Going Incognito

story by Winifred Òdúnóku

| Nigeria |

"Be prepared to wear a thick skin before leaving Nigeria. This place doesn't smile at non-*oyinbos*,", the text that Richard sent me on the previous night to my departure had read. I kept ruminating on the text and chewing each word to make absolute sense of it: be prepared to wear a thick skin before leaving Nigeria. "A thick skin? Why would one need to wear a thick skin before leaving one's country? Is there hardship in the abroad just like the one I am trying to escape from in my country?", I couldn't help but ponder on these things as the clock ticked and sleep weighed my eyelids.

I had been too busy preparing to apply for my visa and wondering whether I would get it. Then when I received the visa, never haven travelled before, I started wondering whether I would be able to board the flight. Knowing that one of my lifetime goals was now inevitably going to occur, the hairs on my nape rose as anxiety overwelmed me. On the flight, a new kind of fear gripped me. Something about being so far from the ground-level can really get you thinking about your life and everything in-between. I suddenly realized that I had not thought much about Richard's text. What did he mean by non-*oyinbos*? I was not none anything. I was a Nigerian student who was one of the best in my field.

So good was I that I had got a full scholarship to study in one of the most-sought-after schools in Europe. Surely only my intellect counted in the new endeavour I was undertaking? What did my lack of paleness have to do with anything? I was a nice guy. Why would the land I was going to not smile at me because I was not white? Except for the fact that flying sort of priqued my psyche to think beyond its normal threshold, I didn't

experience anything else that was particularly exciting.

For instance, I didn't know that I'd have to brush past other passengers to look for a seat that has a number that matched my ticket stamp, so I sat on the first comfortable seat with embarrassing consequences. Trying to fasten my seatbelt was another task that I had belittled because I thought an aircraft seatbelt was similar to a car's. Then there was the air turbulences, more like running into potholes on a road, that made the muscles on my neck and shoulders become so tight, they nearly popped out of my skin. Not to mention the takeoff and landing that made me hold onto my seat and say a prayer. Again, on air, in case of any *yawa*, there is nowhere to run to. For that singular and most delicate reason, I have forced myself to hate flights.

Now in the Glasgow Airport lounge, waiting for a representative from the Caledonian University to come pick me, I glanced furtively at the numerous pairs of eyes that seemed to surround me like a cloud of witnesses, searching for anyone with a familiar tag from the school. I seemed to be lost in my own solitude with one hand holding on to my 'student-from-Nigeria' tag and the other scratching through my thick afro simultaneously.

"Mr. Bosun Majek?", someone called from behind me.

I turned around to see a petite woman holding out her hand with a tag in it which read: Caledonian University Student Representative. She wore a pair of glasses, a jean and polo shirt on which the words - "Student Ambassador" were embossed, and a perfume with a seductive fragrance. I was stunned for a moment. A negligible moment, I might add.

"Thank you Miss err….I mean thank you for finding me"

"Ohw..", she shrugged and waved her free hand with a dismissive gesture, "…that's fine. It's my duty by the way."

With these few words, she led me through the crowd to where the rented taxi was waiting to pick us up. She must have turned around, more than five times, to ascertain that I was still

following her lead. We finally got to the taxi and the cabbie was African. I wondered what African country he was from. Would he know where I could get some swallow? Did they eat swallow in this country? He helped put my luggage into the car boot before gliding past me into the driver's seat to start the car. We settled into the back seat and the cabbie greeted me with a smile, thanks to him. But no thanks to Lucy — I later got her name — who kept asking questions about my flight. Did I enjoy it? Hope the plane or its crew didn't experience any hitches on the way? *How was I to know? I mean no one gets to know what happens in the cockpit during a flight. Right?*

Did the air hostess speak eloquent and understandable English? *Really?* Were we served a three-course meal before finally landing in Glasgow? *Like seriously?* How long did the flight take all the way from Nigeria? *So long a time that I have lost my voice*. Would I like to stop by to get a new SIM card before getting to the hostel? She could be of help in that aspect, you know. *Maybe that'd be great. But I am not keen on holding any conversation right now. Try later.* I responded to all her questions curtly, until I realized it was my psyche at work.

I smiled at her visibly and for the first time, really looked her in the face studiously until she looked away mortified, out the window.

"So Miss Lucy,", I started without much enthusiasm.

"Call me Lucy please,", she interrupted, glad to have finally gotten few words out of me.

"OK. Lucy miss, how did you find me in that crowd back there?", I knew 'how' but I needed to gauge how people around here would go about identifying or describing me and my kind. Hadn't Richard advised that I wear a thick skin before leaving home?

Lucy answered earnestly and said that was the simplest thing she had to do. She emphasized on 'simplest' and went on to explain how she ran up to any black person who looked like they were not from here in the lounge, smiling into their faces or startling them with her voice (like I suffered), and asking the only question there was to ask at that point in time: "Mr. Bosun Majek?"not minding that she actually pronounced the first name as 'Bow-

Sun’ as in two different entities.

I wanted to laugh at the way she murdered my highly cherished *Yoruba* name, but the lump that formed in my throat on hearing her spew the ‘a black person who looked like they were not from here’ statement in describing me left me angry and dumbfounded. If I had not felt insulted by her choice of words, I would have immediately corrected the pronunciation of my name and even explained its meaning. But I opted to interrogate her.

"If I may ask, how would you know whether a black person is from here or not?

She shrugged and made a face that could only mean " I just know".

She couldn’t tell she had made me angry. How could she? The simplest thing she knows how to do is to embarrass my kind with her harmless voice and smile, and lead them to ‘heaven’. She does this yearly, so I was not surprised at her innocent ignorance. Was my anger justified seeing that the colour on my skin was indeed not white? You can't hold that against me. Richard had sent a warning text the previous night to my departure, remember?

The conversation died, and silence fell on us like a spell.

After about half an hour, it became unbearable.

I turned my face to have a wonderful — if not surreal — view of Glasgow: the lush of greeneries on the pavement that separated the lanes, the extremely high skyscrapers with no physical peak or so it seemed, the beauty of the moving houses as our taxi sped by them, it was all beautiful. I turned my face to meet the eyes of the cabbie staring at me from behind the steering wheel. God bless the whites for putting a rear-view mirror in a car. I shied away when his gaze met mine and made to look out of the window for more sight-seeing, then…

“Guy, u too dey vex oh. On top wetin dis *oyibo* just tok to describe us? No make ham surprise you nah. Na their way jare. After all, no be say we sef get white skin nah. Reason

ham.”

I was taken aback. Relief. Surprise. Excitement. Embarrassment. All these emotions enveloped me shyly.

“Oboy! So u be naija boy *sef*?”, I started hoping that my voice had remained calm as I let out those seven not-allowed-here words.

Lucy was shocked. Except she pretended not to be. Who cares?

“Guy, I be original *Ndi Igbo*. Naija for life bro”, he emphasized ‘naija’ with lush pride and added “nothing do you, my guy” before swerving off the road into a wide alleyway that led to Caledonian University.

We exchanged contacts as I retrieved my luggage from his car boot, with Lucy watching the coincidental meeting with apathy. She had been lost all through the journey. Thanks, but no thanks to Ikechukwu a.k.a IK for side-lining the conversation and making it all be about Nigeria and Nigerians.

Was Lucy's behaviour an example of why I would need a thick skin? Was my reaction an example that I was thin-skinned and why IK asked me not to vex?