

THE YAHOO BOYS

**LOVE,
DECEPTION,
AND THE REAL
LIVES OF
NIGERIA'S
ROMANCE
SCAMMERS**



CARLOS BARRAGÁN



The Yahoo Boys

Love, Deception, and the Real Lives
of Nigeria's Romance Scammers

CARLOS BARRAGÁN



FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX | NEW YORK

[Begin Reading](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

[A Note About the Author](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

**Thank you for buying this
Farrar, Straus and Giroux ebook.**

To receive special offers, bonus content,
and info on new releases and other great reads,
sign up for our newsletters.

Sign Up

Or visit us online at
us.macmillan.com/newslettersignup

For email updates on the author, click [here](#).

The author and publisher have provided this e-book to you for your personal use only. You may not make this e-book publicly available in any way. **Copyright infringement is against the law. If you believe the copy of this e-book you are reading infringes on the author's copyright, please notify the publisher at: us.macmillan.com/piracy.**

To my mum

And to Temilorun, Fola, and Feri, the bright future of Nigeria

What you've got to remember is what you're looking at is also you.

—JAMES BALDWIN

1

Searching for My Mother's Scammer

Shit, here we go again, Biggy thought when he saw two police officers heading toward him.

He was picking his way through Igando Market's din of generators, the beep-beep-beep of bright yellow kekes and sun-peeled okadas, the shrill calls from loudspeakers advertising phone data plans or a free health check. People hurried past him from every direction, and hawkers zigzagged through the blinding swirl of color with bulging plastic baggies, calling out "Pure water! Pure water!" Dust mixed in the air with the sweet smell of freshly boiled corn. It was 10:00 a.m. on a Saturday in Lagos. But Biggy's phone, set to New York time, read 5:00 a.m., and his head was running a little slow too.

The night before, he had stayed up late at a friend's place chatting on the phone, smoking Colorado, and listening to Nigerian rap. Now, heading to the bus stop to return home to Ikotun, he realized he was exhausted. He passed the police station next to the market. Two officers were lounging outside its entrance, wearing their usual black uniforms and menacing looks. They saw a stout young man moving slowly, his bloodshot eyes betraying a sleepless night, and decided to frisk him.

This wasn't his first run-in with the police. On previous occasions when they found drugs—usually no more than a couple of joints—they made him pay. That wasn't necessarily the worst news. Another time, a few hundred meters away on Liasu Road, he had seen them clock him the same way. Biggy, his mind told him, the po-po is coming for you, and he quickly hid the weed in his underwear. "Where're you coming from?" they'd asked him. "Where are you going to?" Biggy stayed calm. He said he was going to his family's house. They forced him to unlock his BlackBerry Q5. When they didn't see anything incriminating, they frisked him and found three thousand naira. "Sir, this is for my mom's medicine," Biggy said. A lie, but he didn't want to give the police an excuse to take his money. When they couldn't find any drugs on him, they slapped him, handcuffed him, took him to another Lagos neighborhood, and abandoned him there.

This Saturday he didn't have time to hide the drugs, but didn't overreact when they found them. He knew the drill. The police threatened to take him to the station and demanded a hefty bribe: thirty thousand naira (about thirty dollars at the time). He bargained them down to a third of that, which was still ten thousand naira more than he had. He started making calls. An old friend agreed to transfer the money. Once it landed in their account, the officers let him go. They didn't bother to send him off with a warning.

When he got home to the bright, peaceful three-bedroom apartment he shared with his parents, his mum had already left. Olu, a mother of four, sold spices from a stall at the Irepodun market in Ikotun. Lately, she had been complaining about the weather. The rainy season was coming later each year, in July or even August. For some reason, this meant less frequent but more devastating storms. Muddy water inundated the streets and filled roads with impatient cars that were part of Lagos's horn-honk orchestra. Fewer people were willing to shop in the open air. In the meantime, the removal of a fuel subsidy was forcing prices up. Some Lagosians hoped the new president would tackle inflation. If forty years in the local markets had taught Olu anything, it was that what went up rarely came down.

Biggy was also feeling the strain. Now twenty-nine years old, he had, he often told people, a lot of debts on his neck. He couldn't wait to get his own place—his parents still checked on him whenever he was out for even a couple of hours. But that, for the moment, was impossible.

After his encounter with the police, Biggy told his parents nothing about his newest debt and spent most of the next week confined to his room, sleeping until noon and then watching TV or playing *Candy Crush* and scrolling through a TikTok-like app called Viva. Beside his mattress lay an unopened book from the Jehovah's Witnesses titled *Questions Young People Ask: Answers That Work* (volume 1). The book was a guide for teenagers to help them become "responsible adults," with chapters including "Am I Ready to Leave Home?," "How Can I Conquer the Habit of Masturbation?," and "How Can I Earn More Freedom?" When night closed in, during the few hours that silence settled over Ikotun, Biggy lay on his bed, glued to his iPhone 11. He would spend the night chatting with dozens of American men with names like LeRoy and Toby, Ronald and Skyler, Nathan and Jason, hoping to get what he called a "cash-out," so that he could pay off his debt.

One of his online alter egos was an attractive and slim white woman named Emily. Her striking yellow-green eyes, full lips, and attractive figure made her, he found, irresistible to his victims. Biggy had stolen the pictures from Wanda Nara, an Argentine model and TV presenter with more than seventeen million followers on Instagram. Her husband was the Argentine footballer Mauro Icardi, something Biggy was somehow proud of. The fake Facebook profile read: "Live and let live. Love and let love. The world is a very small place. I love my daughter."

You could scroll down and see dozens of friend requests, but "Emily Lauren" had only around fifty friends. Biggy only accepted men who were willing to send money, Americans mostly but also Europeans, Australians, and a few South Americans. If they weren't willing to pay, he unfriended them. He believed lousy scammers betrayed themselves by having hundreds and hundreds of friends—normal people didn't have that many

acquaintances. He also shared posts about dogs to make Emily's profile look more real because Americans, he knew, loved dogs.

Every day, Biggy told different men—whom he called his “clients”—that it was Emily's birthday. “Would you gift me something?” he asked. If someone showed interest, he told them Emily would do something “naughty” for them. One of Biggy's most recent profitable targets had been John, a middle-aged white American lawyer. It had happened two months before. Initially, John was cautious, aware of online scams and reluctant to send money to strangers. But Biggy won him over with risqué messages. John, apparently swayed, transferred \$250 to Emily after learning that she hadn't had any “chocolate eggs” for Easter. Biggy couldn't believe that someone would send money for such a stupid reason. But as he liked to say, some white people were “craaaazy.” Later, Biggy claimed Emily's daughter was ill, leading to another \$250 transfer. After one month, the lawyer stopped replying to Emily's messages, only to come back again to ask Emily if she had any other “friends” who could get even “naughtier.” Biggy introduced him to Natasha, another profile he managed himself. In two months, Biggy got \$1,500 from the American lawyer before he blocked Emily and Natasha.

Biggy's earnings from his most recent scam, though, had dwindled away. According to him, 30 percent went to his parents for the apartment's annual rent—around five hundred thousand naira. A portion was spent on a fake Gucci bag and a flashy knockoff Fendi set: bright yellow pants paired with a psychedelic shirt—a kaleidoscope of yellow, blue, and red—recently acquired from his favorite boutique. He'd also spent a significant amount on drugs. Now broke again, he was getting desperate, because his clients were not sending money, and his friend had sent him a reminder a few days after lending him the ten thousand naira: “When are u giving me the money back bru?”

That week, the contrast between Biggy's plight and Lagos's festive atmosphere was stark. One of his Muslim neighbors slaughtered a cow in his backyard for Eid al-Adha, a three-day religious celebration that brought Lagos's usual hustle to a halt. While affluent Muslim families in Ikotun

distributed meat from their sacrifices among family, friends, and less fortunate neighbors, Biggy, who was a devout Christian, found himself wrestling with a dilemma: Should he sell his worn-out Dell laptop to pay off his debt? He disliked owing money to anyone, because that made him look weak on the street, but the computer was a precious object to him. He loved playing *Pro Evolution Soccer 2017* on his laptop with a PlayStation joystick. What could he do? The only other avenue open to him was to hang on to the hustle, be patient, and hope to get another cash-out.

“The debtor is choking me,” Biggy told me a few days later. “He needs the money.” When I asked him what would happen if he didn’t pay off his friend soon, he replied, “Nothing happens. We can’t fight; he can’t beat me or kill me. Highest thing, he will just get angry.” But then he added: “Who wants to have debts, bro? Is debt a good thing? I might need his help in the future. To be on the safer side, I need to pay him.” He then burst into a cascade of laughter.



When I first came to Nigeria, I wasn’t there to write a book about romance fraudsters. I wasn’t even there to meet Biggy. I was looking for the man who had scammed my own mother, in what seemed like an impossible attempt to understand why she had fallen in love with someone who didn’t exist.

By a lot of metrics, my mother, Silvia, is a successful woman. She opened her own dental clinic in Spain before she was thirty, and over the next two decades she served some ten thousand patients. She got married and gave birth to three boys, of whom I am the youngest. But her divorce from my father in 2003, when she was forty-four, was turbulent and costly. After the split, my brothers and I lived mostly with our single mom in various rented apartments around Madrid. For a long time, her only asset was an old Citroën C1. The bulk of her income was spent on food, our educations, and

yearly vacations with us. “Books and travel—no matter what, there’s always going to be money for that in my house,” she said.

One day in December 2015, my mother’s face seemed brighter than usual. She told my brothers and me at Sunday lunch that she’d met someone on Tinder, an app I’d encouraged her to download. The man was named Brian, and he was a handsome, divorced fifty-two-year-old American soldier. My mother said that her feelings were real, and that Brian’s were too.

At first, my brothers and I didn’t pay much attention to Brian. Jaime and Miguel were in their twenties, focused on launching their careers. I was nineteen, the only one of us still living at home, but I was busy studying at university. For us, it was the same old story with our mother: big dreams and then the sudden letdowns, always followed by a quick recovery. But when she later told us that Brian was on a mission in Syria, Miguel, a pilot in the Spanish air force, scoffed. “Come on, you really believe that?” he said.

After that my mother shared updates about her new love more sparingly, and mostly with me. She showed me some of the long, passionate emails she and Brian exchanged. She’d studied English in high school but used Google Translate to better express herself. Brian’s messages had grammatical mistakes too—but I thought, So what? Maybe he just rushes through them.

“Sometimes I tell Brian, ‘You’re going too fast!’” my mother confided in me. She’d said as much in one of her messages to him:

I hope there will be many ends of the year together. I think the love of a couple is a way to go, I am sure our beginning is good and I like it. We are in different situation, my life is very comfortable, yours not, I am surrounded of friends and family, you are only with other men fed up like you. And so ... and so. I understand you hang on me and in some way I appreciate it very much, but in other way it makes me feel a little bit anxious about responsibility of being what you expect of me.

Whatever doubts she had, the joy she felt overrode them. One day she came home with two rings: one for her and one for Brian. “He’s coming to Spain,” she said, grinning. He’d told her that he wanted to leave the military

and be with her in Madrid. Now my brothers and I were concerned. We asked her if she'd ever had a video call with Brian; when she said no, we told her we found it shady that, apart from a few photos, she'd never even seen the guy who claimed to love her. We argued, and my mom, hurt that her sons weren't more supportive, shut herself in her bedroom. "I'm going to talk to my boyfriend," she said before closing the door.

A couple of weeks passed, and their conversations grew more intimate, filled with passionate words, dreams of the future, and the desire to bridge the physical distance between them. "How are you?" Brian asked my mom in another email in which he wished her Merry Christmas in advance. "I want you to be a happy wonderful woman, someone I would love to share more than my life with. At the end of the day I have this joy in my heart because I have found you. It is a beautiful feeling, I feel like I've not felt like this in a very long time. Do you also have that feeling like you were in high [school] again? Take care darling, I will write you in the morning."

Their emails showed that a part of my mom was still skeptical. But as their conversations continued, she let her guard down and began to trust him, sharing her loneliness as a single mother. Her messages revealed a woman looking for a space to be vulnerable.

All my life, since I was a child, then as a wife, and then as a working mother, I've taken care of others, and now I want someone to take care of me.

I really want to hear your voice before year ends. I want this present from you. I told you if you would be able to tell me by email you are going to call me I could answer it is alright. I have seen WhatsApp is not a good idea. Anyway I have written I want the time passed very quickly and to be with you as soon as possible. Take care of yourself.

There is someone in Spain waiting for you!

Un beso, Silvia

★ ★ ★

In early January 2016, about five weeks after my mother first connected with Brian, Jaime sent me a message while I was studying at the library. “Carlos, we have to do something,” he wrote. I could sense his anxiety behind the “still typing” bubble on my phone’s screen. “This guy told mum he’s going to ship her some bars of solid gold he found in a terrorist stash,” Jaime continued. “It’s a scam.”

I put down my books and I googled “scams” and “American soldiers.” I first did it in Spanish and got few results. But when I switched to English, dozens of results appeared. Most were warnings about con artists, many of them in sub-Saharan Africa, professing to fall in love with their victims at warp speed, then asking for money. Some of these scammers told their targets that they could deliver gold, gems, or cash that would help them build a new life together, if only they helped cover shipping costs or customs fees. Once the victims delivered the money, the scammers either continued stringing them along or simply vanished.

My mom was being targeted. It didn’t make sense— I was sure that she was smarter than the people I heard about on the news, the people who would lose their life savings to online con artists. Still, realizing that it might take hard evidence to convince her that Brian wasn’t who he said he was, I did some research and found an app that could trace an email sender’s location through their IP address. Now I just needed to get into my mom’s Gmail account to pinpoint where Brian really was.

In the meantime, Jaime confronted her with the truth over lunch. My mother was confused: Brian had sent her so many emails and photos, confessed his feelings and fears. How could he not be real?

“Mom, I’m sorry, but there will be no gold,” Jaime told her. “End of story.”

When I arrived home that evening, my mom was alone and upset. She wasn’t ready to let go of the fantasy—she still wanted to believe it was all a misunderstanding. We sat on our sofa, and using the app I’d downloaded, I showed her how it could determine where an email came from. As an example, I used an email from my father, who was living in China back then.

“You see? He sent me this email from Shanghai,” I told her. My mom then gave me her Gmail password, and I used the app to locate Brian. His emails weren’t coming from Syria; they were coming from Lagos, Nigeria.

My mother’s face went as white as the wall behind her. “What a fool I am,” she said.

Within days, she moved on. She deleted most of the emails from her scammer, as well as the dating apps on her phone. “I’m done with men for a while,” she told me, laughing. She kept busy at work, and a few months later was interviewed by a newspaper about her dental clinic. In the photo accompanying the article, she wore a uniform and a big smile. She told the reporter that she liked restoring people’s self-esteem.

Eventually, my mom dated again, but never seriously. Every once in a while she would tell me, half-jokingly, “I think another scammer contacted me.”



In February 2020, four years later, I moved into an apartment with my best friend in Madrid. I was twenty-four by then and working as a journalist. I knew that my leaving would be difficult for my mother—it was the first time she would live completely by herself. But then, just two weeks after I moved out, the prime minister declared an unprecedented state of emergency: Spain was one of the hardest-hit countries in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the first three months of mandatory lockdown, when people in Spain couldn’t even go for a walk in the park, my mother became anxious and depressed, so I started violating the restrictions to stay with her. She was okay with us bending the rules, but I got very paranoid: in the early days, I even scolded her on the phone for walking the dog too much. Every four days, I drove through Madrid’s deserted streets, hoping to avoid the police, mad at my brothers for not being close enough to help, mad at the world for

putting me in this position, and mad at myself for being mad. At dinner, my mom and I would watch the news—*nine hundred people died today, the strict lockdowns will be extended, a police helicopter landed on an empty beach to fine a man walking alone*—and she'd complain about feeling lonely. What about me? Am I invisible? I thought. I was swamped with twelve-hour work-from-home shifts at the Spanish newspaper *El Confidencial*, my long-distance relationship was falling apart, and the last thing I wanted was to listen to her complain after a couple of drinks. I called her selfish, and this led to arguments. "You don't understand what it's like when no one needs you," she fought back. "You don't understand what it means to be alone."

Back then, I didn't agree with her. I thought I knew perfectly well. Perhaps because my parents' split had been messy, I had felt older than other kids my age, which made for a kind of loneliness. When I was thirteen, my dad moved to China for work, and stayed there for nearly a decade. Around that time, my mom entered a romantic relationship that lasted several years. Rather than be happy for her, my brothers and I were mostly annoyed. *Where's Mum? Who is this guy? We don't like him!* Meanwhile, to keep myself company, I made up stories in my head while riding the Madrid subway. I also spent countless hours alone at home in front of my PlayStation, pausing between games to look through the window and wonder if the world outside was getting away from me.

But my mother recognized my loneliness, and she made sacrifices to help me. Sometimes, instead of going out, she would invite her boyfriend and others over to the house on a Saturday evening, fix them drinks, and play Cat Stevens and Don McLean on a loop. There were other Saturdays when it was just the two of us, and we'd play Monopoly for hours, rolling the dice and buying properties late into the night.

Years later, when I started university, I became less solitary, but I still enjoyed spending time with my mom. She and her boyfriend had split up a long time before that. On weekend mornings, I would read novels and she would make jewelry, with classical music playing in the background. We'd

have lunch and drinks later in the day. We talked, of course, but I was convinced that our relationship was built on a comfortable silence. “My last son,” she sometimes said, “what am I going to do when you leave?”

My mother never had another serious boyfriend. She was intelligent, funny, and pretty, with hypnotic eyes she inherited from her own mother. Privately, I began to wonder if her trouble finding a partner was due to her being too picky (*He’s bald*) or because she just preferred being alone (*He can’t keep up with me*). She believed men of her generation struggled to accept women who could outearn them or were independent, and often attributed her dating failures to sexism. Other times, she blamed fate. “Is this the price I have to pay for having three wonderful sons?” she would ask me.

At some point my mindset changed. I started spending time with my mom more out of pity than anything else. I told my friends that I felt bad for her, that I felt guilty leaving her alone. During those pandemic days, I realized there was a thin line between compassion and condescension when it came to one’s parents, and it was frighteningly easy to slip from one sentiment into the other. Maybe she was right: maybe I didn’t understand anything about her loneliness.

I went back to thinking about Brian, now four years gone from our lives. Why had my mom never suspected he was a scammer? She was capable and independent, our family’s anchor, the constant amid the ups and especially the downs, which could have put me or my brothers on a self-destructive path. So how did she become so oblivious to reality? What had I missed? I sometimes imagined a kind of magic mirror, and when I put my mother’s sadness and isolation in front of it, I saw the face of her scammer. Except, of course, I still had no idea what Brian looked like, what his real name was, or how he went about his criminal trade.

As I watched my mother struggle with loneliness, I became more and more fascinated by the type of romance scam she’d fallen for. I soon found out my mom wasn’t a unique case: between 2016 and 2021, Americans alone lost \$1.3 billion to this specific type of fraud, according to the Federal Trade

Commission. The pandemic further fueled this surge, with reported losses hitting a record \$547 million in 2021. (By 2022, the reported losses would reach the staggering amount of \$1.3 billion in a single year.)

Some of these scams originated in Southeast Asia, where organized criminal syndicates coerced hundreds of thousands of individuals—in a scheme described by the United Nations as “virtual slavery”—into creating fake social media profiles to target potential victims. The other major hot spot of romance scams is West Africa, especially Nigeria. In Lagos, however, the operation is much more informal: the majority of scammers are unemployed young men who operate independently, learning from friends on the street how to deceive people on Facebook.

A year and a half into the pandemic, I told my mom I wanted to travel to Lagos to find her scammer, with the idea of writing a story about it. She was in the kitchen, whipping up something for dinner, and I worried how she would react. “If not find him,” I quickly added, “at least try to understand why he did it.” My mother looked at me and smiled. She nodded enthusiastically. “Every time I hear John Legend’s ‘All of Me,’ I remember him,” she said. “He dedicated that song to me.”



There wasn’t much information about Yahoo Boys—so-called because of the email addresses they once used, though in recent years they’d largely switched to dating apps and social media—on the internet. Western newspapers usually referred to Nigerian scammers with stale, cartoonish tropes about the “Nigerian prince,” but they offered little insight into who these scammers really were and how they manipulated their victims. Determined to find out, I decided to quit my job as a reporter in Spain and travel to Nigeria on my own.

My fixer, Bukola Omoseni, was waiting for me at the Lagos airport when I arrived close to midnight in March 2022. My plan was to spend three