Sometimes, they even choose this habit over paying their children's school fees. So the children would stay home after being sent from school. The older ones would try to earn the money somehow. Some school proprietors, knowing the situation, do their best with these children but eventually, they let them go since they're trying to run a business not a charity.

Before we returned, my friend and I visited Rhoda at her husband's house. I almost wept.

Her husband's compound was expansive. The main house was not very far from the entrance. He lived there with his first wife and her children.

Rhoda was given a room at the hindermost part of the compound. It was as though they were trying to hide her from the world. And the room was empty.

Her senior, her husband's first wife, did not even try to hide her displeasure at having to share her husband with a woman young enough to be her child. I thought she looked thoroughly annoyed by the fact that Rhoda had visitors. And more than once, the thought crossed my mind that she might have chosen the location for Rhoda's room.

Rhoda's cheerfulness, despite her situation, unsettled me.

Was this the meaning of contentment, or did she just not know that her situation was pitiful?

I looked at her baby that we had to hold while she went to fetch water and I felt sorry for the child.

What kind of woman would Rhoda raise this child to be?

I still wonder about Rhoda and her daughter, years after. Is she still content with that one, empty room in the hindermost part of her husband's expansive compound?

I wonder about the seeds we sowed in that village.

Are the villagers now reaping doctors, and lawyers, and bankers and teachers? Or are they still reaping husbands who would work hard all day and return home empty because they had given their sweat to the vain indulgence that's pulling them down the path of self-destruction?

Are they still pushing young wives to the hindermost parts of their expansive compounds as though trying to hide them from the rest of the world?

Do they still have neighbours who would come as friends and then refuse to talk to you when they fail to achieve their evil purposes?

Do they still try to extort strangers while making them believe they're being helpful?

I wonder about these things because I believe it's like how the preacher says, "You can't plant bad seeds, then go home and pray for crop failure".

But then again, it is what we sow that we would reap, not what the people from our village sowed — maybe there's reason to keep hoping.