

Rats Come in Anger

She hesitates at the door, then remembers her mother's dictum: "Try first, the person can only say No." She knocks quietly on the door and waits. She hears nothing. She knocks again. This time, the knocks are louder and bolder than before.

"Na who be dat!"

"Come in"

"That is how they have been disturbing us all day."

The girl prefers to react to the second statement while she tries very much to pretend she did not hear the others. She opens the door, enters and greets.

"Good afternoon Sir. Good afternoon Madam."

Not expecting any reply to her greeting, she hears nothing as she quickly looks around to make sure that she is in the right place. "HEAD OF DEPARTMENT", is boldly written on the door to her right.

"Please," she says with emphasis, "I wish to see the Head of Department of Culture."

"Wetin you wan see am for?" asks the woman dialling a number on the telephone beside her typewriter. The girl hesitates.

She does not know whether it is wise to discuss the subject of her visit.

"Does your mission involve private, personal or official circumstances?" asks the man who is busy looking through a book. She can easily identify the worn-out blue book as Advanced Learners Dictionary because she has a copy which she won as a prize in her former school. She is confused because she does not know how to classify her message.

"It is not too personal, anyway, maybe a bit official."

"Wait"

"Thank you, sir," she is genuinely grateful for she is fearing that she might not be allowed to see the Head of Department.

"So, di only thing dem fit do for dis Christmas na to cut people salary?" The girl realises that the woman has already got the number and is now talking to somebody on the telephone.

"I no blame dem. When dem go dey ride for dem big cars, how dem go remember small people like we?" The two others in the room now listen to her own side of the dialogue.

"How you go talk like dat? Dem no sabi say austerity don reach bush kpa-kpa-a."

"Ehen. Why, because di rat wey dey for inside bush no dey wait for night again before 'im begin de wahala we."

"Who say!! 'Im wey no sabi, go soon sabi. Okay. Bye bye." She drops the receiver.

"So Madam, by your own meagre calculation, the present economic crunch is not affecting every citizen of this country," asks the man still looking into the book.

"A beg, leave me boo. You and your big grammar. You want to talk like them but rat still dey wahala you and me."

"No worry" says the man. The girl notes that it is his first time of speaking the popular pidgin English.

"I no dey go Warri-o. Na for Benin I dey *kampe* for inside Nigeria."

"Then make you stay there do your work instead of gossiping through the telephone."

"Shut up!"

"Whom-are you shouting at like that?"

"I say, you, messenger boy, shut up!"

The man stands up. "Officially I am a caretaker cum messenger, but in practice I am the Personal Assistant to the only Professor of Indigenous Culture and Head of the Department of Culture. So, address me by correct appellation and with respect and dignity."

"A beg shut your big mouth and do your messenger work." The woman says and immediately starts dialling another number.

He replies immediately, "Typist, what have you typed since morning. No be complain here, complain there. Gossip up and gossip down. Is it only yourself who is suffering from the severe austerity measures!"

"He-ll-ow." Her quarrelsome tone has transformed into a sweet one as she greets the person at the end of the line. She uses her

hand to cover the mouth of the receiver as she harshly addresses the girl, "You want fall into my mouth! Why you dey look me. A beg go inside see di man wey you dey look for." She removes her hand from the receiver and talks sweetly into the receiver.

"Sorry. I just dey attend to visitor."

"I say make you go in!" she shouts at the girl not remembering or bothering to cover the receiver.

"Wait, let me go and see whether he is ready to receive any visitors yet." The man halts the girl at the door and dashes in.

She enters the office, her eyes fixed on the ground not daring to look the Professor in the face because she expected the man to be worse than his aides.

"Yes, can I help you, young woman?" Surprised, she does not look up immediately. She is slow in raising her head. Her eyes rest momentarily on the green and white curtains for they have big holes in them. Her eyes are about to focus on the man when she sees that he is also looking at the same curtains.

"Yes, young woman. You are free to look at the curtains for as long as you like. I am not ashamed to admit that rats raid this office. They decided to eat the curtains so as to ridicule me but they have not succeeded because I am not ashamed."

"Excuse me, Sir, I was ... eh, was" She is in fact the one who is embarrassed. It is as if she has been caught as a naughty child with her hands inside her mother's soup pot.

"Don't apologise, girl, it is not your fault. The rats are angry and they have left the bush to come and do battle in my office. They have won initial victory."

As if the girl has come on a peace mission to intervene in his war with rats, he proceeds to explain to her.

"They gave me the first sign in 1987. It was the year I stopped eating lunch because the government refused to review our salary. This meant that my salary was at a fixed point while inflation was doubling and tripling. Now inflation has gone mad! Just like everybody!" He sees that the girl is startled by his speech so he lowers his voice and continues to explain.

"Yes. You may think that I took a drastic action. I had to do it so that the money would still be enough for some basic needs of the family. That was the beginning. I have since sold my car so that I could continue paying school fees for my children." The girl is now warming up to the story. It sounds very much like her

own, only that it was not a car that her mother sold but their only house to pay school fees. Now they live in a rented room in Ohoro. "All of us in one room divided by a curtain that also has holes in them." She thinks, still looking at the Professor's curtains.

"I used to leave the left-over food in the bin there." The girl realises that the Professor has continued his story. "Before I came to work, my messenger would clear the bin." The girl who has now regained her confidence walks towards the chair by the table in front of the Professor.

"Yes, young woman, you can sit down," says the Professor belatedly after she sat down. He himself gets up to continue with his story as if he is lecturing her.

"What I have told you was the beginning of a long story that may end in a nightmare. I am telling you how the rats started coming to my office in 1987 when I stopped eating. Isn't it?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Now listen to the real story."

Professor presses the bell on his table. "You will hear the story like fresh palm wine, unadulterated," he says as the man enters in response to the bell.

"Tell this lady what happened in 1987."

The messenger is momentarily surprised, then he remembers. The Professor has made him repeat the same thing to people many times recently. So, he proceeds fluently in his wordy language.

"This room has always been a constant playground cum conference center for rats but Professor did not know. I used to come early in the morning to clear the office. I used to discover that rats usually ate the food left in the bin but would leave the wraps for me to throw away. Then sometime in 1987 the Professor terminated his habit of consuming lunch although he did not desist from poring over his books or writing till late in the evening. I thought that he was consciously reducing his weight. He used to be ... I mean, he was not very slim at the time."

The Professor nods his head in agreement saying, "Go on."

"Then the rats started scattering the books on the shelf," continues the man. "I used to rearrange the books on the shelf and Professor never knew what was happening. Then sometime

in 1988 they started leaving droppings all over the floor. I would sweep out the droppings and open the windows to air the room before the Professor's arrival. This one continued for a long time. Then in 1990, just around the time when we, I mean soldiers were going to intervene in the Liberian civil war, the rats came up with a new behaviour altogether. They scattered the papers on the table. Professor was very angry and summoned me and that woman you saw there, that foul-mouthed human being of the female specie."

"This is rather rude, my boy," says the Professor.

"I'm sorry, Sir."

"It's the young woman you owe an apology."

"Sorry. May I continue, Sir, with the narration?"

"Go on."

"Professor told us to tell him the person who committed havoc on his table by removing some of his papers. I owned up immediately and corrected him. I informed him that they were not removed but that the sheets of paper were scattered all over the whole place when I came in the morning. I just arranged them as I deemed fit, swept the droppings scattered on the floor and opened the window."

"Who scattered them?" asks the girl.

"Rats, of course," replies the Professor who continues with the story.

"Do you understand it now? The rats were angry because I stopped leaving left-over food in the bin. So, they started scattering my books. I did not react. They started despoiling the place with their droppings. I did not react. They have just started to scatter my papers. So, I now know and I have started consulting experts who advise me on the matter." The man does not want to be edged out of the story. He rushes behind the Professor's chair and brings out the dust bin.

"See! See the bin!" He tries to draw the attention of the girl who is the only spectator of the comedy. He raises it up and points at the hole that is made by the rats' teeth. The girl stares at the hole.

"It is like map of Africa!" she shouts in bewilderment.

The Professor leaves his chair, comes round to inspect the bin as if he has never seen it before. He takes it from the man, raises it up himself.

"My goodness! Why haven't I noticed it before." He places it on the table in front of the girl. She quickly moves out of the chair. Professor is now scrutinising the hole from the far right corner of the room.

"It looks like a map of the world, from here," says the girl. The Professor runs to her side, bends his body so that his eyes will be on the same level with the girl's, bends his neck to one side and to the other. He hurries to his table, snatches his sunshade, wears it and peers at the bin.

The man goes towards the door, stands with his hands akimbo and stares at the hole fixedly. At last the Professor comes up with the result of his own scrutiny.

"When you see it through the shade, it looks like the world. When you see it with naked eyes, it is Africa cut out in plastic bin."

"Professor! This is definitely a map of Nigeria," declares the man still standing by the door. Automatically the girl and Professor run close to him.

The door is thrown open and the three turn around. The unwanted intruder is the woman.

"Sorry Sir, I no know say di man dey here."

The Professor calls her. "Come here, my dear woman, look at this." He touches the hole saying, "What does it look like?"

"Oga, na hole." replies the woman.

"I know. What does the hole look like?"

"Ah! Oga, me I no sabi dis kind question. Make I take my own mouth tell you wetin hole look like?" She begins to back out of the room. "Nobody dey for our office. Make I go see if person don come." She goes and does not close the door properly so that they soon hear her dialling a number on the telephone. She is eager to report another incident that convinces her that "Culture" is not well and nobody notices except her.

The Professor picks up the bin, observes it again and removes it. He walks to his chair, sits opposite the girl, pauses, then informs her, "I am using new weapons now."

"I know."

"How do you know?"

"I can see that." She points at a mouse-trap that is not properly concealed by the curtain. She is not embarrassed this time. The Professor laughs.

"I bought it today with money that I had wanted to use in buying a new book which I recommended to the students."

The girl does not reply. She looks up at the ceiling, scrutinising the holes and marks left by the constant leakage of water through the roof. There is a point on the ceiling from where she can see the sky.

"No wonder," she says shaking her head and wondering whether she should still discuss her mission.

(Written with candle light when NEPA cut electricity supply.
It was a kind of triumph over NEPA — National Electric Power Authority)