



This Hostel Life

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THIS HOSTEL LIFE

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UNDER THE AWNING

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Everyone was already in as she had hoped. She sat on the first empty chair she saw, and when she had finished arranging herself – getting her pen and papers out, making sure her phone was switched off, zipping up her bag – she finally looked up and realised she was sitting directly opposite the leader. The large window behind him was slightly open. Outside, the weather was as unsettled as her disposition as if it was ruminating on whether to rain or not. The sun had also not bothered to come out, leaving the sky an unpleasant grey.

Today was her turn to present her work at the writers' group. The leader took a sip out of a paper cup on the table in front of him.

'Can you read us into your work?' he asked the girl, placing the cup back on the table.

'Where would you like me to start?' she replied, hoping he would want an extract only as he sometimes did.

'Why don't you read it all?' he said, looking enquiringly around the room like the thought had just occurred to him.

She bent her head and started to read, stuttering her words.

You stood under the awning outside the Spar shop, staring straight ahead, barely moving, a pink plastic folder tucked under your arm, waiting for the drizzle to stop. You felt uncomfortable not standing at the bus stop on the edge of the pavement because you knew that back home, life would not stop over 'this small rain'. The newspaper vendors would still blow their whistles in your face, with The Guardian, The News, and The National Enquirer flapping in a transparent plastic bag on their arms. The hawkers would still walk around with trays on their heads, calling out 'Buy Akamu! Fresh corn with fresh coconut! Agege bread!' The blind beggars with plates in one hand and the other tucked into the hands of their small guides

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would still approach cars in traffic, singing blessings in pidgin English, Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba.

Back home, rainfall meant other things to you rather than discomfort. It meant that the flat you shared with your mother's sister and her husband and your three cousins would not be stuffy. It meant that you wouldn't go to the well to fill the jelly-cans in the flat with water. It meant that there would be corn sellers lined up along your street selling your favourite fresh roast corn the next morning.

But here you were desperate not to stand out, so you stood with the young woman pushing a crying toddler in a stroller, and the two older women and an old man under the awning of the Spar shop, careful not to look directly at anyone, pretending not to be paying attention. You had observed it was the way of things here, so people were not made to feel uncomfortable, even though you could hear the woman with the stroller pleading with her wailing child to

stop throwing her toys out of her pram, and the two women and the old man talking about the weather.

You got on your bus and after a while it filled up but the seat next to you remained empty although there were people standing in the small aisle. You stared out of the window, willing the bus to move faster. A few stops later, you felt someone sit beside you. It was a white-skinned woman, but when her phone rang, she answered in a language that was not English.

You got off at your stop and you immediately searched out the house with the little children who always shouted 'Blackie!' at you, but there was no one at the balcony, so you hurried past with relief.

You walked into the house in which you lived with your mother and your two siblings and saw your mother's friend, Aunty Muna, sitting on the sofa in the living room. 'Good Afternoon, Aunty,' you said, and she laughed, 'Haw haw haw,' before saying you were becoming the only

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African teenager she knew in the country who still said good afternoon and not hello. Her loud chortle made you remember and you went quickly to the window facing the small front garden and drew the curtains. You'd noticed that the family next door walked around rigidly and spoke to their children in really low tones, as if to say, 'this is how you should be behaving too,' and you had noticed that their children would abandon their games and run inside if they saw that any member of your family was coming outside.

Your mother asked why you were late getting home from school and you said, without looking at her, that you had to wait for the drizzle to stop. She responded with a familiar answer, silence.

On the television a man was talking about how the new American President was his relative. Aunty Muna said to your mother that wasn't it interesting that the same people who were quick to claim this black man from America were the same people who said the black girl from London could

not be a Rose of Tralee, at which your mother replied, is that so. To which Aunty Muna then wondered aloud why she was even talking about the black girl from London when the African children born in this same country were not even accepted as Irish and do not hold the same passport as other Irish children. She told your mother how once in her daughter's school, all the children's pictures were put up on the wall with their countries of origin written above it and how the children with non-national parents had their parents' countries of origin. She said weren't children of any parentage born in Britain, British or those born in Australia, Australians. You asked her what children born here were called and she said, 'migrant children or children of non-nationals, depending on who their parents were.' She told your mother that she asked her daughter's teacher to change her daughter's country of origin, but the next day, all the pictures were taken down. It was Aunty Muna who had told you not long after you arrived that

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the people in the Western world liked Africans the way you enjoyed animals in a zoo; you could visit them, feed them, play with them, but they must not be allowed outside their environment.

You sat curled up on the sofa Aunty Muna had been sitting on long after she had gone and you thought of the day you had received the phone call from your mother that her application for family re-unification had been granted and that you would be joining her and your siblings. You had imagined everyone would be like the pen pals your school principal had encouraged your class back home to have. People from Canada, Australia, England and America, that you wrote to unfailingly every Sunday about how hot and dry it was during the Harmattan, the leaves so dry they could cut your fingers quicker and deeper than any knife, and about your French teacher, Mademoiselle Jones, whom you mentioned just because she was the only person you knew who had a foreign name and wore short flowery

dresses which made her look all the more exotic. You also tried to impress them with your taste in music and wrote that you liked Usher, Eminem, Britney Spears and Beyoncé, and you were astonished that some of them did not know who they were because they were not into 'that sort of music', and you had wondered what other kind of music there was. You sent them pictures of yourself at home and at school and they sent you their pictures, taken at school and at home. You were so excited to join your mother and had imagined she lived in a big house and drove a big car. Your aunt and your cousins had thought so too because of the money your mother sent every month for your upkeep. In the coming months, you would find out that your mother stacked shelves in a supermarket. She had been a manager at a telecommunications company before she left your father.

She had told you about her friend, Muna. This was at the time when you and she still talked. She said Muna was

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lucky to have a job in an organisation that looked after the welfare of migrants. Aunty Muna had told her that the organisation had the foresight to employ a migrant as that was the best way to really empower those migrants. She would also tell you other things Aunty Muna had told her; how the other staff in her organisation were polite to her, even though they excluded her in conversations amongst themselves, and when she made attempts to join in, they would quickly disperse.

You would find out your sister, who was almost nine, wanted her hair weaved long and flowing down her back and thought Peaches Geldof was cool for walking around barefoot and said she didn't want to visit Africa because Africans were poor and the African children shown on the television had no shoes. You would also find out that your eleven-year-old brother and his friends walked around with their trousers almost at their knees and rapped about everything.

In the college your mother enrolled you in to study travel and tourism, the girls wore a lot of make-up and looked so dark from their tanning, they confused you sometimes. They asked you where you learnt to speak English so well and if it were true Africans lived in trees and how they could never live in a hot country because they would melt. You muttered an empty response, desperate not to show your real emotions, but the sadness would still come when you got home and you would cry into your pillow.

But it was after you met Dermot that you started to write. He came to visit your mother four months after you arrived. He had been working in London for a few months, which was why you had never met him. Your mother introduced him as the nicest Irishman she had ever met. He told you eagerly that he had worked with a lot of charities in Africa and also did some work with Aunty Muna's organisation. He spoke about his experiences through his work with the openness your pen pal letters used to have,

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which made you like him even though he was old like your mother. And your smile reached your eyes for the first time in a long while because his were not guarded. He told you he hoped to get funding to run a project, helping migrant children and teenagers to integrate through football and dance. When your mother asked him from the kitchen, where she was preparing jollof rice with prawns for him, if one could be taught to integrate, you had jumped in and said you thought it was a great idea. He still responded to your mother's question and said he didn't think there were enough opportunities for people to integrate, to which your mother replied that the church, the school, the road, the shops and the playground should provide enough opportunities for people to integrate if they wanted to. Your mother glimpsed the look of impatience on your face and answered you back with silence.

You could tell him things you could not bring yourself to tell your mother, how you hurried with your shopping

because the security men followed you around the shops blatantly and about the man who got on the same bus with you from school, and how he would wave and smile, and you would wave and smile back, until the day he told you he would give you €100 if you slept with him.

You had started with the small things first. And then you started telling him bigger things, about your father and how, in your head, you had blamed your mother for leaving. And how you had always struggled with the anger and guilt but couldn't talk about it because the first time you tried to say something, your mother had stood up from the bed and said, 'It always had to be about you,' and walked out of the room. You told him how for a long time you had felt as if all your family had died when your mother left you behind to travel with your siblings, both of whom were young enough to go with her on her passport. He had nodded his head repeatedly, as if he heard the things you were saying and the

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ones you left unsaid – that your mother leaving you behind was her way of punishing you.

He took you and your siblings to the cinema and you knew by people's reactions to you that they found it strange, the way their eyes slid away when you caught them looking. The old white couple who mumbled and scowled at him; the black man who looked at you with contempt before turning his back on you, his arms folded across his chest; the young woman with two little children who smiled at you and said too brightly, 'It's lovely today, isn't it?' You wondered if he felt as uncomfortable as you, but you couldn't read his expression. He started a conversation with the young woman but did not include you, so you walked away to look at the sweets until it was time to go in for the movie.

He got the funding for his project and you went with your mother and your nine-year-old sister to watch your eleven-year-old brother play on the migrants' team. There were little groups formed around the pitch; the black group, two

white couples that spoke to each other in a foreign language and a large Irish group. Each group mostly ignored the other. When he came around later, he wanted to know if you thought the event was successful, but you dodged the question. You are yet to feel comfortable telling someone something was grand when you didn't think it was. He told you his dream would be to run more integration football and to go to schools to give anti-racism talks.

You told him then about the little children down the street, of perhaps the ages of five and six, who persistently shouted 'Blackie' at you whenever they saw you walking alone and how their parents talked amongst themselves like they could not hear. He told you not to bother about them. You also told him about the girls in your college who told each other to mind their bags or made so much about their purses being in their bags whenever they wanted to use the toilet. He told you he didn't think the girls meant anything by it. And you wanted to tell him about the woman at

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church who told you that a Traveller woman had said that Travellers were no longer the lowest class since the arrival of Africans. And you wanted to tell him about the bus driver who dropped you two bus stops away from your stop because there was nobody else apart from you still in the bus. And you wanted to tell him about the man who followed your mother to a supermarket car park and told her that he wanted a BJ, and how your mother told you she had felt bad she didn't have what he wanted until she realised what he meant. You wanted to tell him all these things but you didn't. You cried for a long time on your bed after he left, confused at how alone you felt with so many people around you and the next day, you went into this same Spar shop and bought a diary.

'Thank you,' the leader said, nodding encouragingly when she got to the end. He sifted through the papers in front of him, rearranging them, again and again before glancing around the room. 'So, what does everyone think

of the work?'

A was the first to speak. 'I am surprised you wrote in the second person.'

The girl gave A an impassive smile. She wanted to show she could take any criticism.

B tucked her hair behind her ear before speaking. 'I think the story should have a bit of light and shade to it, so that it's not all bleak and negative.'

C – 'I'm not sure what it is, but there is something about writing in the second person that prevents me from caring about the character. I always know I'm reading a work of fiction.'

The leader – 'Why don't you think about breaking it up a little bit? Maybe give us a name somewhere.'

D – 'Why don't we ask her why she used the second person?'

She waited for someone to pose the question but all she saw were expectant eyes raised in her direction. 'I

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didn't want to personalise it by using a first person and giving the character a particular voice.

The leader – 'Do you think you can break it up a little bit? Maybe use the second and third person?

She gave him an 'I'll consider it' nod.

The leader – 'Another thing I would have preferred was for the reader to be the one picking up on the xenophobia like the incident on the bus.'

E – 'I saw it as a kind of paranoia on the part of the character. Like the scene at the cinema where a woman was being nice and she completely misread it.'

'That was exactly where I was going with the story.' The girl turned eagerly to E, glad someone had picked up on it. 'The character's paranoia.'

F – 'My only issue with the story was the lack of narrative thread.'

The comment irritated the girl. Does every story have to have the traditional plot trajectory? The girl wanted to

ask F but didn't.

E – 'I think there is a narrative thread – the buying of the diary.'

F – 'I don't think that was enough.'

C – 'I liked the part where she was told by her aunt of how the West perceived Africans.'

A – 'I thought that was a little melodramatic.'

C – 'It might be harsh but the truth usually is.'

The girl nodded repeatedly to show both side of the argument made sense.

G – 'I think you should ground the narration in specific details so we can understand why the girl feels such self-loathing and self-hatred.'

The girl felt a sudden urge to cry, so she scribbled on the paper she had read from, 'self-loathing and self-hatred'.

The leader closed his note book and said, 'OK, that's all for today. Who is presenting next week?'

F raised his hand.

* * *

Later that evening, the girl was alone, considering the story. Although she wanted to keep the second person point of view rather than use it interchangeably with the third person, she still went ahead to make some changes.

It was after meeting Dermot that you started to write. He came to visit your mother four months after you arrived. He had been working in London which was why you had never met him. Your mother introduced him to you by saying, 'Didi, meet the nicest Irishman I have ever met.'

You felt an ache around your heart as you remembered the reasons you were mad at him, so you tried to reason out his point of view in your head. Your classmates who asked their friends to mind their bags were actually not doing anything wrong; the bus driver who dropped you two stops

away from your bus stop could have done so be due to road works; the man in the supermarket who asked your mother for a BJ is just sick; and the children who called out 'Blackie' at you whenever they saw you passing could just be what they were, children.

She emailed the changes to the others and it wasn't long before she started to get their comments back.

B – 'I'm happy you kept the 'you' voice, which really highlighted her anonymity. Please don't change it. I did think it could be useful to still temper the racism she experienced with examples of kind behaviour too. In places there is so much bias, so much prejudice, that it almost swallows itself.'

F – 'If you can structure this piece around some kind of cohesive event or a series of events beyond buying the diary itself, the writing will really stand out.'

D – 'Very strong. Admired your use of the second person. It worked very well. Clear straightforward

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narrative line. Work on the bleak picture. How you would do this, I don't know.'

A – 'I'm so glad you wrote this. I found it believable! You'll hate this suggestion, but . . . I'd actually be interested in seeing this rewritten in chronological order with the girl given a name.'

E – 'You are able to talk about difficult material

without laying a heavy layer of judgment over everything. Also, I really think that the second person is powerful. I wouldn't change it.'

She dreaded G's response the most. She took her time to open it. 'Full of great details, but I would like you to a) lose the second person and b) observe chronology.'

C did not reply.