

The Armed Letter Writers

By

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It all started with a letter, slapped smack in the middle of our street sign. It was Uncle Ermu who saw it and he was livid.

“Ermu... an affront on the ermu...hard working residents of Abati Close ermu, he stuttered.

It wasn't a formal letter; it was a letter from one dear neighbour to another. It was a spidery cursive scrawled on A4 paper, in black ink.

Hello Everybody,

We are coming for a visit soon. We will convey to you the days we will be visiting Abati Close by and by. We will appreciate your maximum cooperation. Do not aid the police in anyway. Please be warned that all trouble makers shall be dealt with, severely.

Mr. God-Servant kindly appended his signature on behalf of our local chapter of the Armed Robbers Association (ARA).

The letter was perused by the Abati Close Landlords' and Landladies' Association. The Head of the association Mr Kole, passed on the letter to the District Police Officer, Inspector Sulu. It went through another round of perusing and investigating at the Police Area Office Z which culminated in the dispatch of two police officers, Sergeant Wale and Corporal Juba. When

the two officers arrived in Abati with the letter, Uncle Ermu couldn't recognize it anymore. The letter was in a very sorry state. Uncle Ermu visited and mumbled in all the nine houses that made up Abati Close, about the current state of the letter, he said it was smudged with fingerprints and spots of palm oil. It had a torn corner, probably chewed off by a rat.

His mumblings eventually got to Inspector Sulu, who invited Uncle Ermu over to Area Office Z for a talk. It was a short talk between Uncle Ermu and two police bullies. At the end of this conversation he got booked for defaming the good name and work of the police. He was thrown into the Police Area Office Z, Cell 5, which was filled with cranky "under-police-investigation detainees" for two nights. When he returned to Abati, he had knuckle marks all over his body, two black eyes and a missing tooth. He explained to us that he'd sleepwalked into Cell 5's walls at night. When asked about the letter, he clamped swollen lips together and walked away from us.

The two police officers, Wale and Juba, prowled and sniffed around Abati for a few days. Their well worn police boots stomped up a storm of dust as they swung their batons at our doors.

"By the authority vested in us as officers of the Nigeria Police, we command you to open in the name of the federal government."

People opened their doors and peeped from their behind curtains and they answered them out of the corners of their mouths. No one wanted to be seen cooperating with the police, the Armed Robbers Association had warned against that. Sergeant Wale asked the questions while Corporal Jubah nodded jotting in his tattered note pad.

"Did you see who posted the letter?"

"When was it posted?"

"Do you know the members of the Armed Robbers Association?"

“Are they men, women, or children?”

“No”

“No”

“No.”

“Spirits?”

“We don’t know.”

We all responded. A yes would have resulted in a night or two in Cell 5. After they finished questioning Abati, they turned to Uncle Ermu.

“Where did you find the letter?”

“How was it posted?”

“Was it in an envelope?”

“Did the envelope have a stamp?”

“How did you remove it from the signboard?”

“Did you read the letter alone?”

“Where did you read it?”

Uncle Ermu, looked at the two scraggly enforcers of the law and told them, he had looked up at the street sign one morning and saw the paper stuck perpendicular to the “A” in Abati. It was about 5cm from the pole. He knocked it off with a stick. It wasn’t in an envelope nor did it have a stamp, and he read it by the pole, alone. When the officers asked for more information, Uncle Ermu told them to go read his signed statement, which should be in the case file in Police Area Office Z. He knew his rights.

Only one road led in and out Abati Close. The other end was blocked by a steep sewage canal that runs on the other side of the road and curves behind the nine houses before it

straightens again and carrying away the waste from the neighbourhood. One morning during their investigations, the officers stood beside house nine, outside my window. They walked to the edge of the steep slope of the canal and looked into it.

“Shouldn’t we look into the canal?” Corporal Juba said

“Why should we?” Sergeant Wale said.

“It is a possible escape for the robbers.”

“Why do you think so, are one of them Juba?”

“No sir.”

“Should we go into the canal?”

“Can you tell me why your head isn’t working well today?”

“I have no idea sir.”

“Does the government pay you to poke your nose in what does not concern you?”

“No sir.”

“Is the canal Abati Close?”

“No sir.”

“As your superior officer I command you to about-turn. We have wasted too much time looking into people’s waste.” Sergeant Wale said.

The police officers turned to the other witness they had, the street pole. It became the centre of their investigation – only God knows how many times they went round the grey pole, staring at the green sign board attached to it.

“If it wasn’t made and installed by the state government we would have asked how much it cost,” Sergeant Wale said.

“With proof of receipts of its fabrication of course,” Corporal Juba said, and noted this in his notebook.

“Or of the name of the welder that made it? Where he bought the metal from or the paint he used?” said Sergeant Wale.

“But of course,” said Corporal Juba

They fondled it, hit it with their scarred batons, talked to it, whispered to it, growled at it and finally left it alone when it couldn't tell them who pasted the letter.

We, the residents of Abati were left with no choice but to respond in terror, and we did. We made our windows and doors burglar-proof by reinforcing them with steel rods. We drenched them with floods of holy water and rosaries blessed by Pastors, Reverends, Fathers and Bishops, attached Imam blessed tirahs to them or smeared on jujus procured from Babalawos. Tall fences grew taller and became topped with layers of broken bottles, metal spikes and barbed wires. Flood lights were added to fences; they lit up the Abati so brightly, that shadows ceased to exist in Abati at night.

One month passed and nothing happened, Abati Close chose to forget the letter with determination, we stopped thinking about it. We stopped talking about it. The police stopped coming by. It must have been a prank they told us. We stopped locking ourselves indoors by 6 p.m. Windows were no longer closed before 7pm. Music blared out of speakers at our dusk to dawn, open air parties. We forgot to switch on the security lights at dusk. Our hearts stopped flying out of our chests when we heard roofing sheets contract at night or when wind rustled through the patch of bamboo in the canal behind Abati Close.

We forgot our fear, until we woke up to the promised rejoinder; it was pasted on the street sign again. This letter was typed in Times New Roman, double spaced, and on letterhead

paper. The letter had a unique emblem on its letterhead – two crossed, long nosed pistols with two captions ‘carpe diem’ in Latin, and ‘seize the day’ in English, joined by an ‘equals to sign’ in red italics beneath the pistols.

Dear Neighbours,

The local chapter of the Armed Robbers Association would visit Abati Close on August 1, from 12 a.m. to 5 a.m. We plead your indulgence that you cooperate with us and our list, and kindly handover your things on our list to us. if you don't? You will face the consequences of your actions.

Please do not bother to inform the police, we have dropped a copy of this letter with them at the Zonal Office A.

Thank you for your anticipated cooperation.

Your Neighbour,

God-Servant for the Armed Robbers' Association (ARA)

The Landlords' and Landladies' Association passed another letter to the DPO. He showed them his copy. Our very slim, very cold, very closed, dusty, forgotten case file was reopened. The DPO dispatched policemen again, to sniff, shuffle and prowl. We, the residents went through another round of questioning.

“Did you see who pasted this letter?”

“Can you speak Latin?”

“Do you know anyone that can speak Latin?”

“Have we ever seen the emblem on the paper before?”

“No.”

“No.”

“No.”

“No.”

We answered.

Abati Close stopped sleeping again. Jujus, holy water and tirahs returned to our doors, windows and gates. People stopped staying out late. The security lights came back on in Abati Close – brighter. We held all night prayer vigils and slept with both eyes open. Uncle Ermu was put in charge of the committee set up to proffer solutions. Mr Kole, and Mama Londoner – a land – lady were members. The meeting was held on the last Saturday of the month of July. It was open to all the residents of Abati.

Mr. Kole’s compound was filled with residents sitting, standing, squatting or leaning on walls. Uncle Ermu started the proceedings at 10.12 am. Ermu... he began, “My people this ermu adhoc meeting was called to find a solution to the menace that is about to strangulate, annihilate, exterminate...” Mr. Kole cleared his throat interrupting him. “ermu us!”

Uncle Ermu glared at Mr. Kole and continued. “All sensible suggestions are welcome. We must rise, ermu... against this ermu...” Mr. Kole grunted louder, “this very grave threat.” Uncle Ermu shouted before he sat down.

Mr. Kole opened the floor by asking for suggestions. Mama Londoner did, asking a question. “Why was Abati chosen out of all the Closes in our local government area by the thieves?” She said peered at us all through her thick glasses. When none of us could answer the question, she answered, “The insect that eats a vegetable lives on the vegetable plant. If a wall does not open its mouth, a lizard cannot come in. It is the house thief that invites the outside thief into a house.”

We fell silent, necks turned and craned around, looking for the insects, thieves and lizards living in Abati. Our brains whirred as we picked out suspects, our eyes locked on them. And we sat in judgment over them. We handed down immediate sentences. We didn't bother to hand them over to the police, where they would have had three clear options, A – walk out of the police station on a carpet made of naira notes and come back to rob us or B – the police would hand them over to our underfunded judicial system, which was filled with spineless Wigs with overflowing case in-trays that will pass our suspects on to the pot bellied wardens of the Nigerian Prisons Service where they would be detained in crumbling prisons, built during the colonial era, and held for years without trial. There they would emaciate on the generosity of the government in bed bug infested cells, eating beans swimming with weevils.

Still in our heads, we opted for option C and dispensed justice. We imagined piling all the thieves together at Abati Close junction, threw rings of old tyres over them, poured petrol over them and set them ablaze. These option C steps were carried out by nameless hands and faces, of course. We lawful citizens watched the scene from behind the haze of smoke and the nauseating smell of burning human flesh and hair. We shook our heads at the actions of these nameless hands but we watched until the robbers stopped writhing in the fire and the tyres had stopped glowing red.

It was Mr. Kole who finally moved us past this very bumpy silence by requesting for suggestions. He stopped our whirring brains and brought us back to the meeting.

We threw suggestions all over the floor.

24 hours surveillance of the Abati Close by the police.

24 hours surveillance of the Abati Close by the army.

24 hours surveillance of the Abati Close by the air force.

24 hours surveillance of the canal that surrounded our local government by the navy.

Get the services of private security operatives.

Fortify our Close with juju from a strong Babalawo who has not seen or felt the sun in twenty years. Cries of “God forbid,” by Christians and “Awusubilahi” by Muslims tore the air. The man who had made the suggestion shouted louder – he had a Sango shrine in a corner of his compound.

It took the combined efforts of Mr. Kole, Mama Londoner and Uncle Ermu to stop the shouting war. Mr Kole stood with both hands raised; Uncle Ermu and Mama Londoner begged us all to settle down. We did after awhile but we didn’t remove the mistrust in our eyes. We now looked at each other through the dust of the religious fervor we had whipped up. Mr. Kole reasoned with us, “I think arguing will not solve the problem at hand, nor would looking at each other with evil eyes. I suggest that we start a roster for a neighborhood watch group. Each house must put up every night, two men to the cause. That’s eighteen men for a night.”

We roared our approval, shouted and clapped.

“Can women participate?” Mama Londoner piped up, and in her excitement, her wig slipped down her forehead. Uncle Ermu helped put it back on right. She thanked him.

“Those interested in making up the first group of eighteen please raise your hands.” Mr. Kole said.

We went quiet again. Hands were carefully arranged by sides or politely placed in pockets. Uncle Ermu stepped into the silence. He said he would solve the problem with a series of integrals and differentials. After some minutes of calculations accompanied by a lot of mumblings, Uncle Ermu eventually showed us the roster he had drawn, but it was not adopted, because the living breathing variables kept protesting at the top of their voices – no one agreed to

their slots. The conclusion of the meeting? The landlords and landladies were empowered by the residents to choose the people who will come out every night. They agreed to increase house rents, by 400% if we failed to comply. Madam Londoner and Uncle Ermu seconded the motion. Uncle Ermu gave out all the available emergency numbers and moved to adjourn the meeting. We were told to be our neighbours' keeper, be vigilant and report any strange activity to the police. They reminded us of the police force's new public announcement – the police is your friend jingle.

Landlords and Landladies chose the volunteers for the 1st of August visit. Residents of each house saw them off at their respective gates, wished them well, and locked gates after them. The volunteers gathered at the head of the Close. Car owners had contributed to a used tyre pile and it provided fodder for the two bonfires blazing at the bottom and top of the Close. We, the residents of Abati Close contributed to the world's pollution with a good excuse. The two bonfires lit up the neighborhood watch group. They sat on stones and used tyres in the midst of empty bottles of manpower and kai kai – they were all male.

At precisely 12 p.m., our visitors announced their arrival with a procession of cars heralded with volleys of Ka ka ka kau ka kau kaus into the still night. It wasn't the local guns of the hunters or the reluctant rusty police Kalashnikovs. These guns were happy to boom, and did so loudly, with pride in the quiet night. The neighborhood watch group on call evaporated into the night, condensing into human form behind bushes and inside gutters.

Residents indoors dived under mattresses and tried to muffle the sound of our wildly thumping hearts. We had saved on our phones all the emergency numbers on speed dial. 1 for Inspector Sulu, 2 for the Police Rapid Response Squad, 3 and 4 for the State Commissioner of Police hotlines, 5, 6, and 7 for the Inspector General of Police's hotlines, 8 for the Ambulance

Services, 9 for the Fire brigade just in case a fire outbreak starts. We tried to call the numbers but, “all lines to these routes are busy.” The untiring electronic voice at the other end kept saying. All the residents of Abati were dialing at the same time – if only we took turns to call, or had assigned somebody during the committee meeting as the caller we could have gotten in touch with the police. God was an afterthought, but we remembered Him, happy that all lines to His route would not be busy. We prayed until our throats dried up and our tongues stuck to the roof of our mouths, but the guns kept booming.

Our visitors, from the Armed Robbers Association didn't break down doors or locks. They simply knocked, and asked politely that we opened our doors and give them everything they had on their checklist. The 60 inches curved Sony smart LED TV that glowed thorough the French windows in House number two's balcony at night. The seldom driven Buggati parked under a tent in House three. The owner of the car Alhaji Sadiq couldn't find roads without potholes to drive it on. Uche, the business man, had a bag filled dollars in the house four. Laptops, tablets, and phones weren't on the list. Our visitors considered it a grave insult to be offered them.

The first house they visited was Mr Kole's, the second Mama Londoner's. They both cooperated fully. They opened their gates and ushered the armed robbers into their houses. God-Servant led in three guys, he introduced them as Smally, the Black One and Long Man. Smally flipped through a sheaf of papers and pulled out the one that had the correct house number on it. Mr Kole and Mama Londoner handed over everything on the check list. It was Uncle Ermu who was a little bit difficult. He did not open his gate to let them in. He waited for them in his sitting room, in his armchair. Sweat poured off his body and soaked the armchair, a small puddle

formed underneath his feet. His wife and children whimpered behind him, telling him to go open the door but he refused, stubbornly sweating into the armchair.

Our visitors broke through his concrete fence and sawed off the burglar-proof rods on his windows. Thirty minutes after they came to his gate, they stood before him and asked for the things on his check list. He told them he was a retired university lecturer who had served the nation with pride, honesty, and hard work in its foremost ivory tower. Smally told him to clean his fat ass with his pride or honesty he could choose whichever, but begged him not forget to make use of his talent for working hard and keep his mouth shut hard except when he was spoken to. He waved the checklist before uncle Ermu again. God-Servant told Uncle Ermu what Mr. Kola and Mama Londoner had given to them. Uncle Ermu reminded them that he didn't have that much. He was a retired professor of mathematics specializing in coordinate algorithms in multiple sequences. God-Servant sighed and told him to stop talking. This wasn't a lecture and they weren't his students.

Uncle Ermu sputtered a couple of ermus, and then declared from his armchair that all fingers are not equal. The Black-one asked him to place his right hand on the table so he could see for himself. Uncle Ermu complied – It was after all a scientific experiment. The Black-one brought down his double edged machete on Uncle Ermu's fingers. "They are equal now," he said, and wiped his machete on Uncle Ermu's shirt. Uncle Ermu wet his pants, defecated and fainted. The sequence of those events are still hotly debated by the residents of Abati. Unfortunately Uncle Ermu can't recall what event happened before the other. His wife and children can't either as they were busy complying with the contents of the list over his prone body.

The armed letter writers went through the nine houses, collecting items on their checklist. At house six, our visitors ate ofada rice and spicy locust beans sauce, but not before they had emptied a very famous jewelry box, the contents of which were well known in Abati and its environs. These pieces are splashed in the glossy pages of society magazines, peeping through the thick rolls of fat draping their owner's neck. The local chapter of the Armed Robbers Association left Abati Close as they came, in a convoy of cars and volleys of Ka, ka, Kaus.

No sooner had they left then several police trucks skidded into Abati. The noise of blaring sirens and screeching tyres filled the morning, black uniforms spilled out of their battered trucks – special anti-robbery rapid response trucks, their reluctant Kalashnikovs coughed into the air.

“Where are they?” The police asked themselves.

“Have they run away?”

“They should come out now.”

“Where are they hiding?”

“They couldn't wait for us.” They answered themselves.

We allowed them to empty the chambers of their reluctant guns into the air and our fences. We knew well of cases of accidental discharges by unknown policemen, guns shooting bullets into human bodies by mistake – faceless police officers cannot be prosecuted. After the smoke from their guns had cleared, it revealed, a confused, malnourished, ill-dressed police force. Residents of Abati trooped out of their houses throwing accusations and allegations into the night.

We blamed the police for our woes and the police blamed us for not calling on them.

We blamed the non performing telecomm networks.

“The police don’t regulate them,” they replied. “Send a petition to the regulatory commission.”

How could you not have heard the gunshots? After all, Zone Z is just a few kilometers away. Even the deaf could hear the sound of those booming guns.

But you didn’t call us, they replied. We didn’t know the exact community that was under attack. We didn’t want to encroach into Zone Y’s jurisdiction. We have to clearly log complaints into our logbooks before officers are dispatched to crime scenes.

This brought us back to the beginning, and we repeated the accusation-allegation cycle again and again until day broke and the armed letter writers got farther away with our valuables.

It took some weeks to gather truths about the night of the visit from our local chapter of armed robbers because the next day we retold the story laced with lots of untruths. We had to sift through dense layers of lies to patch together a story of the events that happened. Some truths came out in our statements at Police Area Office Z. Sulemon had gone to there to report that his laptop was stolen on the day of the visit.

“Lie.” The police officers on duty told him.

They pulled out the letter the Armed Robbers Association had sent the police, informing the police of their visit from our file. And pointed to a line at the bottom, read it out aloud they told him, “Laptops, tablets and phones will not be stolen.” Sulemon read.

The policemen shook their heads at him, “he who tells lies will one day steal.”

They gave Sulemon paper to write his statement.

“Describe the men who had stolen your laptop.” they had told him. His description fit the brother – in law of the sister of the uncle of the DPO. The filed his statement and threw him in

Cell 5. Sulemon returned to Abati Close after two weeks in Cell 5. He was released after he wrote another statement that he was temporarily insane when he filed the earlier complaint. The police officers added also added this page to our file.

Some popped out when we made fun of ourselves, and we laughed out loud with tears in our eyes. Gbenga had run out of the house and hide in the canal behind the Abati, leaving behind his very pregnant wife and seven children. His wife never fails to tell to everyone about his abandonment. Pius had joked at a neighbourhood party that he had heard a neighbor whom he would not mention his name, beg the armed letter robbers to let him join the association and he would tell on the residents of Abati who had gone to the police with the letters. The robbers had told him, to shut up; a snitch was always a snitch. We all laughed until Oke his roommate, told him to shut up. Pius was the one who had begged. Pius denied this vehemently.

Some, we whispered to God in prayers, Abeni was overheard in a church toilet cursing the robbers about her stash of gold jewelry that was stolen. She had kept them in an air tight container at the bottom of her chest freezer. The robbers didn't know she had them but in her fear she had given it to them, nobody in Abati knew she had jewelry. She never wore any.

Some, we mumbled or cried about in our sleep and our partners comforted us back to sleep. Some dribbled out when we've had a beer or two, or more, those stories always livened up beer palours in the evenings. And we would all laugh at ourselves all over again.

Uncle Ermu learned to write with his left hand. He started an NGO, which has the sole mission to identify and catch the members of the Armed Robbers Association. Nobody in Abati wants to be a part of it. Uncle Ermu is the chairman, secretary, treasurer and member of the NGO.

Our story takes on several layers of untruths depending on who is telling the story and where the telling is taking place but the essence has been the same. There were two letters and a visit, on that we, the residents of Abati all agree.