

No Yellow Card

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Two trepidations knotted a cord in my heart when I arrived at the Kotoka International Airport, Accra that Easter Monday. One: this would be my first time travelling under a completely new identity, a new name. Two: this was my first time travelling without a proper passport. What I had with me was an ECOWAS Travel Certificate hurriedly issued to me in Abuja just days ago because my passport had expired and it would take some time to process a new one under my new name. And knowing African immigration officers for their blatant pathology of power, I was sure I wasn't safe from their hassle because they could easily find fault with anything and make one's travel difficult. But none of these worries would matter eventually - instead, a different circumstance would frustrate my entry into Accra.

I approached a booth marked '4' where a Ghanaian immigration officer was seated. The officer had a copious beard. He wore a navy blue cardigan over his regular uniform - probably to conceal his name tag, I thought. He asked for my passport and I handed him my ECOWAS travel document. He asked for my Yellow Card - a vaccination card against Yellow Fever - and I handed him that, too. Trouble started when he scanned the QR code on the card and couldn't get any results.

'This card is fake and I can't allow you to pass without one,' he pronounced.

Episodes where I have been delayed entry at immigration checkpoints flashed in my mind. On one occasion, it was due to my physical appearance not aligning with the photo in my passport because I had transformed into a blond with a three-month moustache and beard. On another, it was about the name on my passport which an officer swore didn't match or reflect my identity. Still, there was another time a superior officer frustrated and delayed me for a long time at a checkpoint because I was sharing smiles with his pretty junior colleague.

Because I didn't wish this to be added to my list of episodes at immigration checkpoints, I countered, 'I just got it recently. Probably you should try it again.'

He insisted it was fake.

I must have been looking helpless and anxious when he proposed that I pay him \$20 to pass. I broke into incredulous laughter when I quickly calculated how much that was in naira, my local currency.

'\$20? I'm afraid I don't have that.'

'You can transfer to a naira account I can give you then. Now, you are going to pay ₦40,000.'

I laughed again and tipped the visor of my cap back. This man must think I smelled of money because I could afford a flight ticket - which was actually paid for by the organisation that had invited me to Ghana. I made up my mind that if I was going to pay him the bribe, surely, I would never pay the amount he had enforced on me. Na my Yellow Card get problem, I no kee pesin. I tried to reach a compromise and offered to pay him the \$10 in my wallet. He rejected it when he saw it was in the denomination of one dollar.

'Nobody will take that here,' he said.

'Why?'

'Because it's expensive to carry the money around for money changers. It costs them equally the same resources -'

'See, it is not as if I don't have this card. Okay, how can I get another one here?' I interrupted him.

He paused. There was a look of disdain plastered on his face. 'Don't interrupt me when I am speaking. I am speaking, and you are speaking at the same time. Which one do you want me to listen to?' He sounded authoritative, using the kind of rhetoric our parents used on us to exaggerate our insolence, to shut out our grievance, and to guilt-trip us into obedience.

I detested him that instant. Fuck shit, he was not my father or mother and should never elevate himself to a moral ground when talking to me. He couldn't have been older than his mid-to-late thirties, so that put us in the same age bracket.

'Is there someone waiting for you in Ghana?'

'No,' I lied.

'You mean you're coming here for the first time and there is nobody waiting for you outside?'

'I don't know, I booked a hotel?' I lied again.

'Which flight brought you?'

'Air Peace. The stub of the ticket is in there somewhere in my document.'

I imagined he was now thinking of putting me on the next available flight back to Lagos. Well, he was welcome if it would be at the expense of his government. Only that it would be a fiasco for him because, you see, my ticket was one-way. And, secondly, I am a Nigerian, a West African, travelling under the ECOWAS Travel Certificate in West Africa and it might just blow back somehow. According to the ECOWAS protocols of 1975, any West African citizen could travel freely without a

passport or visa between member states for up to three months. It is a triumph for the pan-Africanist vision of the likes of Kwame Nkrumah, Nnamdi Azikiwe, et al. especially on the back of the 1969 xenophobic uprising in Ghana when 'Quit Order' was promulgated by Ghana's Kofi Busia's government on November 18, 1969. This encouraged open hostilities against other Africans living in Ghana, especially Nigerian traders who were routed out - and vice versa. The same can be said about Nigeria, too, when Shehu Shagari declared 'Ghana Must Go' in 1983. The Nigerian poet, Peter Akinlabi, illuminates this history by reconstructing the unsettling experience of such a victim and his harrowing journey back home in his poem titled 'Kumasi Cantos' published in his *Iconography* poetry collection. In the poem, the stark apprehension of those who were forced out is made visceral through metaphors that heighten their anguish and the illusion of African brotherliness:

I have fled hate everywhere: Ivory Coast, Cameroon, Zaire, places which had promised soft soil to plant one's feet in the beginning...

There was an old photo pinned on the first page young and dark he was, leaning on a balustrade near a market stall, brocade cap on a batik buba, face flustered by a passing breeze.

That face is not what I remember, but another, veteran, wizened with the agues of flight, mask of longing and loss, growing smaller since that harmattan in 1969, reduced now to a memory of things left behind in a hoary portmanteau. (17)

Still, we were at this impasse. The immigration officer was still demanding a bribe. It made me wonder, where was the role of the CCTV in all this? How could he be so brazen? Was nobody watching?

'Actually, I have another one, but it is under my other identity I no longer use.'

'Then you should have brought it with you.'

Was he being serious or mocking me?

'How could that be possible? It is under a completely different name and I didn't want to create a scene by presenting a double identity. You might even accuse me of being a spy or something.'

'It doesn't matter. That would have solved your problem now. People change their name all the time.'

'Well, I didn't know that. So, what do we do now?'

'Call someone at home to snap that one to you.'

Was he trying to help? Why did he ask for a bribe in the first place?

I pondered for a minute and replied, 'No, there is no one at home who could urgently help me with that.' I can't even remember where I kept it. Books are like creepers in my room - everywhere; they are pillows of imagination in my bed and I sleep with them.

'Then you will have to pay.' He shoved my issue unresolved aside and beckoned another traveller to approach his booth.

There seemed to be a problem with the Yellow Card of this traveller too. Now, one can say this man was just unfortunate to be burdened with two problems at the same time.

'You got your Yellow Card late. I will have to quarantine you,' he told the woman.

'Why?' the woman shifted her weight onto another leg.

He explained to the woman that according to safety policy, vaccinations have to be received at least some weeks ahead of departure. He told her the only way to help her was to pay him some amount - the same amount he was demanding from me.

'Please, sir, I don't have any money on me.'

The officer gave her the same options as me, but the woman persisted that she had no money. He told her quarantine was the only solution. He didn't specify how long she would be quarantined for, whether hours or days.

Because of our identical problems, we instantly became comrades in struggle, which got deeper when we learned we were both Nigerians.

'Since you will not accept the denomination of the dollar I have on me, I can only pay ₦20,000. That is all I have in my account at the moment,' I lied yet again.

He agreed and asked me to pay into an Access Bank account. He explained that it was a Nigerian account and that everybody involved would receive a cut. So, it was a network running back to Nigeria, I thought. This was why he was so brazen in front of cameras; he was not acting alone. He suggested that I connect to the free Wi-Fi at the airport to enable me to do the transfer. I was reluctant at first for security reasons, but I now wanted to get this sorted out because I didn't want to delay the writer colleague with whom I was paired to be transported from the airport to our destination. She was coming from the UK. The public address system in the airport just announced the arrival of their flight. For someone I had never met before, I didn't want to upset her itinerary schedule. Also, when I successfully connected to the Wi-Fi, messages from James, the driver waiting to pick us up, flooded in, wanting to know where I was.

The immigration officer started smiling the moment I completed the transfer. He asked me to allow him to snap the receipt of the transfer so that he could prove that the transfer originated from him to receive his cut. I swear, I would have loved to do a fake transfer to him if I knew how to do one. Shebi dem weyrey wan dey unfortunate ni? I could teach him I was as dubious a Nigerian myself. But I wasn't. I made a mental note, though, that such knowledge could come in handy later.

He started blathering like a stupid tour guide. He freely gave me his WhatsApp line and told me to get in touch with him should I need anything in Ghana. He recommended places I should visit. Really? All this on the back of a bribe just now? This man must think I was a dunce or something. I could get him fired with these little details about him, did he not know that? Even back home, when I was going through checkpoints at the Lagos airport, immigration officers who were poised to ask for a tip refrained when they learned I was a writer.

Again, how could he be so bodacious? Recently, I read about another traveller, a journalist, who they tried to extort money from by denying her the right to check-in for her flight on time. Obviously, it's a racket here. What has Ghana become? I thought this kind of corruption in bureaucracies and such was

purely the preserve of the Nigerians. Abi, was Nigeria no longer the black sheep of West Africa? Anyway, the Yoruba proverb says, 'Èni t'áa kó ní'kà t'ó ɣe é, ikà wà nínú è tẹ̀lẹ̀ ni.' The one who does evil and claims he was taught is only trying to excuse the resident evil within himself.

With my Gordian knot cut, I left the woman behind and strolled to the baggage section to claim my bag. I was now worried I must have kept James and my colleague waiting. The Wi-Fi I was connected to stopped working the moment I walked out of the arrival door. How will I contact James? As if sensing my thoughts, a swarm of people approached me thrusting their phones in my face. Most of them were drivers. They offered that I could make calls on their phone to whoever I was waiting for. Now I knew this couldn't be for free, based on my recent experience in the airport, so I politely said no. I was certain James would soon find me. But one of the drivers persisted, even when I told him I had no money, so I gave in and called James. He told me he was trying to find a free lot at the car park but would soon come to meet me. The call barely lasted thirty seconds. I said thanks to the man and returned his phone. He put it in his pocket and stayed back behind my shadow. He eyed me wherever I moved and I thought I'd made another mistake using his phone.

When James finally located me, he explained he had called my colleague and that there was a problem with the carousel that was supposed to bring her luggage. The man who lent me his phone approached us. He was saying something to James in their mother tongue, demanding money for using his phone. I heard James say, no, no. He kept following us until he gave up and turned back.

James took me to his car and put on the AC so I could relax. He explained he needed to go help my colleague sort out her luggage at the airport. Yeah, of course. So I sat in the car tired, waiting. I got bored after some time; I yawned; I got down and walked around the park to exercise my numb limbs. An hour had now passed and the hand of night descended on the city. I didn't expect it would take this long. When they finally emerged, with carts under the weight of travel boxes, James apologised for keeping me waiting. My writer colleague, especially, apologised profusely. I thought that showed her good sensibility. I took an instant liking to her for that, because that's exactly how I would have apologised, too. I helped to load her luggage into the boot and vacated the passenger seat for her. We drove into the night taking in the sights of Accra in between small talk. I was excited and looked forward to meeting my two other colleagues at The Library Of Africa and The African Diaspora (LOATAD) Black Atlantic Residency Program.

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