

DEAR CHUKUMA,

By Bewaji Busolami

JULY 1st 1967

Bang! Bang! Bang! The sound of constant banging and mumbles forces me out of my dreams into reality. I reluctantly and slowly open my eyes. Instantly I hear my father's authoritative voice clearly, "Is nobody at home?" I jump from my bed, to probably the second banging sound moving round the house. At this point, my heart is in my mouth, my father can't find Chukuma in his house, talk less of my room.

"Chukuma, Chukuma" I'm whispering and shouting at the same time. I pick his shirt up from the floor and throw it in his face. He wakes up about to yell my name, when I immediately throw his socks at him, placing my right index finger to my lips and my left index finger to the door. Chukuma's eyes follow my movement and just as he looks at the door, another bang.

"She has most likely gone out." This time it's my mother's voice I hear, "Let me look for my key." Chukuma is on his feet, shirt on and struggling with his socks. "I thought you said they were coming back tomorrow?" he says with a quivering voice and confusion in his eyes. I ignore his question mainly because I have no answer. I rush to open my window. We both can hear the sound of jingling keys. "Come fast, and pass here" I say still whispering. Chukuma leaps out of the window, while I throw his shoes out as well. I don't bother to check if he catches them.

The entrance door creaks open while I try to adjust my dress to come outside. I hear my father angrily "If Funke is in this house and I have been outside banging my own door like a thief, she better be unconscious and not sleeping." Hearing this I begin to tip-toe backwards to my window. I'm clearly not unconscious so I would rather just disappear. I'm sitting on the window pane, when my room door opens and without thinking I jump down landing in a squat position. "She is not here oooo" my

busy body sister screams. Knowing my sister,I count to ten in my head as the door slams shut. On count seven,the door opens and shuts again, I hear faintly,"She is not here." I chuckle to myself after successfully outsmarting my sister,only to feel a gentle hand on my left shoulder. At this point I'm Lot's wife,I refuse to move or even breathe. I have nowhere to run,plus I'm not a fast runner. 'My Father,who art in heaven,hallowed be thy name' only God can save me now. The sounds of soft hearty laughter surround me,the angels are laughing."Get up let's go."

I turn my neck fast. In front of me,Chukuma stands towering over me,with long legs that seem to extend for miles. His long slender fingers reach for mine,I hiss and slap them away, causing me to stumble. I get up myself,staring Chukuma dead in his eyes,daring him to laugh again. His eyes look straight above me. An effort is made to contain his laughter as his lips curl and his thick eyebrows furrow,holding his laugh in place. While juggling happiness and seriousness,his now wide eyes show joy. I'm also holding my smile back and keeping a stern face. Almost bursting into giggles,I hiss and stomp away from him as fast as I could. I pick up my pace and start running as footsteps pound in my ears,making my heart race faster. It doesn't take long for Chukuma to grab my hand,now we are both running like the little children usually do here in Ore.

Ore,in Ondo state is where I have lived all my 24 years on earth. The air here is filled with the sweet aroma of farm produce,which my father is a proud and successful contributor to. The chatter of buyers and sellers bargaining or joking around under the ever scorching sun,makes this town a peaceful haven for me. Particularly,I enjoy the smell of frying akara balls and boli that constantly fills the air

with a lively and delightful ambiance. Ore for me, is a picture-perfect idyllic town that keeps on giving.

We have run past the busy parts of Ore to Chukuma and I's favourite place. As I gaze upon the clear river, I am filled with a familiar tranquillity. The shores are filled with tall trees that sway softly in the gentle breeze. The only sounds are the birds chirping and leaves rustling occasionally. Also, the air is fresh and carries the scent of Ore's wild flowers. It was as if God had conspired to create a secluded paradise, just for the both of us.

I glance at Chukuma, who has let go of my hand. He is fixated on the moving river, his smile has vanished and been replaced with a sad expression. "Where are you?" "Here", he replies not breaking his concentration on the river. "You know about Biafra?" My heart immediately sinks, I suspect where this is going and I don't want to hear it. "And?" "My father wants me to come back to the south-east and join the Biafran soldiers." I don't say anything so he continues, "He believes it's shameful for his only son not to fight for the freedom of his people." I move closer to him, slightly turning his head to me, his eyes are misty. "He knows they would need your cheetah abilities." This makes him chuckle a bit then he hugs me tight, my head buried against his chest. "It's alright, I'll be here waiting for you to take me when it's all over."

MAY 18th 1968

Dear Funke,

Some days,like today when it feels like I can no longer bear the hardship and challenges of loud soldiers,gunshots,limited food and being apart from you,I sneakily look at your picture that I carry with me in my breast pocket or write to you. There are so many letters I haven't sent, I'll rather show you in person. My fellow soldiers and I are trying our best to keep each other safe,and we take pride in what we are achieving.

You might not be here but when I remember your smile,contagious laugh and of course your loud hisses my love grows stronger and this brightens up my day more than you can imagine. Please know that not a day goes by without me thinking of you and I'm sure you think of me too. I fear I won't be back soon but I know we will prevail and you'll be with me here at Biafra. Till I write again.

Yours eternally,Chukuma

I have a habit of reading all the letters Chukuma sends me multiple times,including the one I just received,which I'm reading on my way home from the post office. I get home to still find my father's eyes glued to the television set,and I don't blame him the Civil War is the only thing anyone is talking about. Mr Gbadebo,our neighbour,is sitting with him in silence,observing General Yakubu Gowon's speech about the state of the War. "You know,I thought this Biafra thing will last only 2 months,5 months at most." Mr Gbadebo says,breaking the silence. "But here we are,it has almost been a year." he maintains a displeased tone and shakes his head gradually. My father sighs loudly,"Well Ojukwu seems to be very serious about the secession. I only wonder at what cost." I have tried not to involve

myself in any conversation about the War. I don't want to fill my head with negativity and fear, I choose to fill it with the sweet words Chukuma writes to me.

I quickly and quietly greet them both so they don't include me in their conversation. So as not to give my father the chance to bring up the topic of Chukuma, an Igbo boy who is part of the Biafran soldiers, in his conversation with Mr. Gbadebo. Luckily for me they are too engrossed or perhaps in a trance by General Yakubu Gowon's voice. My mother however, hears my voice and calls me to join her and my sister in the kitchen. "I'm about to make the stew, Bimbo is washing the meat, you can help with the vegetables." she says, gesturing to the vegetables on the fridge. I walk towards the fridge and drop my letter on it. I'm about to pick up a vegetable to pluck its leaves when I see Bimbo's dark skinny hands stretching for my letter, without thinking I smack her hands away. Bimbo starts her whining with her high pitch voice I think is too squeaky for a 15 year old. Suddenly my mother clears her throat loudly, causing Bimbo to instantly stop her whining and continue with the task given to her.

My mother is not very talkative and prefers to do things quietly. However, when Bimbo and I argue, she will clear her throat loudly and give us a stern look with her big brown eyes. She has a commanding presence that can stop people in their tracks, unlike my father. My sister and I did not inherit our mother's strikingly bold facial features, but we did inherit her tall height of 5'6. My mother carries herself with so much grace that is so effortless and commanding. She is the woman I aspire to be.

I'm done with the vegetables so I excuse myself, sticking my tongue out at my sister as I leave the kitchen. There is a pen on the table beside my father, I grab it

not looking at him or Mr Gbadebo and rush to my room. "Have I told you about this Igbo boy I know?" I hear my father ask and I roll my eyes. On my soothing bed, I'm full of excitement as I begin writing to my ray of sunshine.

Dear Chukuma,

AUGUST 6th 1969

After two years, I'm sitting comfortably on Chukuma's laps with his arms round my waist and it feels like a dream. I look into his eyes to be sure, he smiles exposing his teeth and I place my lips on his, this is real. I was heading to the market when I heard my name, I looked back just to see Chukuma's head peeping from behind a tree. We got to the riverside and I still felt I was dreaming, but now with his warm lips on mine and the soft tickle of his breath beneath my nose, I don't want today to end. "Wait" Chukuma gets up from the rock, bringing out what looks like a note, "This is the Biafran pound", he gives it to me, but I wasn't interested in the currency. I am still looking at the green, one pound note with the drawing of a palm tree in the middle when Chukuma starts singing: "Land of the rising sun, we love and cherish..." Chukuma is standing upright with his chin up and chest out proudly singing what I think is the Biafran anthem. I walk up to him when he finishes, "That's powerful, but I think you scared all the birds in Ore." We both laugh as I put his money back in his breast pocket and he pulls me close, attaching his lips to my neck, causing my hairs to stand. Slowly, still pecking my bare skin, he moves to my mouth. Our lips move in a slow rhythm at first, then faster with more longing, I gasp against his lips and I feel his smile. With his right hand on my back Chukuma guides my body tenderly to the ground. We haven't broken eye contact and it feels like

electricity running through all parts of me, but most importantly I feel safe. He's the home I'll always want to run to.

AUGUST 21st 1969

News is going around that the Biafran soldiers were in Ore, but nobody is certain. Instead, we were all advised to be vigilant and stay indoors most of the time. My father is one of those people who would beat his chest confidently that the Biafran soldiers were not in Ore. He would often say: "What will they be doing here? This is not the South East, they have no business here."

It's impossible to leave home any more without having to explain where I'm going and why. I'm not sure when I'll see Chukuma again and I need to give him my letter that I have been writing since last night. He needs to receive it in person. There have been no violent incidents since the last time I saw Chukuma and I'm starting to think like my father maybe the Biafran soldiers are passing through Ore. The more reason why I had to see Chukuma again before he leaves us. I put on my slippers, pick up my letter and climb out of my window into the now disturbingly quiet Ore. I begin my walk to Oladokun where Chukuma said he would be hiding with the other Biafran soldiers.

The clouds are very dark and look like it's about to rain. I stop walking, still observing the sky. Disappointedly I look straight ahead, "I'm almost there." so I decide to risk it, walking as fast as I could. Drizzling began. Luckily, I found refuge beneath an Iroko tree. I am regretting my choices as I dry my body and letter. Aside from the loud rain and the sound of people and cars, I strained my eyes to see through the fog, hoping to catch a glimpse of someone. Suddenly, gunshots broke the

silence and pierced through the fog. Afraid, I leave the Iroko tree in search of a better hiding spot. Despite the violent sounds of gunfire, I can see vans filled with Nigerian soldiers. Another banging sound echoes, but this time I fall to the muddy ground as the rain continues to fall like pellets on my face. The pitter patter of the rain, boots hitting the ground, shouting and explosions seem to be far away from me, even though I'm in the middle of it all. I can barely keep my eyes open, the pain rushing through my body will not let me. My mind trails off to my parents and sister calling out to me and no reply, to last night when I anxiously had my pen in my hand not knowing how to begin my letter but I finally finished it with tears in my eyes and a pounding heart, just like I have right now.

Dear Chukuma,

I'm barely able to contain my emotions. From the beginning, life has thrown us curve balls. We were forced to love in secret for years due to my father's disapproval, and you unexpectedly went to war when we finally felt we could love openly. I have taken it all in good faith, because as your name implies, God knows better than anyone and He indeed knows we are destined for each other. This is why I believe He has blessed us with a seal that will be the start of amazing adventures together. I can't wait for the Civil War to end. I trust God will protect you from any harm, so we can come together and hold our little star.

I'm grateful to have you as my partner on this marvellous journey. I wouldn't want anyone else. Our love has grown by one and I'm excited to see where it goes. I hope you are too.

With all my love, Funke.