

I am only alive at all because I learned the Queen's English. Maybe you are thinking, that isn't so hard. After all, English is the official language of my country, Nigeria. Yes, but the trouble is that back home we speak it so much better than you. To talk the Queen's English, I had to forget all the best tricks of my mother tongue. For example, the Queen could never say, *There was plenty wahala, that girl done use her bottom power to engage my number one son and anyone could see she would end in the bad bush. Instead the Queen must say, My late daughter-in-law used her feminine charms to become engaged to my heir, and one might have foreseen that it wouldn't end well.* It is all a little sad, don't you think? Learning the Queen's English is like scrubbing off the bright red varnish from your toenails, the morning after a dance. It takes a long time and there is always a little bit left at the end, a stain of red along the growing edges tore mind you of the good time you had. So, you can see that learning came slowly to me. On the other hand, I had plenty of time. I learned your language in an immigration detention center, in Essex, in the southeastern part of the United Kingdom. Two years, they locked me in there. Time was all I had.

But why did I go to all the trouble? It is because of what some of the older girls explained to me: to survive, you must look good or talk even better. The plain ones and the silent ones, it seems their paperwork is never in order. You say, they get repatriated. We say, *sent home early.* Like your country is a children's party — something too wonderful to last forever. But the pretty ones and the talkative ones, we are allowed to stay. In this way your country becomes lively and more beautiful.

I will tell you what happened when they let me out of the immigration detention center. The detention officer put a voucher in my hand, a transport voucher, and he said I could telephone for a cab. I said, *Thank you sir, may God move with grace in your life and bring joy into your heart and prosperity upon your loved ones.* The officer pointed his eyes at the ceiling, like there was something very interesting up there, and he said, *Jesus.* Then he pointed his finger down the corridor and he said, *There is the telephone.*

So, I stood in the queue for the telephone. I was thinking, I went *over the top* with thanking that detention officer. The Queen would merely have said, *Thank you,* and left it like that. Actually, the Queen would have told the detention officer to call for the damn taxi himself, or she would have him shot and his head separated from his body and displayed on the railings in front of the Tower of London. I was realizing, right there, that it was one thing to learn the Queen's English from books and newspapers in my detention cell, and quite another thing to actually speak the language with the English. I was angry with myself. I was thinking, *You cannot afford to go around making mistakes like that, girl. If you talk like a savage who learned her English on the boat, the men are going to find you out and send you straight back home.* That's what I was thinking.

There were three girls in the queue in front of me. They let all us girls out on the same day. It was Friday. It was a bright sunny morning in May. The corridor was dirty but it smelled clean. That is a good trick. Bleach, is how they do that.

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