Shine Your Eye

By

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SMASHWORDS EDITION

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Seni stared at her brother in disbelief. The way her eyes grew wide after his words landed on her ears, he might as well have had a banana tree growing from his head. Only a boy … No. Only a man would believe such a cleverly concocted tale.

"Dele, repeat what you just told me," she said in the same sharp tone their mother frequently used when they were children. That tone, which overshadowed a question and answer session, was the warning that came before a slap or some other form of punishment landed on the unlucky child, for an act of disobedience.

Somewhere in Dele's brain, he noted that she was irritated with him, but he completely ignored her, choosing instead to act like she was over-reacting.

"What?" he asked, shrugging his shoulders. "Weren't you listening to me?"

Seni's patience was evaporating quickly, but she kept her eye on the goal: talking some sense into her brother's head.

Clearing her throat, she charged on.

"You just told me that I was wrong about Veronica, that I had misjudged her completely. Your excuse? Because she insisted on paying for her own meal at … Where was this again?"

"The canteen in school," Dele replied immediately.

"Okay, so you went to eat lunch there and she just happened to be eating at the exact same canteen? Dele, she's an Education student. You're an Economics student. There are several canteens on that side of UNILAG--"

"What side?"

"Where the Faculty of Education is located. You're now telling me that she walked all the way from her Faculty to a canteen behind the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, just to eat toast bread? Is the butter at that canteen made from cows that do nothing else but dance to Shina Peters, fool around with auto-tune and occasionally watch Nollywood movies all day long? I mean, what was so special about that toast that made her walk all the way from--"

"Who said she walked? You keep saying 'she walked' as if she doesn’t have friends with cars who could have given her a ride or like she couldn’t have taken a cab," Dele snapped.

"Regardless of how she migrated to that canteen, don’t you see how absurd it is? That’s a 30-minute walk, at least, just to eat two miserable slices of bread, slathered in butter, with what could possibly be a peacock's egg jammed between the slices!"

"You wouldn’t know a peacock's egg if you saw it. I'm pretty sure of that."

"Fine. But guess what Rita told me?"

"The same Rita with multiple carry overs?" Dele asked with a look that conveyed his low opinion of Seni's friend.

"Forget that side jo. Listen, Rita is also an Education student and--"

"I pity her future students, that’s if she doesn’t wind up counting or mis-counting money in a bank somewhere. That girl's ibon can kill both the sheriff and his deputy!"

"Yes, I know Rita is a notorious sheller, but she is not a liar. She said--"

"Good. At least you’ve admitted that her grammar needs serious polishing."

"Oh-oh! Let me land now!" Seni wailed.

"Okay, I'm listening. But hurry up abeg," Dele said crossing his arms across his chest.

"Well, Rita told me that Veronica does not have classes on Tuesdays."
"Does Rita know the time-table of every student in her Faculty? I mean that girl … In fact, just forget that side. Veronica told me that she came to school to study at the library."

Seni snorted. "Veronica study ke? Sure. When pigs fly and dogs start using typewriters. We are not even sure she really took JAMB by herself. I mean, this is 2001 and you know how these things work. Just forget what she told you. This is the truth: she came to school for YOU."

At this revelation, Dele gave a blank stare. Not the reaction Seni was expecting. She pressed on.

"I can't believe you can't see through this girl's antics. Her goal is as plain as day."

"And what is that, Miss I-know-it-all?"

"She's after your money! Anybody with eyes can see that. She will use you and dump you. Why can't you see it? Or do I need to drag you to a woli to wash your head and eyes with koin-koin before you see what I see?" Seni asked in a frustrated voice.

"Woli? Koin-koin? Seni, how many times have I warned you to stop watching these rubbish Yoruba movies? They're filling your head with nonsense!"

Seni clapped her hands together dramatically and perched one hand on her hip, while the other demonstrated the words that followed.

"From your mouth? You're such a hypocrite! You who have been watching all these vampire and werewolf movies would dare accuse me of watching Yoruba movies because of minor babalawo or woli scenes?! Wonders shall never end."

"Okay, that’s enough!" Dele's eyes were red and nobody needed to tell Seni that she had crossed the line. He was her big brother after all.

"I will not have you insult me over a girl you hardly know--"

"But I--"

"Shut up! You don't talk when I am talking. I am 5 years older than you. Do they sell '5 years' in the market?" he asked angrily. Seni knew not to answer, but her thoughts did not stop flowing.

Na today you just know say you be my senior brother? Yeye!

But she did not dare open her mouth to say those words. She knew her brother well enough to know that when he got angry like that, he could easily baptize her with heavy slaps or worse yet, finish her with his belt, and her parents would not defend her.

Dele continued with his torrent of angry words.

"You keep going on and on about Veronica, as if she is a bad person. Isn't she a woman like you? Shouldn't you be defending her? Later now, you'll say guys are the ones always insulting girls. Isn't that what you're doing now? You women are the ones destroying each other!"

"But Brother Dele, it's not like that. Just because I’m a woman--"

"Point of correction, you are a girl, not a woman," Dele spat.

"Okay, fine. Girl. Just because I am a girl doesn't mean I agree completely with what every girl does or says."

She paused. Her eyes never left Dele. She was watching him closely to see if he was going to lash out at her and mentally prepared herself to flee from him if she had to. For the moment, Dele had resumed his former stance with his hands across his chest. But his face was no longer calm. Seni decided to take her chances.

"You see …" she began, moving closer to Dele, and deliberately softening her voice to pacify him. But Dele refused to be wooed.
"I don’t see anything here but some inexplicable beef you have for Veronica. Don’t come near me," he said, putting up his hands to prevent her from advancing closer. Seni felt hurt, but did not say anything. She got his message loud and clear.

"Brother Dele, I know I’m your younger sister, but it doesn’t mean I have the IQ of a cockroach. What am I saying sef? IQ has nothing to do with this. Call it a woman’s intuition. Whatever. But, please be careful with Veronica. Shine your eye well well! She’s not who you think she is."

“Enough! Enough! We’re not having this conversation again. And since you have grown wings and think you can advise your elders--”

How does he being 5 years older than me, make him an elder? Where’s the walking stick? The grey hair? The endless string of completely irrelevant and meaningless proverbs that have absolutely no application to our discussion? Seni wondered. Dele was still speaking.

“Go to my room, pick up the pile of dirty clothes on the floor and wash all of them! If I see one sweat stain on the armpit of any shirt ehn … You go hear am! Nonsense!"

As he walked away, he talked angrily in loud tones:

“Na person wey no get work, na she go dey walk up and down, dey do busy body, dey give her senior broda advice, dey chook mouth for inside matter wey no concern am. Rubbish!”

Seni let out a long, pained sigh. As she made her way to the kitchen, she caught a glimpse of Dele, serving spoon in one hand, still mumbling angrily to himself, heaping large spoonfuls of the asaro she had prepared earlier, onto a plate.

“If to say I wan poison you now … Na so you go just chop and quench. Dis man, shine ya eye,” she mumbled under her breath.

It turned out that Brother Dele was right. Partly. By the time she finished washing those clothes, it was almost 7:30 p.m. and the mosquitoes had started feasting on her uncovered legs. She was thoroughly exhausted and went to bed early. Pretty unusual for a 17-year old.

* * *

Seni did not hear anything else about Veronica from Dele’s lips. It was as if he deliberately avoided mentioning her name in Seni’s presence. She began to second-guess herself.

Maybe she shouldn’t have told Dele anything.

But how do you stand by and watch a person you love get hurt?

As yet, Veronica had not done anything to hurt Dele, but Seni knew it was coming. She was still wondering about this one evening, a few weeks after the “Vero-inspired” conversation she had had with Dele. She was completing the last leg of her journey home from JAMB lessons by foot. When she was within two minutes of the house, she decided, on an impulse, to go and visit her friend, Nancy. It was Friday, and even though she knew that she had to study over the weekend, she also knew that her parents were less strict with their “you-must-study-everyday” rule on Fridays compared to other days. Her spur-of-the-moment plan was to go and borrow a few movies from Nancy and watch them over the weekend.

Nancy, who was three years older than Seni, had an enviable collection of books and movies. As an only child, she regularly got monetary gifts from her parents and relatives, and the money usually went towards a seemingly bottomless list of items she adored. At the top of that list were books and movies. She even had a DVD player in her room, something Seni plotted and planned to get as soon as she could save up enough money to buy one.
Even as she headed to Nancy’s house, she thought of that DVD player. Almost immediately, the picture of someone’s face appeared in her mind. The image was so repulsive that she hissed in disgust. That person was none other than Boye, her brother’s friend.

A year ago, after she had graduated from secondary school, and had returned home, Seni noticed Boye’s sudden interest in her. Sudden, yes. It was sudden because prior to this unwanted attention, and while she was still in secondary school, coming home only for holidays, Boye either ignored her or sent her on errands.

Perhaps, it was the change from seeing her for short periods of time, a few times a year, to seeing her for uninterrupted and extended periods that had caused Boye’s change of heart. Or maybe it was that she was now perpetually in mufti. But the more she thought about it, she ruled that out as a possible explanation.

“It has to be my body,” Seni finally concluded one day. That was the only thing about her that had really changed.

Being a late bloomer, she was still flat-chested and had the body of a pre-pubescent girl, as she got to her mid-teens. It was around that time that she had moved back home from school. But now, the one year she had spent at home, seemed to have set off a chain reaction in her body. It was like her body finally understood that it was time to catch up with her mind, that it was time to actually look more mature and not just sound that way.

Whatever it was, she had seen her body magically transform from boyish, boring, “ignored-by-boys” to curvy, hot and sexy. It was like she just woke up one day and BAM! She had a butt. Not just a regular, forgettable butt, but a well-rounded, “look-at-me-turn-around-and-look-at-me-again” butt, the kind that compliments a sepe sepe figure 8. Her chest also got the memo, and she finally discarded those awful bra-tops, replacing them with real bras.

“Sepe Sepe Figure Eight!” Boye had exclaimed one day, when he dropped by unannounced as usual. His eyes had danced all over her body and Seni was reminded of a fox staring at a chicken coop.

All those drumsticks …

She could swear she saw drool falling carelessly from his mouth too, but that was not easily verifiable from where she stood. It was that day that Seni finally understood that she was a woman. It was also the day she started to get very uncomfortable around Boye. But that was just the beginning.

Boye was just a year older than Dele, making him 23, and yet he was not enrolled at any university or polytechnic. Like Dele, and like Seni herself was experiencing first hand, he had failed JAMB year after year for 5 years. Boye had watched as younger and luckier students gained admission to universities all over the country, while he was stuck at home, getting older but not necessarily wiser. He lived just a few doors away from them in a neighborhood that was unapologetically middle class. The ongoing JAMB nightmare notwithstanding, Boye was a notorious womanizer, and most people in that neighborhood knew it.

Seni often wondered what women saw in Boye. After watching him closely for a while, she narrowed it down to one thing: charm. Boye was charming, well-mannered for the most part, average height, with passable looks. He was certainly not ugly, but he was also not strikingly handsome by any means. If Seni could have assessed him objectively, which she could not, she would have admitted that his lips received the most compliments. Not his face, not his eyes. Just those two red, sexy, and possibly very kissable lips.

When Seni happened to see him toasting girls, or as happened just as frequently, girls toasting him, that singular feature received the most compliments.
“Boye, Boye, fine boy, no pimples. So how many girls have you kissed?” she heard one girl say to him one afternoon when she went to buy soap from a nearby mallam.

“You mean today or since the day I was born?” Boye replied.

What a flirt! He was probably going to say something else, until he saw Seni. As soon as he saw her, he quickly changed the topic.

There had been countless times when she had overheard those types of conversations involving Boye and some girl, so she had made a mental note to avoid him. As yet, he had not made any move.

But that changed when she turned 17 and Boye really took notice. He started to look for excuses to visit their home more often, and he timed his visits to coincide with the hours of the day when he knew Dele, her brother, would be in school. Ironically, he would come and say he wanted to “hang out” with Dele, a 300 level student at the University of Lagos. On those occasions, after telling him that Dele was not at home, a fact he had verified from the obvious absence of Dele’s car in her parents’ compound, he would attempt to toast Seni. His attempts were laughable at best, but she knew that they worked on some girls or else he would have dropped those lines and picked up much better ones.

The lame pickup lines Boye kept rolling out convinced Seni that men assumed women had no sense at all. Maybe certain men …

Boye’s strategy might have worked on other girls, but Seni was far too shrewd to fall for him. She was tempted to report Boye’s wiles to her parents or even to Dele, but after Dele had told her to back off Veronica’s matter, she had consciously avoided him. Telling him about Boye would not go down well. Her parents nko? They would simply adopt a stricter approach and might even forbid her from visiting any friends. In short, if Seni spoke out, she would get blamed for Boye’s behavior, and the blame game would be played against her using comments like “your clothes are too tight” or worse yet “stop wearing trousers,” as if skirts and dresses offered women some kind of immunity against unwanted toasting. Men chase women, shikena!

Besides, as Seni reasoned, if she could not handle Boye here at home, how would she deal with the deluge of desperate guys who would target her once she started living on a university campus? Would she report all of them, one by one, to her parents and Dele?

No.

“I must learnt to fight my own battles. The world will never be rid of unwanted male attention, men who don’t take “No” for an answer. I just have to learn to deal with it once and for all.”

And with that, Seni started plotting how she would stamp out this pest called Boye.

To tell the truth, the ideas that came to her mind at first were childish. One idea was to set him up and have her parents overhear the rubbish he was saying. She decided that that plan could backfire. Boye could simply change his strategy from harassing her at home, to waylaying her on the street, something she had been spared for the time being.

After much deliberation and self-consultation, she decided to turn his number one weakness against him: women. And Seni knew just what to do. The plan was to be executed the following Monday, which happened to be Boye’s birthday.

What’s that saying again about the best-laid plans? Seni was about to learn a valuable lesson. Nancy was one of those talkative, self-absorbed girls whose character was a direct product of over-indulgent parents. Although she was older than Seni, the latter was far more mature than her. From the moment Seni entered the house, Nancy’s mouth was working at full speed.
"Oh baby! Ah, where did you get that top? I just love it! I saw a similar one in one kain catalogue like that that my cousin brought from jand. Speaking of which, did I tell you I'll be janding soon?"

"For real?" Seni asked, trying to sound like she actually cared. She was on her knees, digging through a pile of DVDs jumbled together in a carton.

"Yes, for real. My father said these Naija schools are just full of crap. I mean, all the strikes and everything and--"

"Really? But you've attended only Naija schools all your life, so what does that make you? A product of crap?" Seni said, flinging Top Gun aside. She had seen that movie four times already, and this weekend was not a Top Gun kinda weekend.

"Oh, come on, Seni. You're too serious. You know what I mean now. Anyway, I'm going to take my SATs or A-levels … Or is it O-levels? I don’t even know which one yet. I don’t know why they can't just accept my WAEC results. These oyinbo people with all their shakara sef. I'm not sure I want to go--"

"You mean you haven't decided where you'll spend the next 4 or 5 years of your life? Na wa for you o."

"As long as it's not in this useless country sha. Even Ghana sounds good. I heard they have good schools there, even better than these Naija schools, and my cousin--"

"Oh Lord! Not another cousin!" Seni groaned under her breath.

"What was that? You better not be abusing me o, eh-hen," said Nancy. "Haven't you found a movie yet? You dis girl, you're slow o!"

And with that Nancy shoved Seni out of the way and with alarming speed and admirable agility, pulled out three DVDs: Mission Impossible, Notting Hill and Gladiator. Seni was already mumbling something about not liking action movies that much, but Nancy dismissed her with a loud "Shut up and take them!"

"I should start charging you for all this borrow-borrow!" she added.

Seni smiled. The large collection of movies belonging to Nancy alone, some of which were stored in other rooms in the house, were enough to start a video club, but she knew it would never happen.

"Oya, gist me now … I'm sure you have gist," Nancy demanded as she handed the movies to Seni.

"There's no gist for now, but maybe by Tuesday sha. I'll see you then."

She was about to turn around and leave when Nancy blocked her exit.

"What is going to happen between now and Tuesday? You better talk o! In fact, I demand payment for these movies. You must pay me with gist."

Without even waiting for Seni’s reply, whether it was a Yes or No, Nancy dragged Seni to her bed, made her sit on it, and she herself planted her butt in a chair facing Seni and waited.

For someone who was that talkative, Nancy became really quiet at the anticipation of gist. Seni knew she had no choice. She told Nancy details of Boye and his constant harassment.

"By harassment, you mean he's trying to sleep with you?" Nancy asked.

"If only! He wants that and boyfriend rights," Seni replied, punctuating her response with loud hissing.

"Is he crazy? He's your brother's friend now. He should be trying to protect you from other--"

"Predators? For where?! He's too busy being one himself. A real fox among the chickens."

"You got that right. With this your fly-away hair, you resemble real chicken…"
Seni picked up a pillow and flung it at Nancy, but she missed as Nancy quickly scuttled out of the way. The girl's reflexes sha …

Resuming her position on the chair, Nancy continued in between bouts of guiltless laughter.

"But it's true now. Who told you to go and cut your hair?" said Nancy.

"Ask me o! I told them to cut Anita Baker for me, and this is what they did to my hair," Seni said referring to her hair, which looked more like glorified punk than a short, layered haircut.

"If I knew short hair was this difficult to maintain ehn, I wouldn’t have bothered. Which reminds me … when you go … i in fact, if you go to emmm … B & U, that salon near UNILAG, don’t let that new girl touch your hair. You can see the monstrosity she has done on my head. I mean, how do you mess up Anita Baker?"

"Na your fault now. You should have told her to plait suku for you. She couldn’t possibly mess that up."

"Me? Suku? God forbid. It's on my list of blacklisted hairstyles. But it might fit villagers and market women like you!"

Now, it was Seni's turn to dodge Nancy who did not bother looking for an object to haul at her friend. She just launched forward and pinched Seni's arm. The howling and yelping that followed satisfied Nancy that her revenge was successful.

"Oya sorry now," Seni pleaded, seeing Nancy about to launch another round of painful pinching. Seni was sure that a second pinch would leave a scar on her arm. She silently thanked God that Nancy was not her mother. This was what Nancy's children could look forward to.

Nancy accepted Seni's impromptu apology and settled down to hear the rest of Seni's gist. At the end, Seni told Nancy of her plan to crash Boye's birthday and embarrass him there. Nancy laughed at the vagueness of Seni's plan and declared that it was not even a plan.

"For someone who likes girls that much, it might be a huge turn on sef. Omo, you're just wasting your time. I think you should tell your brother and parents and fashi all this Miss Independent nonsense," Nancy advised.

"Tell my mum, you mean. You know I can't be telling my father about boys. That’s just asking for trouble. If it has nothing to do with me passing this JAMB, he doesn’t even want to hear it. Plus he's always away on some business trip. Anyway, I think you're right about telling mummy and Dele, but I'm not sure it will work."

"Well, if at first you don't succeed--" Nancy began.

"--Hire thugs to finish the job?" Seni asked beaming with mischief.

"Nope! You already know the answer jare."

The sound of a car horn blaring, followed by the sound of the metal gates swinging open, announced the arrival of one or both of Nancy's parents.

"Oh, mummy is back!" Nancy squealed, abandoning her visitor and bounding down the stairs with the carefreeness of a puppy. Seni took that as her cue to leave. She greeted Nancy's mother on the way out and declined her request to stay and eat something. She needed to get home quickly was the excuse she gave the woman, and with that she hurried home. Nancy's advice weighed heavily on her mind all the way home.

Seni made it home before it got dark, but did not escape her mother scolding her for "branching" on her way back from lesson. Telling her that she only went to visit Nancy did not help matters. Her mother gave her a long lecture on how if she hung out with people who had actually passed JAMB, she might get lucky and pass it herself. Of course, her mother's fears stemmed from the fact that Dele had been stuck at home for a few years, trying to pass the same
exam, before he got admitted to the university. Seni believed that her own case was different, but thought it was wise to keep her optimism to herself.

"Actions speak louder than words," she reasoned. "They'll take me seriously when I produce results not just talk about producing results."

That weekend, Dele did not come home. He spent the weekend squatting with a friend on campus to study for an upcoming exam. It was not till the following Monday that she saw him again. He came home briefly to drop his traveling bag and pick up some other items. It was the same navy blue traveling bag that Seni herself had used whenever she returned to school at Meiran after holidays. She knew that Dele would be going to Boye's house, for the mini get-together to celebrate his birthday. She decided that it was better to tell him about Boye's advances before he left for that party.

As it turned out, her timing was totally off.

"What were you wearing when he came to "harass" you?" Dele asked, his eyes flashing. He was not really expecting a reply as evidenced by the "Shut up!" he barked at her when she tried to tell him she had been wearing a simple dress the first time Boye approached her.

"That's all you know! Boys! You better not bring any pregnancy to this house!"

"Preg what? Who is pregnant?" her mother said, walking into the sitting room. Seni was sure that the entire universe had conspired against her that evening. How come it was when Dele randomly mentioned pregnancy that her mother happened to be passing by?

Chai! See bad luck!

"N-n-o-o-o, Mummy. I was just--" she began, but Dele did not let her explain.

"This silly girl has not even entered uni, and she's already chasing boys! She just told me that Boye--" Dele began. His mother interrupted him.

"Which Boye? Is it Boye Aladegbola?" Mrs. Balogun asked.

"Yes, ma. The same one," Dele replied. "She said he has been harassing her. I'm sure she was the one who seduced him with those short-short things she has been wearing."

"Ah, mummy, it's not true," Seni wailed, finding it hard to believe that she was being blamed for something that was not her fault. She knew she should not have taken Nancy's advice.

"Will you shut up there?!" her mother shouted. "Boye is from a good family. Just wait till your father hears this!"

Dele told her to get out of his way and left in a rage. For a while, she had had her suspicions that he no longer took her side since the whole Veronica incident. This was proof of it.

Seni quickly fled to the room and let out a stream of hot tears.

"Everything points to Veronica! Dele and I used to be so close until that day. And now he's sabotaging me."

Ordinarily, Dele would have listened to her and probably warned Boye off her case. Now, she knew she was on her own. Normally, she would have gotten a slap and serious flogging from her mother except that her parents had sworn off corporal punishment since she graduated from secondary school. They had kept their word, surprisingly too. That was her only saving grace.

From that day onward, she knew she was on her own where Boye was concerned. What would she do?

God has a way of helping people in the moments when man's help is not forthcoming or has failed. Seni was about to experience this first hand.
About two weeks later, on her way back from lesson, her last bus had a flat fire about a mile away from her bus-stop. Other passengers were even farther away from their targeted bus-stops. The spare tire was non-existent and ignoring all the curses and insults hurled at them, the driver and conductor told the passengers to disembark and "find their level." Not a single kobo was refunded.

Seni did not waste her time lambasting the conductor with much-deserved insults and was just thankful that she knew a short-cut to her home, not too far from where the bus had stopped.

It was almost 2:00pm and the sun seemed to be playing hide and seek with some clouds. Perfect for walking. Well, almost perfect.

Her route took her past the snooker club, which Dele and Boye used to frequent together back when JAMB was still kicking Dele's derriere. However, since he conquered JAMB, Dele had abandoned that local hangout. But, not Boye. The area where the snooker club was located was a largely residential one, but here and there commercial shops had sprouted in what were once upon a time, houses inhabited by people.

The former house where the club was now located had just been painted blue, the shade of blue that made one wonder if the owners had any taste, because it did nothing to give the house-turned-club a proper, much-needed face lift. But there it was.

The gate was perpetually open, signaling that anyone was welcome there, as long as they had money. Originally built as a duplex, the snooker area was upstairs with an open veranda where patrons lounged. The bottom part was a restaurant of some sort, with white plastic tables and chairs arranged in the spacious compound, shaded by a red canopy with white poles.

A saucy-faced attendant, who was perpetually chewing gum, and dressed like she was hired not just to sell food, but to appeal to the predominantly male customers, stood behind the counter. There was a fridge with a transparent glass door filled with the typical assortment of local beverages. Standing close to the fridge was a glass display case housing unsavory-looking pastries and other snacks. Anyone who was familiar with this joint knew not to go near the meat-pie and other baked goods. They were horrible. But the stick meat, with chunks of spicy, fried beef interspaced with onions, tomatoes and red pepper on toothpicks, was a winner. It was single-handedly the best-selling item in the entire restaurant, and that was what sensible people came there to buy.

As Seni passed by and caught sight of the stick meat in the display case, her mouth began to water. If she had not thought of stick meat before, it was all she could think of now.

She made a detour there, and endured the hostile stare of the scantily-clad attendant. Pointing to the stick meat, she told the girl she wanted to buy some of them. The girl replied that those ones were reserved for customers who had called ahead. If she wanted to buy stick meat, she would have to wait for a fresh batch, which was already on the fire.

Although she suspected that the girl was lying about the "reserved" stick meat, but not seeing any remedy in sight, she decided to wait for the next batch. The fresher, the better, right?

Seni took a seat and waited.

There were a few customers seated there that afternoon. Some of them were smoking, drinking not-so-soft drinks like Gulder, and some were just eating and chatting.

Seni had barely sat down at an empty table, when a rather rough-looking man walked up to her. He looked to be in his late 30s or early 40s, lips blackened from extensive cigarette use, and the demeanor of a less-than-honest person. This was the sort of person parents had in mind when they warned children not to talk to strangers. He looked like a real gbomo-gbomo.
As uncomfortable as she was, Seni assumed that at her age, she could not be kidnapped. Certainly not in broad daylight, and not in the midst of people.

The man did not introduce himself. Reeking of tobacco, he asked Seni in a lowered voice:
"Wetin be your name?"

The look on Seni's face simply said, "I'm sorry, did you expect me to answer?" But no answer came out of her mouth. She just frowned at him, failing to recognize that men like this were used to being ignored and would not be put off by the hostility of a teenage girl.

"Siddon there dey squeeze your face, you hear? No be you say make I come meet you for here?" he asked in louder tones. Seni's frown intensified. She was quite confused.

"I don't know who you are or what you're going on about," Seni replied, her voice shaking a little. What did this man want?

"You talk say you go wear green top on top blue jeans. Why you come dey pretend say you no know me? Stop all this forming jo!"

Seni looked at her bright green tank top and dark blue jeans in surprise, as if she did not look in the mirror before leaving the house. Yes, she was dressed in the manner this man described, but he was a stranger to her.

She was about to tell him that she did not know him, when he said:
"Sister, if you no want dis pali again," he said, flashing a green passport in her face, "you for don talk am since. No dey waste my time. I get plenty customer ... no be only you. You no know wetin I suffer before I get dis one. We never even chook mouth inside visa matter ... with all dis shakara wey you dey do, dat one go cost well well--"

At that point, she knew for sure that this man had confused her with someone else. She was telling him this when out of the corner of his eye, he spotted someone else, and walked away, but not before saying:
"You no even fine sef!"

Still smarting from his insult, not to mention still wondering how he could have confused her with someone else, she followed him with her eyes and saw him walk up to a young woman who was dressed almost identically to her, except that this person wore dark shades.

"That must be the person he came to see," Seni reasoned. Who was this girl? What did she want with this fellow? Seni had no idea, but she was relieved that the horrible man had left her alone with only insults. He looked like the kind of person who carried multiple weapons.

"That's what I get for craving stick meat," she grumbled. Just then, she remembered that the girl had told her to wait for 15 minutes. A quick glance at her wristwatch told her that she had been waiting for close to 30 minutes.

Seni got up and went back to the counter. This time around, there was an older woman with her, who was obviously her Madam. She was not there when Seni arrived earlier.

As soon as the attendant saw Seni coming, she tried to leave and go to the kitchen. But her Madam called her back and told her to attend to the customer. Madam herself disappeared into the kitchen. Seni told the girl the amount of stick meat she wanted to buy and the girl reluctantly reached into the display case and pulled out a few sticks from the supposedly reserved batch. Unbelievable!

"Didn't you tell me you were reserving these ones for other customers?" Seni asked, raising her voice loud enough to draw Madam's attention. It worked, and Madam reappeared almost immediately, asking the attendant what the matter was.

Seni explained what had transpired while the attendant looked like she wished the ground would open up and swallow her. Turning to the attendant, Madam yelled in anger:
"You dis foolish girl! You’ve started again, abi? Haven't I warned you to stop reserving meat for male customers? Idiot!" And she began to hurl insults at the girl before finally ordering her into the kitchen. The girl left in tears. Seni could care less.

*Serves her right for wasting my time like that.*

"Customer, abeg no vex o. You know how these girls can be. Abeg no vex," Madam pleaded and added a few extra sticks of meat to Seni's purchase. Who could say no to jara?

She paid and was about to leave when she heard someone call her name. She turned around just in time to see Boye emerging from the entrance to the house. He must have seen her from the balcony upstairs where he was playing snooker.

Crap! How could she have forgotten that Boye would be here at this time?

"This is what Further Maths will do to your brain. Confusion!" she chided herself. Should she pretend not to have heard him and just run? No. He would definitely catch up with her. That guy was fast. Literally.

She accepted her fate and just stood there until he walked up to her.

Boye seemed to be more jovial than usual, but Seni was in no mood for conversation. She had just narrowly escaped getting slapped by a complete stranger, and on top of that, the stick meat girl had lied to her. What a rotten day!

Boye, as annoying as he was, could tell that there was something bothering her. She expected him to brush it aside, but he surprised her when he said:

"Come on baby, what's the matter? Who be de maga wey come make your face be like dis?"

"In English, please," Seni said, saucily. She was not in the mood for this foolish talk, but something in her wanted to share all the curious happenings of the past hour with somebody. Anybody. Boye was a convenient receiver, so she told him about her encounter with the rough-looking guy.

"That’s strange, but not so strange. You see that guy?" Boye said, nodding towards the man who had approached Seni earlier. He was still talking to the girl with the shades. Seni acknowledged that she knew who he was referring to, and Boye continued.

"His name is Razor and--"

"Say what?!" Seni said in amusement. "Is his last name 'Blade' abi which kain yeye name be dat? I’m sure he wasn't christened Razor by his parents."

"Stop acting like a child. Just look at this place. Does this look like a place where people use their real names?" Boye asked.

Seni shook her head in response.

"Ehen, so why are you surprised at his name? As long as he has left you alone, you'll be fine. That guy is not the type of person you want to deal with unless you absolutely have to. Believe me, you don’t want to reach that stage in your life," Boye said. Although the statement was calculated to sound abstract, the way Boye said it made it seem personal. Very personal. But Seni did not quiz him on that issue.

"That’s true," she said.

"So baby, how far now? So ti consider proposal mi ni?" he said, breaking into that adulterated form of Yoruba, liberally mixed with English, that had grown increasingly popular with younger generations.

Seni heaved a deep sigh and rolled her eyes. Should she rake for this guy? Would he then take her seriously? One look at Boye's face convinced Seni that this was not a man who gave up easily. He was a fighter.
Up till this point, anytime they had a conversation on this relationship issue, Seni had yelled her responses to him. Now, she considered changing her strategy a bit. With a coy look on her face, she invaded Boye's personal space and said in the sweetest voice:

"Boye, I see you as my brother. There can never be anything between us. See ehn, you deserve better. Me, I'm just a small girl. In fact, from now you're Brother Boye to me."

Boye burst into laughter at her weak attempt at changing the game. He was not born yesterday.

"Brother what? My dear, I'm not your brother o. I don't even want to be. Dele is your brother. Stop playing with me. I have sisters at home. I'm used to all the games you girls play. So just say "Yes" and stop wasting time."

Seni would have been stuck there arguing back and forth with Boye, certain to lose the argument with him every single time, except that at that moment, the wind blew in her favor. A teenager, some local champion, who Boye owed money and had lost several snooker bets to, showed up. As soon as Boye spotted him, he ended his toasting session hurriedly with a rushed "We'll talk later," and slunk away down the street.

Seni could not believe her luck. She almost ran out of the place! As she passed through the gate of the snooker club, she saw the girl hand over a red nylon bag with the name of a foreign boutique to Razor. He saluted her and she heard the words, "Balance" and "Later" escape the girl's lips.

"Tomorrow?" Razor asked.
"Yes," she replied.

She left and narrowly avoided colliding with another couple walking into the restaurant. Seni watched as she hailed an okada down the street, hopped on it, and disappeared just as suddenly as she arrived.

Seni would not have thought about the girl anymore, except that she happened to have the same poorly-styled haircut that Seni had at the moment.

"I wonder if she went to B & U too? I seriously doubt it. There are plenty of bad hairstylists in this Lagos," she thought to herself as she walked home.

Beautiful and Unique, popularly called "B & U" by students, was one of those places that had a reputation for being over-priced, but was well-patronized for the exact reason. Students had a love-hate relationship with the place. Boyfriends generally hated it if they had to foot the ridiculous bill for their girlfriends. Girls loved to boast that they had got their hair done at B & U, even if it was a much cheaper salon they had actually visited. This particular salon's prices were often five or six times higher than other salons offering similar services. One could only conclude that the exorbitant price was attributable to the excessive use of imported products at this salon. In fact, the only functional part of the salon that was not imported was the select group of hair stylists. They were all Made in Nigeria.

Seni had been there just once and had vowed never to set foot in that salon again because that was where they had botched the Anita Baker haircut she requested. By the time she left, she was convinced that the Anita Baker her stylist had in mind was a Yoruba actress, and not the famous American songstress.

As soon as Seni got home, she ran to her room. She had restrained herself from eating the stick meat on the way home, but she planned to eat everything but the stick and plastic bag, in her room.

She opened the door of her room, and took several steps back. Right on her bed, sitting there and completely at home, rifling through her magazines, was Dele.
What on earth …

"Ah, Seni, Seni, oya come and sit here. Oya come now-ow …" he said, patting a spot beside him on her own bed.

The look on her face said, "Get out now!" but she obeyed. Mentally, she added locking her room to the list of life-changing decisions she planned to make before she turned 21. It was right up there with threading her eyebrows.

Dele never came to her room when she was at home, except to borrow something, and he certainly never came in her absence. Something was up.

"I know I've been very standoffish lately, but I want you to forgive me."
"Why? 'Cos you need my help?" Seni asked, her face betraying the irritation she felt.
"Well … yes, I do. Big time. I promise, I'll take you to--" Dele began, smiling sheepishly and trying to side hug her. She moved away widening the gap between them.

"Don’t bribe me. What do you want?" she asked coldly.
"Okay, I'm sorry for what I said and did--"
"Which was?"
"Blocking you."
"You know I won't forgive you just like that."
"I know, but I was hoping we could bond over some Veronica-related gist," he said, looking at her hopefully.

"What about her? Didn’t you say she was off limits?"
"Yes, and I'm sorry. I hereby revoke that restriction."
"Dele, I'm not a robot without feelings. You can't just expect--"
"I know, but I want you to try … for old time's sake. Please?"

In all her life, Seni had never seen her brother so sincere. She smiled a little, and the ice in her heart thawed a little.

"Okay. I forgive you. For now …"
"What?! You mean I'm on probation?" Dele asked.
"Yes, I'm watching you," Seni said. "Very closely," she added, narrowing her eyes.
"Fair enough."
"So what was this about Veronica?"
"I've been thinking a lot about what you said about being careful with her. You know … she never asks me directly for money. She just asks me to pay for stuff … so it's been okay. Until we started dating …"

"What?! You're in a relationship with her? Already?" Seni asked, horrified.

How silly could this guy be?
"Yes o. Two weeks now," said Dele, a sheepish smile on his face. "She's very--"
"Devious?"
"No, charming. And her body … Chai!" Dele said, rubbing the back of his head with one hand, as his eyes clouded over dreamily.

"Look, did you come to praise Veronica's assets or what did you--" Seni demanded impatiently.

"Oya sorry … Ahn ahn! Jealousy!" Dele teased.
"No … I'm not jealous. I'm your sister. I don't want to hear you describing another's woman's body to me. Gosh! Reserve that for your buddies. How would you feel if I started gushing over some guy's abs?"
"Don’t even try it … I don’t even want to hear sef," Dele replied quickly.
"Ehen … So you see what I mean?"
"Yep. I do."

Dele went on to tell Seni that since he started dating Veronica, she had started asking for larger sums of money for what looked like genuine expenses: books, exam fees, even her hair. "Are you her father? Since when did you start paying for all this?" Seni asked angrily. "Just how much have you given her?"
"Emm … close to N 100,000 naira."
"Chineke! So, you have that kind of money and I've been jumping bus, taking public transport up and down in the hot sun, abi? See discrimination! And you've been giving that to a girl? You're just a mugu … Correct, original mu--"

And then Seni remembered that this was her elder brother. She reeled in her tongue, but she was still visibly boiling with anger. She got up and started pacing the room.
"I just didn’t have the heart to say "No." You know her exams are coming soon and it's just the two of us in this house. We've always had everything. Veronica has like six brothers and sisters, and her dad is retired and--"
"I don’t care," Seni spat.
"Come on, Seni. Have a heart!" Dele pleaded.
"I do have a heart, but there's a difference between being kind and being foolish. Right now, you're being very foolish. She sees you as the type of mugu who can pay her bills. End of story. Once you start saying "No" to her, she'll dump you," she said resuming her seat on the bed.
"Well, I didn’t come here so you could keep calling me a mugu," Dele said, in a hurt tone.
"Yes, I know that but--"

"Okay, here's what I need your help with: I just gave her N 50,000 naira today. It's the first time I have ever actually handed over money to her. Then, she told me she needs to fix her hair. She said she needs to do million braids that it keeps longer and she won't have to worry about her hair for months."
"Yes, that's correct. And so?"
"So … I became concerned with the price. She said million braids will cost N 100,000 naira."

Seni leapt to her feet screaming.
"Yeeepa! One hundred thousand what?! Why didn’t she kuku tell you it will cost N1 million naira, one naira for each braid?! Ole buruku! Even Sallah ram does not cost that much for goodness sakes! If you add some more money to that, you can buy a Tokunbo car. Ah, Dele, you have chopped!"

"But that's the thing. I said I was concerned now … I haven’t actually given her the money. It just seemed a bit … I don’t know … too high for just one hairdo."
"Anyway, I don’t blame her. If I also saw a guy who would agree to pay for this and that, I would also cook up crazy, bizarre figures and claim it's for school. So legitimate. Pathetic!"
"So, that’s why I came to you? What do I do now?"
"Oh, you're still asking me? Break up with her, of course! She's using you."
"Break-up? Come on … It's not like she's cheating on me. Maybe I can tell her to be more considerate or--"

"Dele, listen to me: a woman, in fact, any person who will lie to you just to take money from you, will lie about anything else. Go and check it!"
"Okay, okay. I've heard. So, what do I do now?"
"I'm not sure I want to waste my time on this matter. I think you should just go and learn the hard way."

"Ahn ahn … you must hate me o … You know I'm your only brother."

"No, I don't hate you. I hate giving advice and pointing out obvious red flags and still watch you fall into an open and obvious trap."

Dele stiffened and sat up suddenly. He looked very serious.

"Okay, I'll take your advice. What do you suggest I do?" he asked.

"You have to promise you'll do what I say, first," Seni said.

"Okay. I promise."

"Now, here is what we'll do."

Seni told him her plan, and he agreed.

The next day, Dele picked Seni up from lesson and together, they went to wait for Veronica at B & U. She was to show up for her hair appointment, and Dele was to pay for it directly to the clerk at the salon.

They both waited in the car for almost an hour past Veronica's 3:00pm appointment time, while Seni wondered if the appointment itself was legitimate. It was a well-known fact that anyone who wanted to get million braids would do well to go to the salon in the morning because it was a time-consuming hairstyle. But Seni kept that to herself.

The salon was full and there was nowhere to sit that afternoon, making it necessary for them to camp outside in the car. Just a few minutes before 4 o'clock, they finally spotted Veronica approaching. She had just alighted from a taxi, and was walking towards the salon.

As she came towards them, Seni got to see her for the first time. Veronica was a tall, elegant, curvy with bright eyes. Seni did not see those bright eyes till she was close enough and tried to kiss Dele on the lips. She took off her shades and Seni thought she was hallucinating. She recognized her immediately as the girl she had seen talking to Razor at the snooker joint.

But if Veronica recognized her at all, she did not show it.

That was when it all made sense. The money. Passport. Everything.

Dele introduced Seni to Vero and vice-versa. Vero just glanced at her and said "Hi."

"So, I'm already late for my appointment," she said to Dele. "You don't have to wait for me. You can just give me the money and I'll pay when I'm done."

"That's not what you told me yesterday," Dele replied.

"Yes, I know. I changed my mind."

"Well, I did too."

After turning down Dele's offer to go with her into the salon several times, Vero finally lost her patience.

"Ogbeni, just give me the money and let me get my hair done now!" she shouted.

"Which hair style are you doing for 100K? Ole oshi!" Seni finally jumped in, unable to contain herself.

"Eysssss … Who invited you? Oh, so you people came here to embarrass me, abi? It won't work o," Vero said defensively.

"I invited her, and for your information, we already asked the owner of the salon. They don't do million braids. The braiding centers that do charge less than N 30,000 for that!"

Veronica snapped and hurled several curses at Dele, ending with:

"You know what? I'm done. Go and find a cheap girlfriend!"

"No, Vero. Look for another mugu!" Dele yelled at her.

That was how it ended. Veronica walked out of Dele's life for good.
A few weeks later, Dele told Seni what she had already surmised: Veronica had left the country for good.
"But now it's your turn to be surprised o," said Dele.
"Try me."
"Boye has left too. He's in the UK."
Seni was shocked. She certainly did not see that coming.

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About the Author

Sharon Abimbola Salu was born and raised in Lagos, Nigeria where she lived until she relocated to the United States of America. Her stories are mostly set in Nigeria, and she writes the kind of stories she would like to read. She has written several short stories, flash fiction stories and novellas, including a detective series featuring female sleuths called The Aso-Ebi Chronicles.

A professed lover of spicy foods, she loves experimenting with new recipes, to the dismay of non-spicy food lovers. Apart from writing, photography is her other hobby.

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