

She is a Man

He is sitting in his office facing the delegation of students, listening to their complaints which led them to loot the Vice-President's food-store last night. "Yes our people say that no matter how hungry a person becomes, he can never eat common rats!"

"And even vultures which they say is a taboo!" shouts another.

The telephone rings.

"Hello Chief of Campus Police here."

The leader of the students continues talking. The chief listens to the caller while still looking at the students facing him.

"Yes?"

"What?" The student leader has come to the point where he narrates how they search their wardrobes for rats, but the Chief is only looking at him and reacting to the caller.

"Rat?"

"What's wrong with that?"

There is silence on the other end of the telephone.

The student who is talking is also shocked to silence.

On his own part, the Chief is surprised by the silence from the lady on the telephone. He is even more surprised as the students rise up while their leader shouts.

"Comrades, he sees nothing wrong in the fact that we eat rats as our cheap source of protein!" The chief opens his mouth in astonishment as he hears the woman scolding him. His mouth is still open as his eyes register on the group trooping out of his office.

"What's wrong?" he shouts, dropping the telephone.

Beside the well "shaved" lawns and "manicured" hedges of the C100 bungalow occupied by Madame Nne Okoruwa is a small bush. The bush lines the edges of the road that flanks two sides of the house. Madam's gardener is always reluctant to clear the bush. On few occasions when she questioned him, the dialogue

always followed the same pattern.

"Gardener, make you cut the grass outside the barbed wire." She always tries to speak pidgin which is the language of non-literate people like the gardener.

"Madam, Sir?" He usually adds 'Sir' because according to him, "Di woman no be woman again. 'Im don reach man, pass am sef." It would have been demeaning for him to be serving under a mere woman, he feels, so he always adds 'Sir' to reinstate the psychological basis for a man like him with wives and children to be serving a woman.

"I say, make you cut grass."

"For yonder?"

"Yes, for yonder."

"But, Madam Sir, dat na government ground. My own job na to clean for inside dis compound."

"I know, but 'im near di house too much. Snakes fit come for di house." Gardener smiles in satisfaction at his employer's admittance of fear and reliance on him.

"I go cut am, Madam, Sir."

"And I keep telling you not to call me Sir."

"Yes Sir," he says again before quickly adding, 'Madam' as he bows.

Each of the bungalows is a massive four-room apartment with a study-room, living room, kitchen, store and two balconies. At the back of each bungalow is a small one-room apartment with a small kitchen and pantry. The one-room apartment is called boys' quarter, a name that derives from the colonial term 'boy' which refers to an African especially the domestic servant of a colonial master. It is in such an apartment that the gardener lives with his two wives and seven children. He is sitting outside the yard cracking palm kernels. His eyes roam towards the bush where the children are scamping about. He smiles for his large family is another source of psychological booster which gives him an edge over his 'master, Madam'.

"As my Madam Sir no get wife," he smiles at that slip and corrects himself. Although he regards her as a man, he knows that she is still a woman. "As my Madam no get husband and pickins, me wey dey serve am like boy, get seven whole pickins wey I dey manage wit my one hundred naira wey Madam dey pay me every month." He is saddened by the fact that the money is

not enough for feeding his family let alone sending the children to school. The situation has compelled his wives to stay out all day. Very early in the morning, they leave for the farm from where they go to the market only to come home at night. The stone hits a kernel too hard crushing it, shell and all. He brushes it aside in annoyance and curses the present economic situation that has forced a man like him to sit at home and crack palm kernels; a job which he feels should normally belong to women. "But tins no normal again," he sighs and resumes the job. At this point, he remembers that today is a WAD day, that is, the day of every month set aside by the government for the people to clean their environment. Instinctively, he knows that Madam will ask him about the bush again. He throws one kernel into his mouth and shakes his legs, a sign of his reluctance to clear the bush which is the hunting ground of his children. While the bungalow children go to the staff club and Youths' Centre for sport and amusement, the boys' quarters' children scamp about the bushes, so the gardener is reluctant to tamper with the playing ground of his own children and their poor friends.

Many of the children are skinny except in their tommy areas that have swollen due to malnutrition. They are armed with sticks, stones and catapults. The frightful army of little hunters are not interested in the government's "War Against Dirt" (WAD). They are engaged in a war against hunger. Not having enough to eat at home, they resorted to pinching garri and palm kernels but soon even the last kernel or cup of garri was always sold to the new kind of aggressive traders who went from house to house buying up any available food. The children turn to the rats which were previously the food of cats since it was demeaning for human beings to eat them. Coincidentally and unknown to them, they contributed their own efforts to the government's programme, "War Against Rats," which was aimed at eradicating rats because Lassa fever epidemic was traced to disease-carrying rats.

The dust-bin on the bush beside the bungalow provides a veritable meeting-point for rats, lizards, birds, vultures and the children. The children, first of all, rampage through the huge car-like bin for redeemable left-overs of the bungalow people's table. Chunks of yam and garri are the usual items found there but occasionally some stale bread can be found by the 'lucky' child. Poking through the bins has a more profitable reward

because the small animals which are also preying on the left-overs are hunted in the process. It is usually when they exhaust the supply of game in the site that they move to other bushes. Rats and lizards are freely hunted, roasted in open fire made beside the bush and eaten with glee. They are often tempted to kill the vultures but they have sternly been warned against it because vultures are messengers of spirits and are never eaten.

Madam is fuming in anger at the way the Chief of Campus Police treated her. How can he see nothing in the fact that a rat has run into her house. She eyes her breakfast which is still on the dining table, uneaten. She has refrained from eating it because she wanted to conclude the preparation of the lecture, "Population Control and the New Economic Reality." The shouts of the children in the nearby bush had disturbed her, so, she had wanted to go to the boys' quarter and tell the gardener to clear the bush immediately. As soon as she opened the door, a rat ran in and promptly headed towards her study-room whose door was still ajar. "It must have been those children playing in the bush who frightened the poor thing," she thought. She had quickly shut the door of the study-room and telephoned for help. She had expected the Chief of Campus Police to come quickly to her aid. She never expected that kind of reaction from him. "Why doesn't he consider my predicament important enough to come here quickly?" she wonders as she paces around the room.

She is annoyed because she cannot go into the study-room to continue with her work and she cannot open the outside door to go for her gardener because another rat might run into the house. She feels trapped in her own house. Afraid to go out, afraid to go into the study-room, she picks the telephone again. There is no reply from the other end. Maybe the Chief is coming to deal with the problem. She sits on the chair by her telephone waiting for some time to pass before dialling again. She hears a sound by her gate. She is relieved and thinks,

"So, he was just pulling my leg by saying 'what's wrong with that?' That was an expensive joke, anyway," she concludes getting up to go and open the door.

She is rooted on the spot. They are breaking her gate.

"The children! And Adults!" she notes with alarm. "Students! A Mob!" She opens the door to the study, oblivious of the ominous rat and runs into her bedroom screaming. From her room, she

views the mob breaking the gates and doors of the bungalows. They are looting the stores, she observes, for they are carrying yams, garri, pots and other food items. She sees others carrying television, fans and other non-food items. They are breaking more doors and windows, she thinks with more alarm, for she can hear the noise of banging and cracking of doors. She kneels by her window watching the 'bandits' and painfully praying that they do not invade her bedroom.

Glossary of unfamiliar words

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| <i>dat</i> | that |
| <i>di</i> | the |
| <i>dis</i> | this |
| <i>don</i> | has |
| <i>garri</i> | dried grains made from cassava |
| <i>Im</i> | he, she |
| <i>pickins</i> | children |
| <i>na</i> | is |
| <i>sef</i> | used for emphasis |
| <i>tins</i> | things |
| <i>wey</i> | who |