

# One Too Many

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How many is too many? A flow of conversation and music washed over me where I sat at the back of the park with ten thousand other concertgoers on a sunny August afternoon. I listened to snippets of Portuguese, Arabic, and Ukrainian. Two women chattered in the Hong Kong dialect of Cantonese and a little girl complained in Urdu about her bratty brother. I understood all of them.

My name is Jane Smith, and I'm a hyperpolyglot. I collect languages like other people collect sea glass or signed baseballs. I speak eleven languages fluently and get along just fine in another twelve. I'm leaving Monday evening for Malta to add one more tongue to my repertoire. The trip will use two weeks of my accumulated leave days from the post office, but that's fine. In fact, I can't wait. I've always wanted to learn Maltese, an unusual Arabic-based language that's been heavily influenced by Italian and Sicilian.

The post office. It was a paycheck but not much more than that, and not much of a paycheck, either. My boss was always carping at me to speed up my mail sorting, to smile at customers more, to get the damn label on straight, goddammit. If I didn't have a bum shoulder, I'd apply to walk a delivery route, but as it was, I worked inside all day every day. The only benefit was those lovely yellow Authorization to Hold Mail forms people filled out.

To kick off my vacation, I took the train from the Boston area north to this coastal town for the day to hear Barenaked Ladies. The group was the main reason so many fans had crowded the riverfront park. Two twenty-something men who looked West African sat on a brightly patterned cloth in front of my portable chair. They seemed to be arguing, and not in English. I tried to pick out the words from the surrounding noise and blinked when I heard the words *dala dubu hamsin*, which means fifty thousand dollars in Hausa. One of my best languages, I'd learned it with native-speaker fluency while in the Peace Corps in Niger over a decade earlier.

*Ay sii ga faham.* The thinner man said he didn't understand. *Kamaida su, Mamadou.* "You have to return it, Mamadou."

His stockier companion shook his head. "But we could go home, Bashir." He also spoke in Hausa, a language spoken in Niger and elsewhere in West Africa. *Za mu iya ginawa mama da yara gidaje. Kawai dalilin kasancewarmu a nan, shine don mu'aika da kudi gid.* "We could build good houses for our mother and our brothers and sisters. That's the only reason we're here, to send money home."

So the two were brothers. Had Mamadou found fifty thousand dollars on the street?

"Won't the guy who left it in your car contact Uber? Have they asked you about the money?" Bashir pressed, still in Hausa.

*Ah.* Mamadou drove an Uber. The men went on to argue about calling the police, about Mamadou being arrested and deported. Mamadou said the guy who left the money was a rich criminal. He didn't think the man would report the loss, and that doing good with the money back home was a better use for it.

“I will buy us two tickets on the next flight to Niamey. I’ll hide the money. You’ll see, we’ll be fine.”

Bashir, clearly the younger of the brothers and frightened, urged Mamadou to return the bag of big bills. “We should go now, get the next train home. We get back to the apartment, you call the company and report that you just found it.”

I glanced around. Weren’t they afraid someone would overhear? But, no. Nobody spoke Hausa here. Except me, of course.

Bashir stood, folding his arms. “I’m going.”

His brother boosted himself up. “Calm down. I’m coming.”

I stood and accorded my chair closed, slipping it into its nylon bag. I might as well head home, too.

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They hadn’t noticed me as I followed them to the commuter rail station, nor as I waited for the three o’clock train, as I boarded and sat behind them. I not only have a plain name—and really, what had my parents been thinking? I’m also entirely plain in appearance. Dull brown hair the color of mud. Squinty green eyes. Blotchy skin, an unfortunate jawline, and ears that stick out. Nobody ever looks at me, which is actually a great advantage in my chosen hobby. Not learning languages, but the other one.

On the hour train ride, Mamadou reassured his brother that the money was hidden under the loose floorboard in the back hall, that even if the police did come they would never find it. After we pulled into North Station, I followed the men on the subway and through the back streets of one of Boston’s most populous neighboring towns.

They entered a decrepit six-family, a typical Boston-area dwelling comprising six units that looked like two conjoined three-families glued together in the middle. A light went on in the first-floor apartment on the right and Bashir passed by a window facing the street.

I opened my chair and sat in a ratty trash-strewn park across from the building, fingering the lock picks at the bottom of my voluminous shoulder bag. I'd read a Mary Higgins Clark novel a few years ago that included a petty thief who stole only one item from the houses he broke into when people were away. He'd said— after he was caught—that property owners never realized a single piece of jewelry or silver was missing until much later.

I'd liked that idea. Being a polyglot had never gotten me any fame or fortune. It cost more money than I earned to go to foreign lands on a regular basis to immerse myself in new languages, but it was something I was driven to do. Nothing feels better than sussing out the syntax, lexicon, and phonetics of a new-to-me tongue. Plus, locals love that I want to learn their language. Oddly enough, I fit in better in a place like Malta than I do at home. In other countries, I'm appreciated and welcomed. Here? Not so much.

And a lifetime of being ignored in my own culture made me feel justified in lifting a valuable here and there. As Mamadou told Bashir, rich people didn't need the money, and I did, to support my habit. Working the post office front counter with all kinds of people asking for a vacation mail hold? Temporarily unoccupied houses were there for the asking.

But fifty thousand dollars tax free, now that would buy a lot of overseas travel, and maybe an indulgence here at home, too. My own apartment building wasn't much of an improvement over the Nigeriens'. And maybe I could finally own a nice car.

Like the one the brothers were climbing into right now, a new-looking Acura sedan. I smiled. Sorry about your mom, boys, but hey, first come, first served. I deserved the money as much as they did. After the car drove away, I stood, leaving my chair in the park. So what if someone stole it?

I trotted up the apartment building's front steps. Six black mailboxes next to the door were marked with names. I peered at the one for 1A, which read B. Idrissa and M. Idrissa. *Bingo*. I tried the common front door. *Shit*. It was locked. I didn't want to use the picks out here in the late-day light. I made my way around the back, but that door didn't have a key hole. Damn fire doors. Residents would be able to push on the door to leave but nobody could go in that way.

Back at the front, I lucked out. A woman juggling a dozen grocery bags struggled up the steps.

"Can I help you with those?" I asked.

The woman nodded. "*Faz favor,*" she said in Brazilian Portuguese. Please.

I wanted to respond in kind. But I didn't want to be remembered as the distinctly unBrazilian-looking woman who oddly spoke the language like a native. I simply held out my hands and took half the bags. At the top the woman put down her burdens and unlocked the door. I held it open for her. After the Brazilian unlocked the door opposite Bashir and Mamadou's, I handed her the bags.

"*Obrigada,*" she thanked me.

I smiled and gave a little wave. *Whew*. The woman's door clicked shut, and I glanced up the staircase but saw or heard no one. The hallway smelled like an international food court, with the savory smell of onions frying, the spicy scent of curry, the alluring aroma of roasting teriyaki meat. My empty stomach burbled.

I turned to the other door and went to work on the bottom of two locks, standing close to shield my tools in case someone approached. The lock was old and stubborn. I swore again to myself but kept working it.

*There*. It yielded with the always satisfying *snick*. I turned the knob and let out a breath. *Damn*. The door was bolted, too. It was a wise move by the Africans and one more challenge for me, but not an impossible one.

The front door lock clicked. I jerked out the pick and whirled, sliding my hand into my bag. My heart thudded like jackhammer. My palms grew clammy. A man pushed through, his dark hair jelled and spiked, his equally dark eyes flashing.

“Who are you?” he demanded.

I swallowed. “I’m a friend of Mamadou’s.” I struggled to keep my voice from shaking.

“How’d you get in the front? It’s locked.” His bushy brows met in the middle, and his accent was Brazilian.

“I helped a lady with her groceries.” I pointed to the opposite door. At least that much was true.

“My wife.” His glare morphed into a smile. “All right. We can’t be too careful in this neighborhood.”

“Very wise.” I nodded sagely. I hoped that was how it looked.

“Thanks for helping her. You have a good day now.” He turned and let himself into his apartment.

I took a deep breath and returned to the job at hand. Too close for comfort. I wasn't used to working where someone could see me. But two minutes later I was in the apartment with the door locked behind me. It was a surprisingly tidy bachelor pad smelling faintly of hot pepper and fish sauce. A rice cooker sat on the kitchen counter and two woven prayer mats were spread on the empty living room floor.

So far this was going as smooth as flan, or as they say in Brazil, *pudim*. I headed to the back hall. *Crap*. Boxes clogged the space and blocked the back door. Two battered suitcases sat in front of the boxes. A faded runner covered the floor. I needed to move all of it to find the loose floorboard. Could I get it done before the dudes returned? If I wanted the cash, I was going to have to.

Unless...what if they'd taken the cash with them? What if Bashir had convinced Mamadou to turn it in to Uber? I stood in place frowning, thinking, and frankly, swearing worse than a car mechanic under my breath—in English. I didn't need other languages to do that.

But, hey, I was here. What did they say? In for a penny, in for a pound, or was it, in for a dime, in for a dollar? Didn't matter. I'd never forgive myself if the money was here and I left without looking for it.

I'd just reached for the first box when my ears went on high alert. What was that sound? I froze. If the guys were back, I was trapped. And screwed. I should have stuck to robbing vacationers. I stifled a sneeze.

But no lock clicked open. No Hausa words floated into the apartment. It must have been someone in the hall. I whooshed out a breath and set to my task. Ten minutes later I extracted a pleasantly fat zippered bank envelope from under the floor. I checked to make sure it held actual bills and not something else. I shoved everything else back into place, dusted off my hands, and headed for home, my bag now heavier than before.

The Nigeriens might notice their dead bolt wasn't shot when they returned. I doubted they'd care once they discovered what else wasn't where it should be.

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Monday morning I walked into a Bank of America branch as soon as it opened and asked to open a new account. I'd bought a round-trip ticket to Niger online the day before, leaving in January. Why not thank the dudes who'd led me to the bucks by spending some money in their warm country during the coldest month in Massachusetts? I could cram in an intensive study of Zarma while I was there, too.

I knew deposits of over ten thousand dollars were scrutinized more closely than smaller amounts. Opening a new account with nine thousand in cash shouldn't be a problem. The rest of the money could keep company for now with the valuables in the little safe in my bedroom. After I returned from my trip I'd make more small deposits.

A teller directed me into a manager's office. The fresh-faced man, in a red tie and a crisp white shirt, asked me the usual questions and typed the information into his software.

"And how much would you like to open the account with, Ms. Smith?" he asked.

"Nine thousand dollars." I slid the white legal envelope containing ninety of the crisp hundred dollars bills from the haul across the table.

“Perfect.” He picked up the envelope. “I’ll be right back.”

I idly glanced at the old photographs on the walls, which depicted the neighborhood a hundred years earlier, and thought about the packing I still had left to accomplish before my flight tonight. The weather on the island of Malta, in the Mediterranean south of Sicily, would be warm but not unbearably so over the next few weeks, so I wouldn’t need to bring much. I didn’t have to worry about being culturally sensitive and covering up, either, since most people were Catholic, not Muslim.

Where was that manager? I twisted in my chair facing his desk to scan the rest of the bank through the open door. I couldn’t see him. Maybe he was new and needed help with the deposit. I turned back and checked the time on my phone. Oh well. I had all day to pack. I was on vacation.

I brought up my Maltese language app and scrolled through. I kept the sound off but mouthed the words in response to the screen. I finally sensed someone in the doorway and glanced up. The manager lurked behind a towering man in a dark uniform. A patch on his shirt read, B of A Security.

*Shit.* “Is there a problem?” I kept my voice calm, but it wasn’t easy. I stood.

“We’ll have to ask you to wait here, ma’am,” the burly uniform rumbled.

“Wait for what?” Could they hear my heart pounding? I swallowed down a lump of fear.

“Please sit down, Ms. Smith, and hand me your phone.” The guard held out his hand.

I laid my phone in it. They didn’t want me to text my accomplice. Not that I had one.

The manager backed out and closed me in with the uniform, who blocked the door, hands at his side. I sat. I folded my hands in my lap, knowing I was royally screwed. Something was wrong with that money.

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Twenty interminable minutes of waiting later, a stern-faced woman in a suit opened the door, accompanied by a middle-aged man wearing the same outfit and expression. The woman flashed open a wallet-sized ID case

“I’m Senior Agent Colby with the Federal Bureau of Investigation.” She sat in the manager’s chair behind the desk. Her partner stood to the side and did not introduce himself. The security guard shut the door and resumed his pose blocking it.

“We’d like to know where you obtained the bills you submitted for deposit,” Agent Colby said.

I’d done my best to come up with a plausible story as I waited. I’d always had a vivid imagination. “I found them in a public park. There was no identification on the money, so I didn’t know who to return it to.”

“Where was this park?”

After I gave her the street coordinates of the park across from the guys’ apartment, the agent exchanged a glance with her partner.

“This cash was just lying on the ground?” The male agent asked.

“No, it was in a blank bank envelope.”

“And it didn’t occur to you to bring it to the closest police station?” The seated agent cocked her head. “That someone might have lost it?”

I cleared my throat. “That would have been the ethical thing to do, I suppose. But it’s not illegal to find money, is it?”

The agent blinked. “Nine thousand was all you found?”

“Yes, ma’am.” I swallowed again. “I don’t understand why I am being questioned.”

“Why did you buy a ticket to travel to Niger in January?” The male agent, incorrectly pronouncing it as *NYE-jer* instead of *nee-ZHAIR*, set his hands on the desk and leaned his head and torso into my personal space. “Who were you taking the money to?”

I leaned away from his acrid breath. “Nobody. I was in the Peace Corps there.” If they already knew I’d purchased a plane ticket, they must also know my entire past—the official version, that is. “I wanted to go back to visit friends and the village where I worked. I was going to brush up on my Hausa while I was there, too. That’s all.” I pressed my hand to the side of my mouth, trying to look casual, hoping it hid a telltale tic beating in my upper lip.

The man straightened with a look of scorn on his face. “When did you first connect with Mamadou Idrissa?”

“I don’t know anyone by that name.” Which was, strictly speaking, true. “Who might you be, sir?”

“Glenn McBride. ICE.” He checked with Agent Colby, who gave him a slight nod. “Jane Smith, we are detaining you on suspicion of collaborating with a known terrorist.”

*What?* My insides turned to ice and not the US Department of Immigration and Customs Enforcement kind, either. Mamadou was a terrorist? Had someone funneled him the money to take home and he'd lied to his brother about it? Or maybe someone—ICE—had planted marked money in Mamadou's car to see what he would do with it simply because he was from Niger, and the Feds had been watching to see where it would surface. Another possibility? Bashir worked for ICE and informed on Mamadou. If so, the younger brother was a really good actor even when he didn't think anyone was looking.

Mamadou might really be a terrorist. Or he might be an innocent black-skinned man from a watched country trying to bestow a windfall on his beloved family.

I wasn't innocent, though. They would surely obtain a search warrant for my apartment. Find the rest of the money in my safe. I mentally kicked myself for not examining the bills. I traveled to all kinds of watch-list countries. They couldn't pin terrorism on me, but they would certainly detain me for a long time. Worse? They'd discover the stolen items I hadn't yet sold.

My last theft added up to one too many.