

I was 25, a sales manager in France, and I had just closed the biggest deal of my career. The reusable bag I had helped design, source in Asia, and sell to a large French chain of cultural and electronic stores was about to go into mass production. One meeting remained, to finalize the specifications with a customer I had only ever known through phone calls and emails.

The room was bright and modern, with a glass table and chestnut brown chairs. Nothing in it was hidden. I brought my intern, Eleonor, a young white woman who reported to me.

I walked in proud. This was my first project beyond grocery chains, and our reusable bag was stylish, beautifully designed, almost luxurious. I knew it would do very well.

The questions started, and every one of them went to her. The eye contact, the nods, the technical details, all of it landed on Eleonor. Within minutes, I was a spectator in a project I had built from the first sketch.

I had been here before.

At 8, a teacher told my mother, in front of me, that he had never met such an intelligent young Black girl. My mother, who never missed a microaggression, was speechless. At 22, I took multiple trains to a cosmetics company in Paris for a summer job that would pay for my college tuition. I waited in a dark hallway for hours. When the owner finally appeared, she told me to leave because she had found the perfect student, a Master's candidate. She never let me say I was that student. I was escorted out, and the agency later explained she had not expected a Black girl to show up.

Too Black to be smart. Too smart to be Black.

At 22, I waited in the dark for someone to see me. At 25, I sat in a room made of light and glass, and it happened again.

I told them, with the forced diplomacy I had learned to keep ready, that I was the one leading this project, the one they had worked with since the beginning. They kept looking at Eleonor.

My father used to say, "You have to work 10 times harder." I had. Then ten times harder again. And in that bright room, I realized that my home country, the country of lights, the city of love, the capital of fashion, would never rise to the level of my ambition. No matter how hard

I tried, I would only meet rejection, disdain, and belittlement.

A girl keeps knocking on a door, convinced the next degree, the next deal, the next proof will finally open it. A woman understands the door was never meant for her, and walks away to build her own.

I finished the meeting. The bag is still in stores today. Eighteen years later, the company adapted it from the original beige to black, and I am still proud to see it carried in France and 15 countries worldwide.

I stayed and kept building. When I was given the opportunity to develop the North American market- the USA, Canada, and Puerto Rico- I could finally use my French, English, and Spanish. I signed big deals with grocery stores and retail chains until I was asked to open an office in Miami.

Two years after that meeting, at 27, I left France for the land of opportunities. I was not running from the girl in that dark hallway. I was taking her with me, finally with a voice.

*I am Christelle Mombo-Zigah; TS#37 of 52 of The SoulTown Magazine. I want to thank you all for having SOUL! ☺*

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# Too Smart to Be Black



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