

Honorable Mention—First-Year Writing

Write a profile.

— Professor Cassandra Hirsch

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Hustler's Paradise

Okay people, are we set? Yes? Alright then onwards we go. I will be your guide through this madness of a marketplace. Mind you, this is unlike any other marketplace you have ever been in. If you would like to leave, please do so now; leaving any time later could be incredibly hazardous to your wellbeing. This place is not for the lily-livered or faint-hearted. When David in the Bible spoke of “the valley of the shadow of death” he was almost certainly speaking of this place. At the same time this is also “the land of milk and honey.” Ladies and gentlemen, as we enter this market make sure to guard your wallets, guard your personal belongings, guard your bodies. And, above all else, guard your faith, sanity, and morality.

The first thing that hits you is the noise; the glamour of hundreds of thousands of souls buying and selling, trading and begging, and shouting and yelling. That's how you know you have arrived in the market. If you look around you, you will no doubt notice the colors and the dirt. These are things you will find everywhere in this market; the dirt however will come in different forms and in varying degrees. Notice the smell, the strong overpowering smell of pastry sellers with puff-puff and donuts and roadside cooks forcing you to pay attention to their various meats and stews. In the course of this trip, we will encounter different scents all the time with something begging to be noticed. That is the nature of the market and the people of the market. Within the multitude there are individuals and groups of individuals that will just not go unnoticed. Mind the mud all over the floor. These are just the dirtier parts of the market. You can see the rickety stalls of some traders right next to the buildings that house others? That is how it is over this market; this is a market of extremes, the extremely rich right next to the extremely poor. Constantly there are people tugging on your clothes to “come and buy these jeans” or “see this fine belt I have for you.” In the market everybody wants you. A strong will and foreknowledge of your purpose are essential to not be swayed by the waves of people offering you 101 things at once. Many people come and end up spending all their time and money and leaving with things they don't need or even want.

The vendors at this market often have several “boys” scouring the streets looking for customers, essentially anybody. In my opinion, these are some of the best and most relentless marketers the world over. Never have I seen a group of people so devoted to their hustle. First off they approach you and hit

you with the “feel-good” move by saying “fine boy, fine girl, angel, my colour etc.” If you are ever feeling down just step into the market and you are definitely getting a compliment. Then they quickly offer their product to you promising to have all the varieties you could dream about. If you display even the slightest hesitation or interest, they are convinced you are hooked and will do almost anything in their power to reel you in. If by some witchcraft they do not have the specific product that you need, rest assured that one “boy” is going to scour the market for that exact design or the closest possible to it. Not because they value you or your time, but because there is a strong bond and money lust in the market. The “boy” knows that as he gives you that referral, he’s going to get his cut. That’s the funny thing about the market, it’s every man for himself, but amongst the poorer it’s not quite dog-eat-dog as it is with the richer.

It is rare that two customers get the same item for the exact same price. There is obviously a price range but the exact price has many variables to it. The vendors have an impeccable sense for detecting foreigners, people from the upper classes that have never been poor, and recently relocated Nigerian a.k.a JJD (Johnny Just Drop). For this class of people, the quoted prices are two to four times inflated so if you find yourself within this class, start negotiations at a fourth of the quoted price. To an extent, you can say everybody is trying to cheat you but understand they are just trying to make more money like everyone else. After all, man must eat and provide. Sometimes the paths we take to reach our petty goals are so extreme and who are these vendors to do anything different? In the market it’s all about packaging. The container is the difference between a \$5000 and a \$50 coat. Truthfully, the quality may have some part to play but it’s mostly the branding. In the market it’s all glitz and glam and flashing lights. Everything is made up, painted over, it’s all just props. All packaging affects the product’s price: the nature of the shop, the presence of an air conditioner, seating space, down to how the vendors are dressed.

All prices are negotiable but watch yourself, asking below a certain unspoken threshold can result in insults and curses even down to your 4th generation to be evoked on you. And when these insults and curses come, I beg of you to hold yourself or as they say in pidgin “*no go do pass yourself.*” Returning the insults could be fatal to your health. “*Nobody get mind pass person wey no get shishi to lose*” meaning nobody is bolder than people without anything to lose which is the case with many “boys.”

Due to the raw size and human population of the market, it is often subject to political ventures. Recently, a part of the market has been demolished and rebuilt in order for some elitist governor to brag or “*raise shoulder*” and use it as a talking point at a political rally. When these shopping complexes go up it is usually an incredibly violent and corrupt process. Many vendors and “boys” are brutalized by state police and their products destroyed without as little as a second thought. Worst off are the food vendors you saw closer to the street. Usually the old ladies are beaten and their foodstuffs are stolen or destroyed on sight. Additionally, rent in the complex is too expensive for most

vendors to realistically afford. The cost to sell in the complex or close to it is ridiculously high but the curious fact is that these complexes still get filled up. That's where the corrupt nature of these buildings come in, many store owners have relationships with corrupt officials or some illegal source of money and need to put up a legal front. To make matters worse, these buildings are poorly constructed and maintained so officials can pocket money budgeted to construction and maintenance.

Above all the problems and issues in this market, there is one thing that remains true. The market always smiles at the end of the day. No matter how many times it is ravaged, raped, beaten and broken down, in the words of Maya Angelou, "still they rise". I believe market dwellers have found the secret to life because for them there is always a reason to dance and "*flejo*." Maybe it's in celebrating the small victories, or appreciating life more or maybe not taking life too seriously all the time. Don't be fooled by the laughter and music you hear in the market. Living here is for the strong. Life is tough for both the rich and the poor. While their sufferings are not the same, they are comparable. You can survive anywhere if you survive here and you have not been anywhere if you haven't been here. Welcome to the market. This market is the city of Lagos, Nigeria, a hustler's paradise.