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The Nigerians

by Mike Clough

The Nigerians arrived on a cold wet day in November. They each carried a brown leather case containing a suit, striped pyjamas, a pipe and slippers.

They seemingly had to shake everyone's hand. They had such huge smiles 'the powers that be' in the form of First Immigration Officer Stokes couldn't help but conclude they were 'on something'. They chatted giddily. Often they'd peel into hearty, contagious laughter.

"Drug couriers, cartel, mules," First Immigration Officer Stokes declared. "These black sops are full to burstin' with narcotics. A dangerous risk to be taken in return for flights paid and a chance of a new life in Europe but you must remember these men are villains. Gloves on an' bend 'em over."

X-rays, strip searches and internal investigations revealed nothing unusual. In fact it was noted how polite and compliant the visitors were, as if they thought it normal procedure for entering the UK. Hands were shook. Laughter reigned. After two nights in solitary confinement the Nigerians were allowed to go on their way..... to me.

The advert was tucked away between 'Business' and 'Entertainment', one of those A5 flyers that ordinarily go straight into the bin. Perhaps it was the startling image of a starving infant holding out a pitiful hand, its poor dribbling face swarming with huge black flies. Then again it could have been the abysmal spelling and grammar, something which I cannot tolerate. Whatever, I couldn't help but be drawn.

Nominal monthly fee adopt an poverish plantation worker you provid education, sanitatory and hose for him and his fambly.

Loose heart strings easily pulled, a genuinely charitable disposition - it's hard to say. Certainly I had romantic notions of what my fiver a month would do. I imagined grammatically correct letters landing on my doorstep in the years ahead, thanking me for having transformed lives.

Dear Mr Vaughn,

I am now, thanks to your generosity of spirit, a graduate of the University of Lagos where I studied law.

Or

Dear Mr Vaughn,

Today I was elected to the National Assembly, all because of your open-heartedness all those years ago. Now I shall demand a program of economic and military reform thereby bringing peace and prosperity to this once forlorn land.

On a more even note, I saw this as preferable to dropping coins into a collection tin or leaving a couple of stinking old jumpers outside Oxfam, as the money would go directly to those in need. And so out came the Graf von

Faber-Castell and off went the flyer, to a PO Box in Slough.

I couldn't have been more surprised when five days later, opening up for the morning trade, I found five Nigerians in the doorway, clutching suitcases and grinning with such intensity that I couldn't help but smile too. I ushered them in out of the cold.

"We are forever your servants," their spokesman announced, reaching out to take my hand. I would later learn his name was Abayomi. He was the tallest of the group and he was forever taking my hand and shaking it enthusiastically much in the way of a used car salesman clinching a deal.

"What do you mean, my servants? Who are you?"

"You master, we servant," Abayomi repeated, squeezing with such force that I began to feel faint.

"No, no, you've got something terribly wrong here. I'm not your master at all."

Five sets of eyes glimmered excitedly through the drizzle, and in sync they chorused, "Master Vaughn, we are yours forever."

"Please, this is really too much. I'll have customers here soon. Who's to know what they'll make of this?"

Abayomi thrust a card towards me with my name and address on it beneath the letterhead of the charity I'd subscribed to. I wanted to laugh it off as some sort of sick, crazy joke, one of the regulars playing an elaborate April Fool, but it wasn't April and as the morning wore on it became apparent that these men were authentically Nigerian and not actors from the nearby college.

After the midday rush, I called the number on the ad and was told it was impossible, no matter how much I'd donated. "The only information adoptees are given is the name of their benefactor, a photograph too if you are willing to send one. Are you willing to send a photo of yourself?"

"No, no I'm not."

"If it isn't too much trouble beneficiaries like to see their benefactor."

"They can see me right here in the flesh. They're here, I tell you, in my cafe."

"I really don't think so, Mr Vain."

"Vaughn the name is, Vaughn. Please, you can at least get my name right. Would you like to speak to them? I can send them over to Slough right now. I don't have the address of your offices, no, but most certainly I can Google you. Oh yes, Google. You can't hide from Google. No, no, that's okay. I'll pay their fare."

Only then did she take me seriously, saying she'd send a representative over and contact the Nigerian embassy.

By then they were pleasantly making themselves at home. I'd put two of them to work at the counter where they were happily devouring the pecan and walnut pies I'd made the night before, to be sold at a three-hundred percent profit, NET.

The representative arrived within the hour. She asked for names and after calling through to her office confirmed that these were indeed the men I'd adopted. How or why they'd come here she couldn't determine. "But please," she said, scooping the froth off her cappuccino. "If you look after them for a few days until we've sorted this out it would be an enormous help. My god, this is lovely coffee by the way. And this pecan pie is simply to die for."

"The last slice I might hasten to add. I'm very much out of pocket already."

"You're a good chap. If only everyone else was so decent. I'll call back again in five days and it will all be sorted out by then." And with that, she bundled together her paperwork and hurried out into the street, flagging down a cab and disappearing back to Slough or wherever it was she came from.

Although it was her day off, I called Helena on her mobile and explained about the Nigerians. She was taking a year out from her studies to travel the world and we'd hit it off at once when at the interview she'd taken from her rucksack a battered copy of No Logo, which happens to be a favourite of mine. "I get free," she'd told me at the time. "Cardboard box outside bookshop. Many good books there. And next door you get free fruit, oranges, grapes and bananas, they too are there in boxes to be taken."

"Where are you?"

"Shopping," she said, somewhat coyly. "I find many good shops with free offers today, many cardboard boxes, I fill two bags already."

"It doesn't mean they're free, Helena. You have to take what you want inside, take it to the counter. How often do I have to explain this to you?"

"Mr Vaughn, I say that the shopkeeper is the thief. He steals profit with every transaction."

"But that's business, Helena. And what you are doing is stealing. You are stealing from local shops that serve the community if you take from those cardboard boxes. I'm sorry but if you get caught I really won't be able to come to your defence again. And anyway, you'll have plenty of money because I'd like you to come in to work today."

"What are they saying in your country, the double time, the overtime? If so, then this is a deal for me."

"Helena, Helena, Helena."

And thus I spent the afternoon on a sightseeing tour with five Nigerian plantation workers who kept shaking everyone's hand and bursting into laughter. First we went to Buckingham Palace, where they were so overwhelmed by the Crown Jewels they insisted on meeting the Queen and

congratulating her in person.

Jumoke wondered whether she would be willing to exchange some of this glittering, arcane finery for his best goat, Beckham.

"Beckham?"

"Yes, Beckham. He good kicker that's why I call him Beckham. I have Owen, Gerrard and Lampard too. But Beckham, he best. Golden balls!" With this, Jumoke peeled into such hearty laughter that a crowd gathered and began flashing their cameras towards us, no doubt thinking this was the prince of some minor African state with his entourage. I'm sure they expected the Queen to appear and join in with all the hand shaking. Unfortunately the long journey and being witness to all this treasure proved too much for my visitors. We were watching the Trooping of the Colour when they began swaying from side to side, holding their stomachs, only for Her Majesty to trot by and see three of them falling to their knees and vomiting into the gutter. If this had happened in one of those post-colonial novels no doubt it would have been rich with symbolism, deserving of a paragraph in undergraduate assignments. However, although our figurehead rode by seemingly untroubled, my one presiding emotion was that of abject embarrassment. I decided that food was the problem, or rather the lack of it, and so once all the puking was done we headed off to the nearest pub for an early evening meal.

"You are saying you do not like your Queen?" Abayomi asked, finishing off his fourth pint.

"No, no, no, I didn't say that at all. I think she's a perfectly decent sort. It's just that, well, it's all rather silly isn't it? All that bowing down and genuflection. It's really all just to keep the tourists happy, something to keep the masses entertained, royal gossip and all that, weddings and then of course divorces. I really do think it's time for her to step down. We'll get rid of them then and have an elected president."

Abayomi held my arm, in a way that was more threatening than endearing, his eyes red with imported German lager and seething anger. "You do that, you tell her she can come and live with my family in Nigeria. When Philip die she marry Olasubomi, be queen again. You tell her that."

With all the tube and taxi fares, as well as souvenirs (the Nigerians were like children in that regard, acquiring more pencils, rubbers and snow shakes than they could ever possibly need), and Helena's wages, I was desperately out of pocket. Five pounds per month I'd subscribed to, and by now I'd paid out more than two years. Back at the cafe, I had them drink strong coffee and then set them to cleaning the tables and serving.

Certainly they were an attraction, their eyes and teeth glistening as they went between tables taking orders and clearing away, the deferential nods seeming to come naturally to them. However, not being used to such an environment they were exceptionally clumsy. In that first day alone at least thirty cups were dropped, smashed or cracked. These weren't cheap cups either but ones I'd imported from a small, family-run pottery in Italy. I also discovered that they were giving out coffee for free and would have done the same with the cakes and biscuits if they hadn't scoffed them.

And then it was bedtime. It was with curiosity that I watched them unpack their identical cases and put on their slippers and pyjamas. To a man, they took out their pipes, filled them with tobacco, and began puffing in earnest, filling my lounge with thick blue smoke. Had it not been such a long, nerve-shattering day I would have been able to see the funny side and understand that for years to come I'd have the perfect dinner-table anecdote.

I didn't enjoy sharing a bed with Abayomi. He kept pulling me into his embrace and whispering 'Anuli' into my ear. I later learned it was the name of his wife but that night I couldn't help but think it was a request to bugger me. That and the snoring emanating from every corner of my flat kept me wide awake.

During the course of the next day, five voracious appetites emptied fridge and freezer. The Nigerians broke my Bang and Olufsen stereo, my Sony TV, my Samsung DVD, as well as countless cups, plates and saucers. All of which was accompanied by their hearty, unbearable laughter.

"Just another day or so now, Mr Vain. A week at the most."

"Vaughn not Vain. What do you mean, a day, a week? What is it?"

"Well more than probably a week. We're having difficulties in establishing what exactly has happened."

Hearing the crashing of something or other coming from the kitchen, I resorted to pleading. "You have to help me. Please, you said you would sort this out."

"Yes, well. I'm afraid we're very busy at the moment. After all, this isn't an isolated incident, Mr Vain. There are others in your predicament and we have to deal with you one by one."

"Others? In my predicament? What do you mean? This is a scandal. And by the way, it's Vaughn not Vain."

"For the benefit of the Nigerians, I really think it best that this is kept out of the press. Do I have your agreement? There will be implications, after all, Mr Vaughn."

A thud of something that was no doubt expensive and locally sourced. "Vain not Vaughn. Good day to you."

I put down the phone and went to investigate the latest calamity. Madu was filling the dishwasher, his big black hands seemingly incapable of doing anything but drop whatever came into them. He smiled and said, "Master, I am cleaning you the kitchen."

"Thank you, Madu, thank you. But really, you need to take it easy there." And with that, I sighed deeply knowing that I had to get rid of them quickly, and decently, before I went completely mad.

By chance I heard two customers talking about a warehouse hiring immigrant labour. They were organising a protest march or a picket,

believing that the owner was exploiting foreign workers.

"And this is in Penge is it?"

"That's right, Penge. They're getting paid only three quarters the minimum wage and no National Insurance or anything like that. They'll take just about anybody. It's a disgrace."

"Whereabouts in Penge?"

An A5 flyer was thrust towards me detailing the atrocity. "Hmm, yes, I think I know where that is. I'll put this on the door for you."

They seemed happy enough sweeping the floor and carrying boxes and so I left them in the safe hands of a foreman who assured me he'd provide lodgings. When he insisted on payment, a commission or bribe I couldn't be sure, I accepted intending to keep the money safe so they wouldn't blow it on souvenirs. I wouldn't deduct anything for damages and planned on visiting at the end of the week, to present them with this bonus.

My one thought that night as I climbed into bed alone was that I'd done my best. The Nigerians would be kept busy in that warehouse, earning money to send home to their families.

Two days later I was woken early in the morning by a furious banging on the door. I answered in my dressing gown to find a contingent of armed police.

A warrant was flashed. Five burly officers barged past intending to search my premises. The interview was scheduled late in the afternoon, meaning that I had to sit in a cell wearing only my pyjamas for nine hours. I tried sleeping but every time I closed my eyes the events of the last few days rolled through my mind. By when I was taken to the interview room I was feeling exhausted and queasy.

I explained about having adopted the Nigerians.

"Adopted?" the interrogating officer said, unable to stifle a chuckle. "Now that's a new one. A likely story. You do realise these are serious charges. Very, very serious charges. We're talking ten to fifteen years. People trafficking is a lucrative business. It helps no one but the trafficker. So what are you then, fancy yourself as the kingpin of Leicester Square?"

"The what?"

"The kingpin," the detective said, in such a way that I couldn't decide whether he was serious or playing. "The leader of a gang."

"I'm not a leader of any gang. I'm not the leader of anything except for a reading group held every Wednesday evening."

I gave them the number of the charity, expecting the story to be confirmed. "It's a mistake. I thought I'd be helping these men out, improving their standard of living. I never expected them to turn up on my doorstep. There are plenty of others in my situation. I'm not the only one."

“Unobtainable,” the detective said, returning fifteen minutes later. “No such number. And now this money we found in a brown envelope, let’s turn our attention to that.”

Mike Clough is originally from Manchester, UK, a city known throughout the world for its ‘soccer’ team, Manchester United. To earn a living he lectures in English Literature and Creative Writing. When not doing that, he can be found writing articles and short stories. He has published in small literary journals and a radical newspaper. In 2008 he published a limited edition book about sport and politics. He is currently working on a novel.

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