

## Pupil in the Thorn Bush

Again Mr. Edokpai, the headmaster peers at the paper through his worn-out spectacles. He removes them, brings out a handkerchief, and wipes his face, all the while thinking about the name. He cannot remember any hospital in the city with such a name. He frowns for he does not like to be taken unawares. He always believes that anyone who comes to see him already knows something about him and that he has a right to know something about the person too. In this connection, he tries to study such a person carefully through his or her physical features. He has almost decided to grant the visitor entry when suddenly he remembers that one of his students bears the name.

"Maybe the doctor is related to the student," he mutters. He tries but cannot remember what the boy looks like so he can use it to determine whether he is a good or bad boy. Anyway, he presses the bell.

The man is closely followed by a student who looks depressed.

"Good morning, Mr. Edokpai," says the doctor as they shake hands.

"Good morning Dr. Ebigbe, sit down. What can I do for you?"

"I am really sorry to bother you. I am here because of my son."

"So, this is the connection," the headmaster thinks nodding his head. He quickly reminds the visitor that he ought to have made acquaintance with him during one of the Parents' Days' activities.

"This is really true, Mr. Edokpai. But, you see, I have been abroad for studies. My children have been in the care of my wife and my mother."

"Are you back now?"

"Yes, for good."

"So we shall expect your full participation in the school's activities?"

"Of course, yes."

"So what is the problem?"

"I brought my son here this morning and went to the Teaching Hospital where I work. I later went back to the house to pick something only to find him by the gate of the house because everybody had left either for work or school. When I questioned him, he said some boys in the school have threatened to deal with him today."

"What's your name boy?" The headmaster asks directing his gaze to Dr. Ebigbe's son.

"Titus Ebigbe, Sir."

"What class?"

"Class 6A, Sir."

"Oh! That's the bright boys' class. Let me hear your story, Titus."

The headmaster adjusts his spectacles, folds his arms and nods at the boy.

"Sir ... Sir ... I'm s-sorry."

"Tell the story," says his father impatiently.

"I'm sorry Sir, for ... for breaking the school rule."

"What are you talking about?"

"I pass shit for ground," he bursts out trembling. The headmaster unfolds his arms, pushes up his spectacles and asks,

"Are you speaking English or what? A class six student cannot express himself correctly? And a boy in an A class for that matter!"

Tears begin to run down his cheeks. He trembles and attempts to wipe the tears with his hands but his father offers him his handkerchief.

"Just cool down. He won't eat you. Tell the story truthfully just as you told me."

The boy wipes his eyes and uses his right hand to hold his chest, his heart pumping at an extraordinarily fast rate. The headmaster waits for him to control himself while he takes time to study his father.

He thinks that the doctor might be slightly younger than him. He is stout in stature and overgroomed by Mr. Edokpai's standards. "If he spends so much time and money on his looks, what will be left for his family?" he wonders. Again, he scrutinises the doctor's navy blue suit, white shirt and the striped white and

black tie that matches his black shoes. He then focuses on the black rimmed white silk handkerchief on his coat-pocket, his low cut hair, side burns and moustache. He compares father and son. It is evident that the boy has his father's watery eyes and small lips that give the face an innocent look. The headmaster frowns. The boy is not as well kempt as his father. His skin is coarse and his exterior generally rough. His hair is bushy and his sandals have lost their brown colour. The doctor becomes aware of the headmaster's scrutiny and the frown he now wears. He too is watching the headmaster. He notices that the lapel of his white cotton shirt is worn-out but very clean. He observes his glittering hair as the sun illuminates his shiny bald. The doctor concludes that he looks kind in spite of his reputed sternness. The boy interrupts the exchange of glances between his father and the headmaster and attempts to start his story again.

"It was last month, the day we finished our first term examinations. I was having running stomach."

"I remember that period. I just returned from Western Germany. In fact he was my first patient in Nigeria."

Titus' father cuts in to lend credence to his son's story.

This confirmation has given the boy more courage. The headmaster notes that Titus instantly removes his hands from his chest, a sign that he is becoming less tense. The headmaster bends his head towards his table.

"I had to leave the examination hall at a point in order to go to the toilet," the boy continues more confidently.

"It happened after the examination. I was walking from our classroom to the library when sudden pain gripped me. I felt like easing...." The headmaster raises his head but before he can speak, the boy corrects himself.

"I'm sorry Sir, I felt like going to the toilet. Four boys were coming from the opposite direction. I just rushed into the nearby bush. It was there that the boys caught me. They surrounded me saying I was uncivilised and that they would report me to you Sir. I pleaded with them." Here the boy's voice begins to shake. Once again he holds his chest, this time with both hands. He blinks away the tears forming in his eyes and continues.

"They called me all sorts of names, abused my family and threatened to deal with me."

"What names did they call you?" This question by the headmaster surprises the doctor and his son who stare at him. It is not his eyes that confront them but the glittering baldness of his head which he slightly bends towards a paper on his table. The boy bites his lips, thinking of names, then continues.

"They called me 'hot shit', Sir." He expects a reaction for that ugly word. Not getting any, he comes up with a string of names, "*Ewu, Nama, anumanu, bastard, uncivilised he-goat.*"

"It is enough. Go on with the story."

"Sir, they produced a piece of paper and told me to write a statement of confession and pledge. I was afraid.

I was still squatting. They told me to write that I stole a pair of shoes and that I would pay back the sum of five hundred naira at the end of the month." The headmaster stands up.

"What! Did you borrow money from them?"

"No Sir."

"What then is the five hundred naira all about? Do you mean that we are breeding criminals here?"

"No Sir. They forced me to write the statement. I did Sir and the payment was due yesterday. They came to ask for it but I could not produce it. So, they said that I would suffer the consequences if I failed to bring it today. That was why I went back home."

"They even suggested that he stole the money from me." His father adds. "Just imagine the corruption at such an early age!"

"Who has the confessional statement?" asks the headmaster.

"They made me to write two. They have one and I have one." His father gives the headmaster their own copy.

"What are the particulars of the boys?" As the boy calls their names and class, the headmaster presses the bell and commands his messenger to summon the boys from class 6A.

The first to enter was John Uche. the headmaster peers at him. He is a brown-skinned boy with fine features and has his hair cut in the latest fashion. "Yes, this one is vain and can do anything to maintain his vanity," the headmaster thinks and notes how he eyes Titus.

"Kneel down!"

John kneels and starts rubbing his hands in anticipation of the cane.

"I am not going to waste my time flogging a criminal. I will just

expel you."

"Please, Sir, please Sir, forgive me, Sir."

"Forgive you for what? What did you do?"

"We told him to bring money. But he provoked me."

"I did not do anything!" Titus has found his courage for his reply has venom.

"You are a liar and a thief," retorts John.

"Shut up!" shouts the doctor.

"Your son is a thief," retorts John.

"Can you prove your statement. Who is your father?"

"Doctor, leave this to me." The headmaster glares at the boy who immediately apologises to the doctor.

"Sir, I am sorry," he says bowing his head. He now turns to the headmaster and asks, "May I say my own side of the story now, Sir?"

"Shut up," says the headmaster. Titus eyes John triumphantly. John looks down. The headmaster sits down again and folds his arms visibly enraged.

He unfolds his arms. "Right!" he says.

John looks up thinking that it means the headmaster is giving him a chance. He sees the man pull out a drawer and bring out some sheets of paper. He gives John a paper and pen. "Write your own side of the story." Still kneeling, John places the paper on a stool near him and proceeds to write, just as two other boys enter.

"Yes?"

"Good afternoon, Sir."

"You are ... the gangsters eh?"

"Yes, Sir." It is the messenger who answered.

"Let them stay in the general office. I give you ten minutes to write down what happened between you and Titus Ebigbe. I want the truth only."

The boys leave immediately.

The headmaster gives a paper to Titus.

"Write your own statement." He sits down and starts a conversation with Dr. Ebigbe.

"Doctor, this is what is happening now in schools. No discipline in the homes. No discipline in the schools. No discipline in the society. Discipline has disappeared. You see them. All brilliant boys in A classes. But, see what they get

involved in. They now use their brains for negative things."

"In our time, things were really different," the doctor replies. "Now small children know the value of money." He continues. "Five hundred naira! That is almost half of my monthly salary. In our days, I would always give to my mother any money given to me as gifts and they were always small. Tell me, Mr. Edokpai, what will small boys like these do with five hundred naira?"

"They use them to buy the latest shoes, trousers, shorts and other things."

"Do their parents not see them wear these expensive things?"

"I suppose they don't. They are simply not vigilant enough. The boys are too smart for them. They hide the expensive clothes in all sorts of places."

"Like where?"

"Right in their own homes or in their friends' homes. They sneak out in them to go and show off."

"Do their parents not see them?"

"They claim not to see," replies the headmaster adding after a pause, "They are too busy chasing money."

"How can money be more important than one's children. I had to come home as soon as I finished my studies so as to help my wife take care of the family in spite of the fact that I knew she herself is very vigilant. I do not see how we cannot notice when our children are becoming deviants, no matter how busy we are."

"Well, we always discuss this issue during the Parents' meeting. Some of the parents whom I have confronted, claim that the economic situation in the country is so bad that if they do not make extra money, their children would starve."

"Nonsense!"

"No, do not dismiss their argument like that. It has some merit. Look at me now. What I was earning ten years ago when garri was fifteen cups for one naira is what I am still earning today that garri is two cups for the same one naira. How does one expect me to feed my family and dependents with the same amount I was receiving ten years ago? Not everybody is a doctor, you know."

"You really have a point there."

"You now see it. However, I am luckier than some other parents. As soon as I finish from school now, I lead my family, wife and all, to the farm. We continue our family life there and

all of us get involved in working to eat. This way, I bring up my children even though I am engaged in another means of livelihood. But not everybody can farm or even has the land for farming." The doctor is affected by the headmaster's personal example. He now sees the issue of children's upbringing as a serious thing to merit national attention. He declares:

"We cannot afford to play with the upbringing of the future leaders of this nation. The government must address the issue." As if in reply, John Uche says, "I have finished writing Sir."

The two men are embarrassed. They seem to have forgotten the boys. The boys have heard them blaming parents and the society for their crimes. The headmaster tries to cover up by saying, "However, in spite of all these arguments, we have rules and regulations in this school. No matter what one's background is, as soon as he joins us, he has to behave accordingly. This is what I tell my boys every time. Is it not so? My boys?" he asks the boys emphatically.

"Yes Sir." They chorus.

The headmaster takes the written statement from John, sits, and reads. Both John and Dr. Ebigbe watch his face for expressions that can betray his emotions. From his kneeling position, John peers at the headmaster through the side but he cannot get a clear glimpse. His face appears dark because his head is bent towards the paper. The contact of the sun with the metal frame of his spectacles emit rays that offend John's eyes, so that he withdraws his head in reaction to the glint and pushes it forward again in fulfilment of his desire to know the headmaster's reaction to his statement. Dr. Ebigbe has given up watching the sheen of the headmaster's bald which blocked his view of the man's face. Instead he turns his gaze to John who is busy pushing and withdrawing his head like a lonely lizard. The trio, Dr. Ebigbe, John and the headmaster, are absorbed in watching John, Headmaster and John's statement respectively and do not know when Titus finished writing his own statement and joins them in the watching game. He watches his father as he removes his coat all the while staring at something. He further juts out his mouth as he usually does when he is disgusted. He still stares. Titus follows his eyes and sees John jutting and withdrawing his neck as if he is doing the popular break dance. The movement looks funny without music. He almost laughs at the spectacle, which he finds bizarre, but for the timely

intervention of a burst of laughter which comes from the headmaster. All of them look at him still laughing as he passes the statement to the doctor. Osman and Tunde in the general office have finished writing and are curious about the laughter. They enter the headmaster's office and give him their statements. He reads, still standing. There is another burst of laughter from the headmaster.

"Incredible," shouts the doctor who is still reading. Titus notices his father's nostrils widen. He knows that it is a sign of anger.

"Terrible. Really terrible," shouts the doctor. The headmaster's laughter is subsiding as he says "So, three of you have come up with the same story eh?"

"We did not discuss, Sir," says John.

"Shut up!"

"Yes, Sir."

The doctor has finished reading. He glares at John and hands the paper to the headmaster who gives him the other two. All eyes are on him as he reads.

"The same thing," he says.

"From beginning to end," agrees the headmaster.

"We'll go to the police. This is pure extortion. It is scandalous. I'll charge them for defamation of my son's character, for molestation, for ...."

"Hold it doctor," says the headmaster.

He brings out sheets of paper from the drawer.

"Follow me, everybody. Titus, you lead us to the scene of action."

It is a bushy shrub between the library and the senior classes block. All of them fight their way through the thorns into the bush. All of them are scratched by thorns as they wade through the shrub. They finally arrive at a spot.

"It is here, Sir," says Titus. The headmaster can see that the other boys are baffled. Even the doctor does not know what he is up to.

"Squat!" Titus looks at the headmaster in astonishment. "Squat ... show us how you were defecating the environment on the day in question."

Titus starts to unbuckle his belt.

"No, don't remove your pants. Just squat."

Titus squats. The headmaster gives him a paper and pen. "Now, who was the one who told you to write the confessional statement?"

"All of them, Sir. They all shouted at me."

"Now, you three. Shout the way you did that day and force him to write the confession."

"We did not shout."

"It was not here."

"We did not force him to do anything."

The three boys talk at the same time.

"Shut up!" They keep silent.

"I command you to use your mouth to intimidate Titus Ebigbe and make him write that he stole a pair of shoes and that he would pay back the sum of five hundred naira." A thick notebook is provided as support for the paper. Although the three boys act their part well, Titus cannot really be as frightened as he was on the day of the incident because of his father's presence as well as the headmaster's and the confidence this gives him. No matter how much the boys try to intimidate him, he just cannot be genuinely afraid. He starts writing and the boys shut up. The headmaster commands them to continue shouting on him.

"Idiot! write."

"Hot shit! Shit on paper!"

"Person wey leave chair sit for ground, leave house go for bush! *Ewu*."

"Na real goat."

"Bush *ewu* not domestic goat."

"Real *anumanu*, bush meat."

"I have finished writing, Sir."

The sun is going down by the time they came back to the office. The headmaster explains to the doctor.

"You can see that the statements which your son claims to have written in a state of frightfulness, ill health, and fear of his intimidators are in fine, clear, orderly handwriting and shows no trace of unevenness and incoherence as would be expected of anything written under such conditions. This is quite unlike the ones written now that he is healthy and strong. Just look at today's statement. The sentences are crooked and do not follow the lines on the paper."

"What are you suggesting?" asks the doctor putting on his

coat.

"I am telling you that your son has not told us the truth. These two earlier statements could not have been written under the conditions he described."

"Are you really saying that my son stole the shoes?"

"I am asking you now, as his father, to find out the truth from him. This 'hot shit' story might have originated from your house."

"My children don't lie. I can vouch for my son."

"I have been a teacher for almost thirty years and I know ways of squeezing the truth out of people of this age. It is true they are full of surprises, but I'll try."

The doctor keeps silent. He is disappointed in the headmaster. He is sure of his son's innocence and he hopes that the headmaster deals with the "ruthless and scheming criminals" (as he thinks of the boys), or else he would go to the police and possibly to court. The headmaster breaks the brief silence.

"Does it not strike you that the three boys wrote the same story."

"They, of course, planned their strategy."

"But they did not know that I have discovered the incident."

"They could have suspected it when the three of them were called out of class especially since my son did not come to school."

"You remember they mentioned the names of people who gathered near the library when they searched Titus and found the shoes?"

"That proves nothing. The boys are criminals. They can bribe the witnesses."

"They have not been proved to be criminals yet and they too have fathers who can vouch for them. But, I'll handle it," declares the headmaster who quickly calls Titus.

"Titus."

"Sir."

"Come here." A cool breeze rushes across the room.

"Titus Ebigbe, bright student of class six A. You are due to leave this school successfully this year if you do well in the final examinations. I know that you will do well. But, there is a big BUT. You may not have the chance to take the examination because one, you wasted my time today, two, you have led me into a thorn bush, three, you have deceived me and ridiculed

your father, four, you have prevented a medical doctor from seeing his patients, five, you have broken the school regulation, and six, you have disgraced the school."

The headmaster observes Titus sweating profusely even though the sun has gone down and the weather is now cool. Even his father who is now having his coat on is not sweating. A cool breeze again rushes across the room through the windows. The headmaster continues,

"For what you have done, I should expel you from this school. But, I give you a chance to redeem yourself by doing one good thing today. This story about your 'hot shit' ...."

He pauses and stares at Titus whose legs have started wobbling.

"Do you want to pass shit?" The headmaster for once speaks the forbidden language but nobody takes notice of it, even himself.

"No, sir. I want to finish and enter the University," says Titus lamely as he sinks into a kneeling position.

"Then tell the truth."

"My story of hot shit is a lie. I stole John's shoes." he says crouching and covering his face.

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