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The ghosts of my student years in northern Cyprus

When the Booker nominee arrived at university, he found many fellow Nigerian students had been duped into enrolling. And for some, that was only the beginning of their troubles...

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Chigozie Obioma (in the red hat) with 'pioneer' Nigerian students in 2007. Photograph: courtesy of Chigozie Obioma

The man who walked into my apartment that evening in 2009, carrying a strange light in his eyes, was not different from most of the African students I met on my first visit to northern Cyprus in 2007. There were only seven at Cyprus International University, one of the two universities in the capital city, Lefkosa (Nicosia), and all of them were Nigerian. They were the pioneers and had all come one

semester earlier, in February, through the university's representatives in [Nigeria](#). They had all paid their tuition, accommodation and other fees through these representatives who, as is often the case, had fleeced them and their sponsors by inflating the figures and pocketing the excess.

I arrived with a cultivated resistance to the culture of middlemanism, known in Nigeria as “who you sabi” (“who you know”). It was the rich soil from which the dark flowers of bribery, favouritism, opportunism and all forms of corruption sprouted, stretching their protean tendrils into every sector of society. When a Nigerian sees an advertisement for a job opening, she or he simply goes to find someone – an uncle, an aunt, a distant relative, a friend who might know someone who might be connected to someone at the top of that firm. To the typical Nigerian, the ad is purely informational, a notification that there is an opening; it is not an invitation to apply.

It was easy for these agents to bait Nigerian students. All they needed to do was tell them that northern Cyprus was a nation in [Europe](#) for which no visa was required, that it was safe for a Turkish transit visa. I had come to Cyprus as a last resort, after failing to secure a visa for a British school; most other students had planned their move.

This man, Jay, came with the students who, in what must have been September 2009, arrived in droves like a flock of migrating birds. The light in his eyes was that of a man who had danced through life's theatre of fire, and now bore the scars of his partial incineration like a trophy. He had done standup comedy, but never saw it as a career path. You told him your name and he immediately made a fun-sounding nickname out of it. Chigozie became “Chigo” or “Chi-chi”. He was full of stories, of kindness, of jokes, of life, but, most of all, he was bursting with dreams: he wanted to do business, to own a company; he wanted to enter politics and change things in his failing country. But he had one dream that dominated all others: to get back on his feet.

Nigerian students came bursting with hope and expectations to a desert of stark, paralysing disappointment

He had been solidly on his feet not too long ago, before he came to northern [Cyprus](#) – living in Berlin, gainfully employed, engaged to a

woman in Nigeria. Then one night he was rounded up, his papers confiscated, and he was deported to Nigeria. He could not understand how it had happened. He could recall only that he had had a fight with someone, a fellow African – “an Ethiopian or something” – at a party, and a few days later the police had stormed his house and harvested a polythene bag of a prohibited substance from beneath his bed. He was convinced someone had planted it. He returned to Nigeria on the edge of delirium. Reduced to a dependant again, under the care of his mother for whom, until recently, he had been a provider, he struggled to stay sane for months. Then he chanced upon the agents.

They did not have to work hard on Jay, because the prospect of a place where he could get back on his feet revived a once-strangled hope. He threw all the money he had left into paying his way to Cyprus. Perhaps because they knew he had lived abroad before, the agents had been more ferocious than usual with their lies.

As one of the university’s older students, I was assigned a role as a mentor to some of the new arrivals. Dee and Abhinav, the two students I shared an apartment with, came with me to the airport to welcome people off the plane. It was here, as the plane touched down and Jay saw the ramshackle airport, that his troubles began. He asked so many questions that by the time the bus reached the campus, it was clear that he and all 17 of the Nigerian students were crushed. This was not the overseas they had been given to expect.



Illustration: Eric Petersen

In Nigerian circles, the word “overseas” holds an almost sacred connotation of comfort, wealth, class – all the luxuries the typical African believes abound abroad. For what use would it be for the parents or sponsors of these people to pay €1,300 – the equivalent of hundreds of thousands of Nigerian naira – every semester, when the same programme could be studied at a Nigerian university for much less, or even for free? The difference, the students believed, lies in Europe, the US, Canada, and in some Asian or Middle Eastern countries. There were jobs there, opportunities; once overseas, a man brings his brother, then that brother brings another, and this begins a process akin to drilling an interminable hole of immigration until everyone is either overseas or supporting those who remain at home. This phenomenon accounts for half the immigrants who leave Nigeria on a yearly basis, and for the more than £8bn Nigerians in diaspora send home every year.

Was it true that this was not Europe? It was true. Was it true that there were no jobs, and no way to make money? It was

None of the students on the bus that day knew that northern Cyprus was, at the time, an impossible place for this pipe dream. It was not Europe; it was not America; it was not Asia; it was not even [Turkey](#). This was – and still is – a nation under the United Nations embargo. It had been a part of what was once the Republic of Cyprus, but the union had ended in an internecine war that resulted in the division of the island in 1974 to form the Republic of Cyprus belonging to the Greek Cypriots, and northern Cyprus. Under international embargo, it was suffocating. Its streets were ramshackle, its infrastructure second rate. There were no jobs. There were no amenities, no opportunities. There was nowhere to work to pay the next lot of school fees; no naturalisation or citizenship to aim for. There were only two options for survival: one was to fight for the menial jobs available with the often hostile immigrants from Turkish Kurdistan, Syria, Lebanon and other low-income immigrants; the other was to depend solely on sponsors back in Nigeria, something only a few could afford. Many of the students’ parents had sold their properties, in some cases their ancestral lands, to finance their children in the confidence that this was a long-term investment. And because most Nigerians rely on a middleman, these students had not verified what

the agents told them. They came bursting with hope and expectations to a desert of stark, paralysing disappointment.

Jay stepped down from the school bus and continued with his barrage of questions. Was it true that this was not Europe? It was true. Was it true that there were no jobs, and no way for him to make money? It was. Was it true that he would have to depend on someone in Nigeria for sustenance? It was. What about all the money he paid? That was gone.

He stared intensely at everyone who spoke, trying to reassure himself. We took him and the other male students to our apartment, but he seemed to have completely melted into himself. He began fidgeting, and punctuating his speeches with much head-shaking.

All day he asked questions and told stories, until the kind of heavy darkness that came upon the island in the autumn descended, and the campus was swamped in the nocturnal swamp-song of toads. Everyone else had gone to their on-campus housing units, save for Jay and one other new arrival, Tonerio. We had eaten Indomie, a brand of Nigerian noodle, and talked, and a natural silence had fallen. In the lull, friends gazed into their phones or computers. But Jay sat in one of the armchairs with his head between his hands, intermittently shaking it and letting out a sigh or a hiss. When he finally spoke, his words sliced into the heart: "I will – I will get back to my feet." At first he was muffled; then he cleared his throat and it came out audibly.

"You will be able to do it, I trust and hope," Dee said.

"Are you sure?" he asked, desperately wanting it to be true.

"You will, I'm sure," I said.

He gazed at us, then nodded repeatedly. As I watched him, I thought of birdlime, a substance I'd encountered a year earlier when our apartment had been menaced by the most docile of birds: pigeons. They had formed coops anywhere they found room, and a degenerate tribe had lived on the roof, and invaded our porch, rendering it nearly

impossible to put tables and chairs out there during the heat of the summer months. Ten minutes was enough time for a pigeon or two to deposit a glob of ashen stool on the tables. We did not dare leave our doors or windows open. After the summer break of 2008, we returned to find our porch covered in a goo of bird faeces, a hay field of feathers, tiny glops of shit-like black spittle, a hostile smell.

Dee, Abhinav and I were desperate for a solution. We went to an old grocery store in Kyrenia, the equivalent of what we called “the gbogboe store” in Nigeria – the store that has everything. The man pointed us outside, where we found an antenna-like disc said to be an effective remedy; there was also a plastic bag containing dried, shrivelled seeds and leaves, and instructions, written in English and Arabic. This was a “bird trap” from Damascus; a handful of lime seeds, tree bark and leaves placed on a flat piece of wood would serve as a gluey bait for birds, which, once they stepped on it, trapped them unshakably still. But what surprised me most was its name: birdlime.

For me, the name was a combination of two things that had made a strong impact on my childhood. Because of the way they populated the trees that filled the town, especially the lime trees, I’d grown to believe that birds love lime trees. There was a tangerine tree and a lime tree within the perimeters of our low-fenced compound, which housed a two-storey apartment complex in which my family lived. As children, we would climb the trees and watch the neighbourhood for as far as the eyes could see. During mock war games, the fecund leaves of the trees provided us with Vietnam-like hideout foliage.

But we were increasingly locked in stiff competition with birds: pigeons, sparrows, partridges and even, occasionally, hawks. They would brood here for months in the dry season, weaving innumerable nests and smearing every branch with their stool, and then leave for God knows where in the wet season, when rain fell in deluges for six uninterrupted months. In early September, the birds would return and reconstruct all that the rains had destroyed: their nests, feathers, food residues, smell, everything that made the trees uncomfortable for us. At any time of year, a shake of a low-hanging branch could send scores of birds on a mad, wing-fluttering flight; our struggle for supremacy was always short-lived.

In Kyrenia, my friends and I bought the trap, which we planted on our balcony to rather miraculous effect; but the birdlime lingered in my mind. I wondered for a long time how the tree that was so beloved of those birds could also be a trap. It would take this encounter with Jay, a year or so after I first saw the birdlime, to provide an answer.

Jay had left my apartment on Friday evening; it was now Tuesday. 'What do you mean, missing?' I asked, slightly shaken

Jay had nodded at my assurance that he would find his feet, and for those first three or so days we were able to comfort him. He cooked, shopped for new clothes; on the third day, he went with Tony – whom he'd dubbed "Tonero", a nickname Tony still bears – to rent a house just outside north Lefkosa's downtown. But when he returned to campus, his mood had lowered. From the stories he told, especially about his time in Germany, we could tell he had once lived a good life. Now it seemed this was the only part of his life he could remember, and he told it again and again. Once, halfway through a speech, he stopped and turned his eyes on the floor. "This one na the worst thing wey don happen to me, the worst," he said rising to his feet. "Na the worst thing."

He shook his head, and lifted his hands and eyes to the ceiling – towards heaven – and said, "Baba God, why, why you allow this kain thing happen to me again naw, why, Baba God? Why, why?"

Later, when Dee set dinner before him, he broke down in tears. We told him it was too early to despair. He agreed, ate and even made jokes. Then he left for his new apartment with the new laptop he'd bought when we took him to shop earlier that day, promising to be back that weekend to have Dee install some more software and music on it. He seemed to have regained some confidence, but who knew for how long.

"I wanted to tell you that I'm at the police station," Tonero said to me on the phone four days later. His voice, naturally sonorous, sounded deeper, louder, betraying his agitation.

I had just got out of a class, and seen the multiple missed calls. I had hardly climbed out of the English department building when my phone rang again. “Where are you?” I asked, even though I’d heard him.

“The police station. Jay has been missing since Friday night.”

Jay had left my apartment on Friday evening; it was now Tuesday afternoon.

“What do you mean, missing?” I asked, slightly shaken.

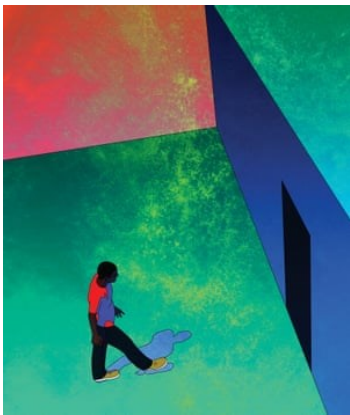


Illustration: Eric Petersen

“Missing, as in missing,” Tonero, who was easily impatient, replied. “After we left your place, I went to sleep and woke in the middle of the night to find that he was not home. His computer was on, playing the songs Dee had uploaded for him. So I felt he went somewhere to buy something. He didn’t return the following day. I have called everyone, but no one has seen him.”

I remembered that on Saturday afternoon Tonero had called to ask if Jay was at our place: why wasn’t he answering his phone?

“Where might he be?” I said.

“No idea. I would have suspected that he has crossed, were it not for his laptop and bag. He couldn’t have crossed without those things.”

By “cross”, Tonerio meant that constant occurrence whereby some African students jumped the barbed wire demarcation at the green line border zone that divided Nicosia into two countries. Most of them made it into the greener, Greek part of the island and applied for asylum, claiming they were from Sudan or Congo or Somalia – anywhere in [Africa](#) where there was war and strife. Others were caught, and severely beaten, before being sent back into the north.

“I just wanted to let you know about this,” Tonerio continued in Igbo. “Our people say that it is better to search for a black goat while it is still daylight, for once night descends, such a task would be difficult, even futile.”

I thanked him, and he hung up.

The agent in Nigeria who had deceived Jay and brought him to Cyprus was totally oblivious to the harm he had done

The Igbo, the tribe Tonerio had referenced, believe that before a cataclysmic event occurs, a constellation of warnings gather in the spirit realm, which only the discerning can decipher. It might come in the form of an unusual happening: an owl in daylight perching on your porch, a sudden wound that defies logical explanation. But there was none of that; the cataclysmic event occurred without prior warning, in silence. Then, a few days later, like a scar we never knew we had, it revealed itself in the most improbable of ways: in the news that Jay had been found dead.

Tonerio announced this to me with a strained laugh over the phone. A fetid smell, he explained, had begun to fill the vicinity of the house they rented. At first neighbours had ignored it, thinking it would go away; but it had grown stronger. The council was informed, and they dispatched a team to find the dead dog or cat – only to find Jay lying dead in an enclosed space under the eight-storey building, rotting away among the small grass and a pile of dirt.

The police would, that same day, find evidence that he had been on the roof: a pack of cigarettes, empty cans of beer, a shirt. They concluded that he had fallen from the roof through a small opening behind the elevator; an unusual slip. It was hard to imagine, but I managed to piece the stark moment of his death together. He must

have been too drunk to see the door of the elevator, which was old-fashioned, and not the kind whose ascent and descent was concealed behind a door. One waited for it in a rugged room while it rose from the ground floor to your level, filling a vacuum that faced on to the neighbouring apartment block, opened and took you in as an elevator. It occurred to me that Jay must have stepped into this space and fallen on to the top of the elevator, then bounced off it into the opening that became his final resting place. The autopsy would confirm days later that he had died from the impact of his head hitting the ground. But, as they would explain to us, he most likely did not die right away. It would have been slow, an hour or so, in the dead of the night.

My mind went back home to Nigeria, to the imagined office of the agent who had deceived Jay and brought him to Cyprus. I wondered where this man was, what he was doing at that moment: was he eating? Was he sleeping? Was he making love? He was totally oblivious to the harm he had done, and might never know, since Jay was just one of hundreds he was fleecing and sending here. I was deep in thought when a Turkish student came to me with a copy of the Gazette; on the front page there was a picture of four members of the city council team, their noses covered as they carried Jay's body in a big black trash bag.

"I'm very sorry for your friend," the girl said, wiping her eyes, before one of the African students who had gathered nearby took it and began passing it around.

I remembered the birdlime; how innocent birds are ensnared with the promise of feed. I feared that more ambitious young men and women, their wings aching to fly, would be trapped. And that, when this happened, many of them, like Jay, would not survive.

Of course many of us who knew Jay did survive the island. A small fraction went back to Nigeria after a few semesters of struggle. A greater fraction pulled out of school and fought their way into Cyprus's harsh menial labour market, working under-the-table, washing cars, sawing wood, as farm help. Others left the island for other countries, on visit visas, later refusing to leave; or made

internet marriage arrangements. A fraction who depended on sponsors back in Nigeria pulled through school, helped by the university's merit scholarships. Many of the students in this last group went back home after graduation, while some made their way to other countries overseas.

I outstayed many of them in slightly more auspicious conditions. The university offered me a scholarship for a master's degree and a graduate teaching position, which I held for one year before moving to the University of Michigan. On the day before I left, I visited all the places I felt were the highlights of my long stay there: the pigeon-troubled apartment on campus where I had lived for three years, the Mediterranean sea at Kyrenia. There, under a strong nostalgic impulse, I entered the old store where we had bought the birdlime trap. The old man was still there, sleepy and much older. Everything was the same – the matchboxes, the candles, the pile of newspapers – but I could not find the one item that had brought me there: the birdlime.

As I made my way back to my apartment, I saw, from the window of the bus, a young African man who had become so famous among the foreign students for sheer eccentricity that he had, or so rumour had it, been profiled in a Turkish Cypriot newspaper. No one knew his real name (I'd asked a great many people). People were evenly divided as to where he might be from, but generally held that he was from Nigeria.

This guy was the great wanderer whose feet had scorched the thin earth of northern Cyprus. You saw him in the length and breadth of the city, in the fury of its menacing sun, in its stop-start showers, in its humid autumns, trekking as if possessed by the ancient spirits of the Tuaregs of the Sahara. To him, it seemed the world was a field to be grazed on foot, and beyond this great field, nothing. All he had, or all he seemed to have, was a single briefcase, which, every year, wore out. His shoes, perhaps the only ones he had, too, had worn thin. They were brown, the colour of the Cyprus earth: clay-coloured desert sand. He was swarthy beyond normal, a moving, animated sculpture coated with tar. He spoke to no one. He made friends with no one. No one knew how he ate, or how he lived from day to day.

He was a great mystery. He was a blister on the great sick body that was the community of Nigerian youths on the island – a blister that no one could come close enough to pop. It struck me, as I watched him, that while many survive and eventually return home or migrate elsewhere, only a very few, like Jay, die here. Yet this man now walking toward the Lefkosa stadium was, like Jay, a trapped bird. And I wondered, as he faded out of sight, if he, too, would make it out alive.

- Chigozie Obioma is the author of [The Fishermen](#) (Pushkin Press), which was shortlisted for the Man Booker prize 2015, [the Guardian First Book Award](#) and won the inaugural FT/Oppenheimer prize. He is writing his second novel, *The Falconer*, inspired by Jay's story.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/16/chigozie-obioma-booker-nominee-haunted-student-years-northern-cyprus>