

Chinedu Ogoke

## LETTER TO WAYO

Dear Wayo,

I am happy you have enrolled into the Law school. The little German you have learned is enough for now. You could join us here in Mainz, for your graduate studies. I will go right away to tell you all you requested to know about Mainz, and to an extent, Germany.

You liked the story I told you in my last mail. It was really funny. The man, for whom we had worked, would never accept that a working man was entitled to his wage. That was after going through a three hour, tough, brick-laying under smoky and burning cold, which almost roasted us. We were heaving along an expressway in his truck, after work. He noticed my colleague hadn't anything which permitted him to lay those bricks in that cold. He looked over at our side, then with his eyes back on the road, jokingly said, in German, „I see your friend is James Bond of Africa.“ My friend, meanwhile, rubbed his hands in his confusion. If my friend was an African Bond, then the man was a German Arnold. We should have asked for his autograph instead of the meagre money he was eventually forced to pay. Some humour, right?

I was relating something about Mainz. Mainz, as I have always told you, like most German cities, is beautiful and orderly. In that picture I sent you, which particularly interests you, you can see the background looks like something out of this world. Yes, that is a police car on the left, and a public bus on the right. It is a construction work going on behind the bus. There is so much money in Mainz that something has to give way for the other every hour. Behind me, to the left, is a refuse bin, hung on that stop sign. Everything is state of the art. No drop of paper on the ground, as you remarked. Amazing, right? Mainz is an amazing city. You are not seeing a lot of people because we are in winter. That is why I am padded. I know you will be wondering if it is a farewell shot before a blast off into space. You are not seeing a blast off site, either. It is a train station. That sign, Hauptbahnhof, yes, means, main train station. The university is seven minutes drive from there.

Your curiosity especially, is about the university and the German students. This Mainz. I have to tell you that if anyone could be weird enough to look for boredom, the city has a lot in store for him or her. The university catches this boredom also like an infection. African students catch it too. If one should do a roll call of people in this infected, exclusive list, one will find

the African. He isn't there for his brother. You can't look at him in the eyes because he keeps his gaze down when he is passing by. There are many Chinese, Moroccans and Eastern Europeans in the school. They all relate with one another like *Oguta* and *Orasi*. Ever been to *Oguta*? *Oguta* and *Orasi* are two bodies of water, running together, but which never meet. If a fish in *Orasi* ventures into *Oguta*, it is thrown back, and vice versa. You can't detect any line of separation, but you observe the colour differentiation, and you can feel the warmth in one and the other's slightly cold temperature if you dip your hand either way from a canoe. Researchers have always left the place shaking their heads. Their only explanation is that the fish in the warm *Orasi* cannot find comfort in the cold *Oguta*, so if its original body temperature expires, it jumps back on its own. But we know that had our native scientists not been harassed out of business, they would have explained it all. Like the scientists, I shake my head at the University of Mainz and this city that accommodates it. That is why the question, „How do you find Mainz?“ is different from „How do you find Russelsheim?“ if you know these two places.

To me, previously, there were two sides of the coin as regards German students in Uni Mainz. I never invented any of that. I merely embraced the one I first laid my eyes on. I had gone over once to a hostel in the company of another friend, Bola, to visit a friend. This friend wasn't there, and he had to know I had visited. I found a paper and asked Bola if he had a pen on him. He had none and suggested I ask a German student, for he had seen one or two come out and go into their rooms. We took different courses on this point. „What do you think these Germans are?“ he asked me, as my attitude suggested I wasn't going back on my words. I told him what I thought they were. He ignored me, knocked on a door, and a pen turned up, accompanied with smiles. He gave me that *you see* look, exposing my narrow-mindedness. I refused to be convinced. I probably was suffering from the *Orasi/Oguta* syndrome. Let it play itself all over elsewhere, then, maybe, I could think again. I remember knocking on a German neighbour's door, requesting for four sheets of papers and getting exactly four. Another got some canned tomato paste from me for his soup, and replaced it two days after, despite my strong protests. Now, do you get something? Was I not twice surprised? It is not as if I was entirely wrong. Imagine what happened to an American neighbour some time ago. I was staying in a hostel where I had to struggle to single out somebody, a German, to count on sometimes to explain things like the use of the washing machine or how one could obtain a phone line.

A night came, when the American kept me at the margins of insanity. We hadn't ever spoken a word to each other. It's not unusual here because you could exist entirely behind your own walls. On the night in question, his guitar

was ringing incredibly high. A mad, high voltage guitar is the worst beast one can put up with. It rode through me like a drugged, wild Harley Davidson. Whatever he was doing was moving so fast, it couldn't have been that most ugly song on earth called 'God Bless America.' My room came between his and other rooms, so others wouldn't really have taken the heat of it. I got everything. So, I struck the wall angrily, but of no effect. A long time later, I got on against the wall, and let it feel my anger. Time and again, I withdrew from the wall, for I was almost getting blisters on my hands. Then, I realised I must have been taken in in a mad rage. You won't believe it. He kept at it two nights afterwards and I had to always go back to the wall. A friend in between asked me to call the police. The decibel determined would inform them whether to stop him. Yes, there is an instrument for measuring such a thing, and the police use it often. Some days later, well past midnight, I saw the fellow who had made me go through hell, lying on the stairway, where he had suffered a knock down from heavy drinking. The next day, about the same time, I saw him on the same spot, sitting vertically, with a hand passing under his legs to support his jaw. I could then see what he was undergoing. Not long after, we passed each other in a place where one could really get a chance to look at somebody. He had a kind of shoulders that could take two men in an emergency. He was well kempt and if he had looked at me, he would have been looking down at my 5'8. He had a lot on his mind, like the lock of hair that came down up to his shoulders.

Back home that same day, I opened my door to a knocker, who turned out to be him. He didn't have that worry on his face anymore. He had it in words. I immediately set aside whatever grievances I had against him, from what I soon found out. What did I find out? I found out what drew him to alcohol, as he regrettably admitted. I discovered he was having problems becoming a member of our floor. Can you beat that? He talked about what he was getting from living in a hostel. He said he wasn't seeing faces but backs always turned to him, or a discussion breaking up when he approached. He had been tricked into choosing Mainz, he told me, because of the city's friendly face and beauty. Lest I forget, rich Mainz has many low rate friends like Rwanda, which it supports. If it was all about coming to Germany, the American went further, he'd get much more value in a rest house for his money for a few days, or settle for a private accommodation. He said the Germans should know they were hurting the wrong person. It had nothing to do with him, I told him. I told him I joined the Germans through a friend in their midst at football, and invited him, which he turned down. The rejection, he said, wasn't because he had an American attitude to the game or couldn't kick the ball, but that he wouldn't walk into any pitch if uninvited by those people themselves. We related fine thereafter. But, I saw him some weeks

afterwards, one heavy bag around his shoulder, and a hand pulling hard at a heavy suitcase. He stopped for greetings. He said he had had enough of the place, and was leaving. I let him know it wasn't proper he was leaving, because it was on the wrong grounds. But was he going to reverse the flight arrangements, the relinquished accommodation, and other bureaucracies, because I stood before him? He must not miss his flight. So, I stepped out of his way.

I curiously take an exception to this rule. I relate well with some of the German students. If I require a proofreading assistance, I'd get it and promptly done, with just a raise of the finger. I spot my email address often in an all German mailing list. I have gotten favours I find difficult to return. My current hostel has boasted good camaraderie championed by two girls, Eva and Simone, and sustained by the rest of us at their departure. The relationship was run on occasional, collective dining, utensils' sharing, outing and floor parties. But somehow, a next door neighbour, I assumed, took refuge in the limited company of just a boy and a girl, and non-communication with everybody else. His terms were very favourable to me. It went on for a long time, then, one day, he pulled up with a rare peace move. He approached me, saying some nice things he had heard about me. We subsequently felt free to get into each other's rooms at will. And, when he had to leave for an overseas programme, he invited me to see what he had for me, a musical gadget. Food ingredients and cooking utensils joined in. A great guy.

German students here usually lock themselves into hardboiled, granite cells which move further inwards, adamant to knocks from without. One could never get in, even when one struck with all one's might. But, they love Americans, and that love really is an entry ticket to most Americans who have no problems, getting in. One Vincent we had recently in my current hostel had it easy with the Germans. Then, there was another American, a lady, who went from door to door offering cakes at every door that responded to her knocking, and asking after people's names. Boys and girls share the same hostels, if you would like to know. What I am saying is that one has to go to the Germans.

It will be wrong to think that these German students are not their brothers' keepers. In various places in the university, as doors run back and forth in a marathon, going from hand to hand, creating room for the person behind is seen as an obligation. If you stood beside a door chatting with somebody, the door will still be there, held up patiently until you are through, then you will show your appreciation with a smile and the word, 'Danke,' thanks. I might be 100 kilometres away and be summoned on the mobile phone, when I still had one, to come and relieve somebody of a door.

Someone may fall asleep on the door, waiting for you to relieve him. They know how to hold the door for you. But, if it is your first semester in school, and you form an opinion or build anything on this, you may be disappointed, for any relationship formed in a particular semester hardly survives the next semester.

The university is indeed a strange place. Take what some students do to others, for instance. One gets to hear about the attitudes or apartments or parties of such students, as if they are genetically different. There are sighs or remarks about how these Mediziner or medical students behave, or „What do you expect from a BWLer?“ That is, from a student studying Business Administration, or from an Elektrotechniker or a student studying Electrical Engineering. The last one is not offered in Uni Mainz, but the students infiltrate Uni Mainz. It is easy to recognize these students trying to negotiate themselves into being descendants of Albert Schweitzer and Albert Einstein, Adam Smith or Thomas Edison. But I know that if those traits were hereditary, circumstance would come up with more suitable persons. Those men were unassuming and these students are mere cartoons of them. The students I am talking about, not all of them, have such repugnant breathe which leaves a hurt that doesn't heal fast. They seek ways to nourish the bruises they suffer from the frustrations with their studies, by repeatedly accompanying each salutation with the question, „Was studierst du?“ which is, what are you studying? As if they are academic police. Once it turned out not to sound sensible, they ask, „Was willst du damit machen?“ meaning, what do you want to do with it? The society here is so structured that he would feed whatever information obtained into the little calculator in his head, subtract your taxes and life time purchases, set aside your other miscellaneous expenses, and come up with your life handouts and retirement benefits, not comparable with his possible, respectable salaries. He'd nudge towards you a few hours later in the train, and pose the same question again, and get reminded both of you had just gone through that, and he would withdraw with apologies. I hear these people also let it be known who they are through their attires. But, I think they would wilt completely should they show their faces at a school nearby called European Business School, in a place called Oestrich Winkel. Beautiful name, right? The Oestrich-Winkel BWLers would jerk uncontrollably with laughter to realise there is another civilization in this part of the world with a similar identity. For, the showing of these Oestrich Winkelers is beyond their reach. From the Oestrich-Winkeler, they could take introduction lessons in show biz. These Uni Mainz students, therefore, scare their fellow students out of certain areas in the university. The university has already chosen its people and made clear who its rightful heirs are with the distribution of facilities and accommodation. Great expertise, something

above the architectural range of modern construction, has been utilized to provide an academic home for these students. Their victims go into a weeping structure called Philosophicum for their lectures. The university is considerate. It has a students protection policy. It, therefore, provided an escape route with trees as cover for the students being discharged from this Philosophicum. Different shades of tools being used in moulding people, like in our universities. If you get admitted to Uni Mainz, you would need to work on your German, so you would, like most foreign students, be having your German language lectures in a dark basement. The language would still, somehow, see daylight in you, with intensive drills. I know some of the oppressive students would ‚clean up‘ the university, if they were to have the chance.

However, a lot is happening in school. There are parties and the like spread everywhere. The most important is the ‚Sommerfest‘, or summer festival. Everybody knows summer is around, but waits until he is reminded by this gigantic and extravagant party that it is summer time. This ‚Sommerfest‘ has the same attitude as the entire university. The River Niger does indeed derive its water from the Atlantic Ocean. A Moroccan student disagrees that it is boring, but I can't think of a gathering of such magnitude that has such faint rhythm. Outside this year's, I never ceased being part of its tight, close and restraining crowd. A girl started my night, though, at last year's. I had barely entered the place, when I noticed her, watching how she handled the music coming from the big stage. She looked magnificent, and I named her Melanie. She had an amazing, raving skill and with such consistency, with her hair swirling like the colours that took turns to go up somewhere, uniting with a multi-colour like stream going up a wall. A boy who from his attire, needed to clean up, the type who refuse to abide by simple lavatory rules, crawled up behind her, took her in his arms, and smothered her with kisses. She responded passionately. I had had enough. She and the gigantic party gave me a big appetite, anyway. The activities all around just didn't do much to help me attain what the appetite had rolled out for me. I was thirsty for the real thing. I got moving. Soon, the appetite was gone. Luckily, it got restored again at the Brazilian corner, with its samber and humour. It grasped the essence of life. Oh, me. I spoilt it again, when I later made a stop where a group of rambler, engaged in what looked like a brawl, driven by techno music, did their thing. It was a male affair. It was a prolonged, purposeless and disorderly ramming of armless bodies into one another. What I can say is that at the ‚Sommerfest‘, generally, there was a living heart, without heart beat, blues without rhythm and rhythm without blues. Fortunately, that night, I was going home to a delicious egusi soup.

Once in a while, one prepares egusi or ogbono soup. You are surprised to learn we have access to these ingredients. We do. Acquiring the ingredients is a tiring job. Friends or shops are our sources. And we improvise a lot. Garri is expensive, so when we cook, it has to make way for what they call Grieß. Ugu's place has already been taken by spinach. You may not find spinach in your dictionary. It is something close to efo but hardly with large leaves. I made some ogbono last week. The entire exercise forms something inexplicable in my mind. I got down to real work when I received good news over the phone that Chidi would make it. If one had to have him, then okra was out of it. All the things anyone at home could have for his ofe ogbono was on the table. With Kartoffel or potato, one wouldn't be denied achi or miss ukpo. Ground potato also holds the ingredients together. I always make an attempt to get what one Anozie uses, because he cooks very well. Since you know what ogbono is, you would appreciate what was happening inside me right then in a foreign land. I had had everything going just fine. The ero or mushroom, a special type, had become darkened with heat. I threw them in indiscriminately. It was obvious the heat would get them wherever they would be. I broke some smoked fish into the soup and sprinkled in some crayfish. Crayfish gives every soup the real kick it needs. The advice I have for anybody making ogbono is to have the crayfish come after the smoked fish. Sceptics of my cooking say that is where I get it all wrong. I watched the heat rocking the ogbono into bubbles, with some sensation building up in me. That last week, I swallowed thickly, going for Grieß and thinking I was almost there, when suddenly, somebody appeared and was off again. As if she had sounded the alarm bell, her colleagues started running from different directions. You'd think there was a fire outbreak. They swore at me, pointing at my soup, with their hands to their nostrils. I was shocked to hear what their words made my soup look like. I recovered quickly and told them it was their noses that had the wrong interpretation of the smell and that their noses misinformed them. I could swear, as well. I advised them to retune their sense of smell. I knew they had laid in wait from the onset, waiting to jump in when they did. Afterwards, I put a call to a friend in US. I laid it all down. He was all a raving. He said, in the states, I would have been smiling to the bank for such injustice and injury. He said he was sure the German law didn't prohibit the sale and use of crayfish, and the students had to know that. I told him one of the students looked like a law student. I saw that from his eyes. So, he must know what he was doing. I also told him the same German students eat this crayfish and some fresh water things in Chinese restaurants, but not the dry type. That they have this thing in their waters, and that there was only just a simple adjustment somewhere. So, now, I have to exclude my beloved crayfish from my soup,

so somebody doesn't push the fire service button. Now, they ignore me and my cooking. But they explore other forms of commentary. If I am unto salad, they say I am preparing a healthy diet. In all, they wish they could legislate and curtail our cooking. They are rich, so seldom cook.

Somehow, I feel, too, I could legislate on some of the things they do. Boys, for instance, could be cooling off on their seats waiting to see a lecturer, or anywhere else, while these attractive girls find the bare floor conducive to sit, hands over knees or holding down their legs. One would watch a male go for a seat just vacated, while people waiting comprised boys and girls. Just yesterday, I stood up for a girl, knowing a seat was female property if there was a female around. But, she and her friend declined. They laid aside their books, 'wiped' the spotless floor with their buttocks, and drew up their legs, knees coming up to the jaws. Nothing under anything to see because they were in jeans trousers and we are in winter. You know how taking away things that belong to the women folk would appear in our eyes back home. Such circumstances here disregard female presence. The girls probably had crossed too far into the male domain in their emancipation drive and forgot to make little, natural adjustments. Sometimes, one would see males in things associated with the female folk and vice versa. Often times, too, one sees habits like thrusts of the hair, excited hair, and other habits that ought to emanate from girls, coming from boys, or manly habits presiding over feminine figures. I was having problems separating a boy from his girlfriend in that sitting place, to see if they weren't same sex. Both were smoking and their lips would occasionally reach for each other. The boy had trousers over seemingly female shoes, and had removed all outward male traces in him. I was wondering why he was bent on depriving himself of his manly features. An admiring eye, therefore, must discriminate between what it consumes, so it doesn't go spitting out anything or cursing silently. I had started thinking of *these Mainz students*, when someone arrived and called my name, and I hardly remembered her name. I felt guilty that I had been thinking, *these Mainz students*. I have to see a psychiatrist. I wan' mental.

The names I get either get entangled in my thin head or just fall off. To Germans generally, the names stick on. How their heads could hold so many names, even names that come very hot, I don't know. I usually attach some elements to rely on to fish out names. The way these attachments desert me baffles me. In contrast to the German students, Africans and Arabs are at their best making objectionable experiments with my name and me. My name suffers on their lips, if they attempt to call it. An Iraqi thought an Iraqi name was okay for me. When I objected to a Baghdad name, he probably misunderstood me, and said Baghdad would be too dangerous for me now. A Senegalese gave me Chinua Achebe, for he read the man's books in school

and liked them. Then, to a Moroccan, I am Finidi George, the footballer who rhythmically does the dog walk and lifts one leg sideways, when he scores a goal. So, telling these people my name is an invitation to get ridiculed. You can see how I have been smeared with all sorts of names. So, when once a German student at a work place behaved like an African or Arab, I wondered if he was one in disguise. He was defenceless against my charge, and pleaded to hear my name anew. I still talked about how I was unimpressed at him, over something that is a German trade mark. You'd think my comment stripped him of his proud nationality. Finally, I reluctantly told him my name. The incident and the face were forced out of my memory by time. I was excited, when I saw somebody from the past one afternoon. It was this same fellow I had accused of his poor showing where his people distinguish themselves. He called my name, down to the pronunciation and all, and I found myself clutching thin air. He is now my nightmare because we meet often. I have an idea, anyway. I am going to press his email address from him, and with the name appendage, he would betray his name. I recall he has a set of unique and broken letters for handwriting.

Germans make art out of writing, and as edible as alphabets on paper can be. Out of the varieties of writing, and unlike that young man, they prefer the cursive. Those cursives with alphabets that look like nicely clipped hair. I remember working on the cursive the first time in my life, in secondary school, trying to make the various spins, to hook them up appropriately, then make them touch the bars on the paper, rather than have them go astray or the like, and with a good management of the sidelines. Mine still looks like an abandoned project. I never had good writing lessons. It is something not unconnected with foundation education. Like the treatment of the every day life. This smart, lofty cursive is unchanged when it flows from female fingers here.

Talking about the German girls, something you especially want to know, a German girl sends a green signal that looks like a red one, so she could pull out of it quickly without regrets. So, what the man needs is patience and a measuring instrument. She knows what you don't know and you don't know what she knows. She is unlike our girl who puts an inviting smile on her lips and playfully puts forward something perceptible you can hold unto so you don't drown. But with our girl, you beg for the same thing each time. Our girl may be smitten by sympathy, or may not be able to hold you off for too long, if you are the one making the move. To what you just put up, our girl will nod and say, „That was a good try. Wow, our boys are getting too smart. Boy, I would have fallen for it if I hadn't been engaged.“ And she will wish you good luck. Sometimes, she might even feel one man shouldn't have it all. Their girl will give it to you in one piece. If you accost a girl on the road because a

combination of her beautiful face and her melodious voice makes you start wondering why men ever go to war, or because you think she is a *ninja* girl, I bet, then you might as well try a hitch-hike along a dangerous highway, with a placard in one hand and an unconcealed weapon in the other, and get a friendly ride. She will choke with hate and will toss you into a ditch, with a swinging glance, and move ahead. If you have known each other already, and you come off smiling, then you must have done what men are required to do. You must have undergone military service and specialized on her. This is a maze of rituals like going to cinema, disco, café, etc, so she will have enough evidence of your commitment and witnesses thereof. All this is necessary also, so you would be incompatible to any other woman whenever she kicks you out. The spectators have since gone home, but these victorious girls don't seem to have heard the final whistle.

In some societies, 'outdoor chasing' is highly curtailed. For pedestrians in Mainz, it is no stopping, no parking, no discussing, no anything, keep walking, so 'chasing' doesn't even occur. Dancing clubs come to the rescue. Instead of your hitch-hike, they are there like travel agencies. They provide the needed atmosphere to sit, drink and taste some marijuana to get emboldened and dance and listen to the roaring and assuring sermons of Charlie Deluxe and a deluge of other ghetto rappers which re-orientate you both and make you high, task the head of state to acknowledge his role in your mis-education, and encourage you both to catch up on whatever you missed on the streets. You could offend the floor for no police is taking notes and the cameras have been turned away. You are permitted to smash all the rules. You hear of one night stands. The party spots are their genesis. You will see a replica of the girl who once gave it to you on the street roar and jump like a bolt when a new beat is in the air, then you see how out of touch you are with reality and how you are trailing everybody in Mainz. People want to be brought together. So, they cry out through adverts at bus stops, on walls in toilets and in newspapers. These places and forms have all assumed new roles. Majority of the people get themselves computers. They turn to the internet, like fugitives, roaming strange lands, looking for those elusive lovers that don't walk the streets. Streets are deserted in the evenings here, with people sucked into the wild wild web. Chat rooms take the lion share of all the platforms. As I write this mail in the computer centre, here, a girl nearby is chatting, her fingers flying over a computer key board. She has geographical features I can't rightly situate. To my left, a boy, a foreigner, is chatting, as well. A friend has just gotten down in conference with him, perhaps, to take him to the site which offers the best services at the most moderate price. I agree, some people might find such things irresistible and run to them for fun. But, such people are quite few. Once, beside some lecture rooms frequented

mostly by girls, a kind girl, in an advert, said she wanted a successor at her boyfriend's bed. She gave the bed's dimension. On that bed, she claimed, it never ceased being fun. The young man was so nice she couldn't think of him without a partner. She was going back to her home country, and wanted all enquiries sent to a given number. A friend who also read it said there was no girl in the story.

Once in Stuttgart, a friend, Ndube, saw one of these black girls who make rare appearances in Germany. You must have read about Stuttgart. That is where most of the Mercedes Benz and Porsche we have on our chaotic roads come from. The girl's gaze was directed somewhere in my friend's direction. The girl was restive, so the young man thought she was posing for invisible cameras. This went on for almost a decade. It was when an unruly street tram fled away with the girl, with the girl waving from her heart and blowing him kisses that he got it. He was so annoyed with his insensitivity, he never responded. He only dipped for her when the tram was out of sight. He phoned me and I found myself consoling him. He said he saw tears in the girl's eyes and I believed him. Consoling him wasn't easy. Yet, another of the sort, he said, once asked for directions and with sealed lips, he walked with her a long distance. Then another asked after the time, though a watch was sitting comfortably on her wrist. You know flirting started out in Africa. Please, don't blame my friend. He is from Mainz. Mainz turns everything upside down. You can eat along the road, but, you must not raise anything, your voice or your hand. People wave by clipping their fingers, like butterflies flapping their wings.

Our girl employs a lot of these *sisi eko* steps, pre-occupied with the amount of comments and glances she will take home in a given day. Buses have to be punctual here, so, girl, you gotta run. That is what the girl here does. She will tell our girl she had been there before, and that what our girl is doing is not good for the female psyche. The girls are playing the new game in town, but the boys are the ones smiling away. The boy has to be a good student of this new phenomenon. He has to let go the public relations aspects of the relationship. His days will be long if he can do this.

The German boy faces a strange accusation from all sides. Ask foreign and German girls, he is a habitual traffic offender. I had been watching an acquaintance at a students' party the other time, tossing her head about like a doll to musical beats. Later, as if her energy supply had been suddenly cut off, she was calm, not moving. After the party, we fell into the same bus on our way home. I yielded to curiosity and said to her, „You didn't dance a good part of the time. What happened?“ „These German boys,“ she flared. „They will just not make a move.“ „No“, I said, „but you should have made the first move. They are scared to hell of rejection. Some signs; something obvious

like, „Is this seat free?“ „I did all that.“ She looked at her fingers, which she had really worked on for the party, almost in tears. „Where I come from“, I said, „a girl in that situation would do even more.“ „I am going to strike your face“, she said, like our girls, and laughed. Meanwhile, a girl who would easily pick up the most beautiful girl poll on campus, was seated somewhere with a heavy face. For her, it was another unfulfilled night. It will require unusual ambition to look her in the eyes and maintain the gaze. If it is ever going to be in this city, she will get off at the bus stop of that boy who claimed Melanie at the ‚Summerfest‘. The boys at the party had perhaps gone deaf from the loud music and blinded by the intense lightings. Wayo, don't you think they should undergo periodical eye and ear tests? This was the feeling I had when we got to the train station and as connection buses began to assemble. I am amazed by the punctuality of these people.

Germans are punctual. Punctuality is not in Africans. Please, in your reply to this mail, I would like you to tell me what you think about Africans dangling before their fellow Africans, appointments they cannot keep. One of the reasons I couldn't make the enquiry you earlier requested was because I was kept under house arrest by somebody, an African friend. That was four days ago. He had phoned to ask for a rematch over table tennis. I reluctantly agreed. By agreeing, I gave him control over me and the opportunity to manipulate me. He had felt good, pulling the strings, calling once more to say he was on his way. What a lie. I felt restricted in mind and body, my mind following any sound around my vicinity. The whole day, he didn't come. I try to comprehend why and how he had chosen me, and how I had accepted to be pulled along. It has happened too often, with these Africans. I can't tell where they derive their antics. We finally met at the train station a day afterwards, this person and I. We went together shopping, and I noticed our discussion may end without us saying something about the botched appointment. I told him how displeased I was that he could leave me in suspense. He had been waiting with a handful of excuses or accusations to take care of my ordeal. I watched everything change to why it should be an issue. Then, I smelled this take it easy *men* attitude. It all got trivialised, like the name issue, something our Africans probably don't see. I am losing this fight against these people. That is why I need your advice. Imagine. This fellow was using table tennis as bait. Some of them use the internet, knowing I can never shake off a request to come over to use the internet. One of them accused me recently of taking measured steps to his apartment, because of my punctuality. The urban transport service, the Rhein-Main-Verkehrsverbund or RMV, had counted these steps to every man's door step, in plotting the bus schedules. Did he expect me then to moderate it with human shortcoming? It had already been worked out by the RMV, which counted out

the steps. Nothing to do with me. I merely stepped into the footmarks. That is, if I inadvertently took measured steps to his place. I didn't say that, before I became a German. Well, I have made my point now such that those who randomly pick people to set up would drop my name immediately. Our ways have to step aside for the German ways. We are in Germany.

This RMV is doing a marvellous job. It owns that bus in that picture. It considers everybody, old and infirm included. Occasionally, it clinks glasses and drinks heartily from expected public opinion. Recently, the management turned off the ignition to evaluate its score card. But they shouldn't have been in a haste to do a victory lap, because I know they wouldn't have gotten a handshake from everybody. Mona, a friend, would, instead, have been waiting in his corner to raise the red card. His reply to the RMV crew at the exit door, would have been, „Sorry, I didn't enjoy the flight.“ He was unhappy with its monotony. He said he always felt discomfort with RMV's dictatorial clutches around him. So, he walked out on the place. I recall I told him any option would adulterate the entire system. Incidentally, our trip to the last students demonstration here was our last time together. The students demonstrate, too, but differently.

Over here, because they won't bear being starved of the presence of students, campuses are accommodated within or around the cities, unlike the situation back home. In contrast, our students are dumped in mass starvation camps, and the state turns its back on them. Away from society where distance will muffle the grunts and moans of students. Obviously, sometimes, in our case, as you well know, we attempt to come within hearing distance. We therefore use songs to make the long journey over oil fields easier. From our bruised souls come such songs that will swell our ranks with street urchins and jobless people, old songs, furnished with campus romances and other experiences, all merry making. As we do our things, some students go rolling back and forth. And the girls will adopt and walk through the hot drum beats with such unimaginable tender artistry. The dictator, we know, will think our coming is like a furious indictment. We are past caring, as usual. Our boys toil happily over drums, and we push on. The police roll out their armoured tanks and Uzi machine guns, AK47s and M15s, shooting excitedly, determined not to waste their gold-plated bullets, to hit targets. The beautiful female voices wet their appetite to come and rape and our boys' drumming lubricates their zeal to come and kill. Give it to the police. They cannot understand why society keeps alive in such conditions, people it doesn't need. After all, there wouldn't be jobs after graduation. So, these sadists embark on these mercy killings with their part of an international loan splash. The G5 will grace our dailies the following week, happy with our democratic progress and our stance on global terrorism and shake hands with our

leaders over a new loan package with military aid. They point at what those students are doing to the price of the Brent Crude and the entire oil market.

German students, unlike us, merely commune at the train station, when they demonstrate. They barely cover the station grounds. There is usually a handful of unarmed police. Maybe, four. The students stand around and blow whistles, interrupted by life band music. The following is what fell into my ears during the last demonstration. It was a dialogue between a policeman and a student. First, the policeman provided fire for the student's cigarette, then, remarked, „Your turnout today is heavy.“ „Enrolment is going up“, the student replied, sending smoke upwards. „I see“, the policeman said. „So, from here now, you are going into town and the real party begins.“ „Not me. My colleagues are going“, the student replied. „I am attending an employers' exhibition later today at the university.“ „If you are thinking of a career, why not come to us?“ the policeman asked him. „You can see the inscription on our vans. We want to catch you people young. The police take home is attractive.“ „I fancy police job,“ the student replied. „But you people are too disciplined and upright for me. I like my jeans, you see. Besides, I am looking for something more challenging.“ They both laughed. „Today, we are concluding, and I am putting pen to paper. I graduate in two years. Between graduation and job take off, I will go and see Nicaragua.“ „Was in Cuba in my student days“, the policeman told him. „How long will you be in Nicaragua?“ „Two months.“ „We have lost you, then“, the policeman told him. I didn't hear anymore. When I told Mona who wasn't listening, he said the student would be desired in the even more challenging Nigeria police. According to Mona, in Nigeria, that same policeman would have been grinning inside technology's latest armoured tank, while the tank's massive chains fed on the boy's flesh. Next, the police would go into the university to gang rape the boy's sister and to cart away their belongings.

Wayo, probably, there was a slight displacement somewhere when civilizations were joined together and I fell unto the wrong side. I am probably being missed in an earlier civilization after being dealt the wrong card for the right place. Please, I would like to indulge your patience. Sometimes, Wayo, if I am at table with the German students, the rice that comes before me assumes a different form. That is, the talk is about what nutritional category the food falls into, and what chemical tribe it belongs to. This chemical tales get in the way of the food. Modern scientists and their nutrition science and horoscope. I think they have stretched these things too far in order to sustain their relevance, and these boys and girls accept their tales. In my mind, I say please, let's eat this food, it is getting cold. They continue, in spite of me. One talks about the nutritional family of another food. Then, another tells a third he thinks her body needs more vitamins. When, finally we start eating, I make a

contribution by suggesting we go further down to determine all the compounds of all the foods, then rename those things we eat the foods from crucibles and the ones with which we heat them burners, so it becomes clear the menu table is an extension of a lab. Somebody will say I am funny, and we will all laugh. The tables are usually distinguished and jet set, with lit candles. Deep into a meal, somebody with two filled up canals will suddenly pull up a serviette and place it over her nose and move crabs and slime with such high voltage and pressure into it. She will try again and still more will storm into the serviette, and then she will continue eating triumphantly. How weak I am. I suffer an appetite breakdown. No meal is complete without that ritual.

Such a setting is strong wine of sorts that awakens things which ought to be unsuitable for the table. Everything goes around. Nothing is omitted when they go around. Nothing is kept under or away from the table. Julia will pick up a slice of bread which will end up in Stefan's mouth. Later, she will pat him and tell us Stefan wouldn't have been sitting there with us. That he has just recovered from a dreadfully infectious disease. Then, with his head against her shoulder, Stefan will accept another bit and chew on.

A friend, Florian, his girlfriend, Betty, and I had just met at the station one afternoon, when a couple with their dog, Nina, touched down from a glass lift, and came over to us. Both of us two parties knew this couple separately. The couple thought the coincidence extraordinary, and thought it would be a great idea to have us all some time at their lunch table. We all kept the appointment. There was some rock 'n roll music in the air. As a table devotee, who is always glad to be alive to witness yet another build up before him, I noticed our host's wife had done a head count. I was watching her, and didn't see Nina, the dog, approach. I just felt the dog's nauseating wet tongue over the hand I had 'sharpened' to pick up bread. Betty seemed to like the dog. With its legs on a bench, the dog attained the average height of a five year old child. The dog's furs fell backwards as Betty ran a hand over them. Then, she passed a hand over the dog's head, despite the dog's running nose. The dog winked its eyes like it was going to pass out. „Chinedu says he hates dogs,“ Betty said, to my unbelief. The dog was later pacified with some bread which disappeared into its mouth. She was wrong. I had only said something close to that. Parties here do not demand exotic attires, so at that meeting, there was no change from the every day attire. Betty, for instance, had come in her usual jeans trousers with its pockets relocated to the most disagreeable places.

In the university here, flashy attires are diluted with shabby ones. You won't take something from the middle and say this is the code here. You might get yourself into trouble if you want to look chic in school or in the town.

The peculiar attire thing might be something indigenous to Mainz. The wind blows the other way in nearby Wiesbaden, where, though, it has been lowered a little in comparison with places like Bad Homburg. Back to the university, there are no run ways for fashion girls, and no audience, because nobody would be watching. When a fashionable boy or girl 'rides' up and down unnoticed, un-applauded, then he or she would be forced to bow out. The university doesn't have starving students to impress with your out of Paris clothes. Besides, there are no five star restaurants sitting somewhere or one square bukas\* on a different quarter. Nobody sees who's getting out of which car. And it is never brought to anybody's notice whose daughter that girl sitting there is. What happened in our situation was that those people came with their audience while their parents prepared the ground with the introduction of poverty. People got overwhelmed and a lot of other people got conscripted. Unless, perhaps, these Buckingham Palace kids enrol, here, in Mainz, and you know, with a large troupe of English cheerleaders in tow. I know that if they do, private time tables would change, for instance, if I remember how the students here were ripped off when Diana died and when those Harry Potter series were released. There is David Beckham running around the world, ignorant of the deep grudge against him here for leaving our dear and generous Mainz out of his plan. Excuse me, please, for the diversion.

Wayo, what do you do, when something is brought to you for your opinion, knowing you could be a person's best visual aid? Assume for a moment I am this entity, and had already done a twist before a mirror. I come to you, knowing the mirror doesn't tell it all. Moreover, I would still edit the mirror's judgement. If I am right thinking, an incident might make me later turn your kindness over. From a German student, I would get a rubber stamp. She or he would say the very safe things. „Oh, wie schön“, meaning how nice, knowing the bent of my inquiry and what I would fall for. I could even observe the creases of my jacket smoothen from his or her nice words. Then, feeling safe and cool in the attire, I would start to *fade*. I think it requires some talent to make such complementary remarks. Wayo, as a friend, if you are not frank with me and place your hand over what you think about me, wouldn't I start wondering what you want to do with the image you conceal from me? I just don't accept such things. The production of anger and laughter is human. Not the volume, but the life in genuine laughter is important. In my view, I think we must criticise even our dear friends when it becomes appropriate and must not deprive ourselves of dissent and mild outbursts of anger. I think a girl I saw some months ago kicking her feet and almost rolling on the ground at the door steps of the students affairs office here because some people wanted to take her accommodation from her did right. So did the girl who jokingly

wanted to blow my face. It is the pleasantness of the mind that makes the lips shift in genuine smile. Not the makeshift smile that doesn't make it to the heart. We must not fight, though.

Fighting is rare here. There exist only silent wars, especially in buses. When they have the opportunity, the students in Mainz usually take ego trips to the station or to the university in buses like the one you saw in that picture. They will swarm a bus, and using the communal instrument, they will start to implement a code of conduct contrived from the inner city. They will start relating, and start selecting, building blocks and closing ranks. All, in a journey of seven minutes. Left to right, they will be distributing themselves among their fellow Germans. Perhaps, they need some massage after an aching non German association. There may even be a defection from your seat, if the person next to you discovers a next of kin sitting alone somewhere. An African pointed this out to me, which I dismissed. He said in such situations, the seat beside him, would yawn, like a festering sour, causing him discomfort. If he didn't have a foreigner to join him, he said, he would close it up by giving it to his bag, or he would take the outer seat by the aisle, leaving the window side vacant. I understood what he was saying. But I know I won't fall for it. I even don't mind the *face me and I face you* seats in the buses, which the young man says he simply avoids.

I take the buses, because they are cheaper, and more convenient. A lot of rights have been taken away from the private commuters and given to the public buses and taxis. On weekends, if one requires something on wheels to run errands and scramble into after late night parties, with every object under siege from the snow, and getting the chill of winter, then the car becomes irresistible. I find myself oftener in a friend, Odinaka's car, in such periods, than in public buses. But, it is difficult to say if Odinaka can always be trusted with a car. While partying, he keeps going from one bottle to the other until he gets to the one 'for the road', and then excitedly gets into his car, and drives off, very drunk. One can't just stop him. Not even the police. We were going home from a party recently, and it was the same Odinaka at the wheel. He had been trying to recall the front, right wheel of the car that had gone over an embankment in an isolated road. The wheel had gotten clear of an obstruction once, and the opportunity was missed, so he was trying again, probably following his mind and not my directions. We soon attracted a police car with a robust bottle which from its soul released, ominous, bluish lights into different corners of the night and into my frightened soul. The police car drew up lengthwise, then, rolled neck deep into a space ahead. The police, a man and a woman, came over and later played unpleasant host to us. They had a busy time, with the initial, normal procedures, studying our faces against our IDs, and the like. I went through the checks and came out clean. I

was unnerved and thought of those small loops the police carry closing around Odinaka's wrists. He reeked with alcohol, he could wake the dead. But he was calm. The flame sprinkler was turned off. The police lady *pianoed*\* him. The *piano*\* became funny. The woman sought external assistance. He wasn't on the lists they were looking at. When the instrument for alcohol test was extended to him, he almost blew out his cheeks. We waited for his classification. But, the police instead introduced another instrument. It was mute, too. Instrument after instrument, if anything escaped, I was sure the instruments couldn't recognize it. Meanwhile, shielded by the police exchange, I whispered to Odinaka. I said, "Odinaka, to avoid problem, I get 50 Euros. Bring another 50 Euros make we piano\* them." He shook his head. „Wetin you no go talk?“ he asked. „How you go piano German police? Forget. Nothing go happen.“ The police weren't any longer happy having us around. They were embarrassed and knew there wasn't going to be any scoop for them. Later, there was a little shake up. Because I had a driving license, I was asked to take Odinaka's place behind the wheel. The police waved at us, and watched us drive off. No charge. Inside the car, Odinaka touched my hand and showed me something and I realised immediately why his jaws had been moving before the encounter with the police. „No tell me say you no know this thing“, he told me. „Those Viagra people will never ever find this one out.“ „I almost suspected it was this root“, I told him, as I drove on, shaking my head.

In my next mail, I will tell you why I want to contest the next Austrian presidential election. I will also tell you what Uni Mainz students do during lectures. I do hope you are in good health. When will you sit for the exam you told me about? I want to know, please.

Yours sincerely,

Chinedu.

## Glossary

1. Bukas – short form for bukataria, a lower class eating place, but not necessarily less expensive than a cafeteria.
2. to piano him – to consult the computer for background check on someone
3. piano – computer
4. to piano them – to bribe them