

## MMERI

I ran into an old classmate today, her name is Ejiofor Mmesomma. It's been 17 years so I sat watching her, checking for her scar as confirmation that she's who I think she is but I can't tell if her scar influenced her mode of dressing or if she really isn't the type to show some skin. In any case, I don't blame her, I too would hide that scar. She's been staring at me for a while too, I can't tell if she's just reciprocating my rudeness or she's also getting that air of familiarity.

I remember the last conversation we had when we were both 17, just before I was leaving for the university and she, to the hospital –again. "My big cousins lived with us and they called her Aunty so we got used to calling her that too and I'm happy that's what we call her, I don't think she's my mum, I'll never see her as my mum," she'd said.

I glanced over at her again, she quickly evaded my gaze. She was still skinny but curvy, had skin like honey with glistening eyes which by the way had lost their joy but she was still beautiful in every way. The man who'd been sitting close to her left and I tactfully went to take his place. I sat down. "Hey," I said quietly. "Heyyy, you know lesbianism is a crime in Nigeria right?" She looked too serious, I was alarmed. "Pardon?" "You've been staring at me since I walked in like you want to eat me, I'm flattered but I'm straight so no, you can't have my number."

Jesus, seriously, what's with people nowadays? "No no... I" "Ugh, I'm just fucking with you Ibiso," she said, laughing. My God, this girl was still insane! "You're crazy! Why didn't you walk up to me?" "I wasn't sure it was you so when you walked towards me, that was the confirmation I needed. But you, what were you waiting for?" "Uhm, my flight? We're at the airport na" "Oh no, I mean like before you decided to walk up to me." "I don't know, everything was just awkward and I had to mentally prepare." I lied even though I badly wanted to ask "Has your scar faded?" "Oh, that's fine. It's been ages, I don't blame us."

We were both heading to Port Harcourt to see our mums. "My mum is finally dying yunno, to think she lived this long." She said casually. Conversation about her mum always made me very uncomfortable, if I were superstitious or even religious I'd have believed her mother was a witch, I only asked after her because you know how courtesy can be, going around demanding things from us. I tried to change the subject. "So do you live here in Abuja?" "Oh, God, no. It's too expensive for me, I live in Lokoja." "That's beautiful, I live and work here." "Oh, great! I see you're married, how's he?"

"We're just engaged and he isn't bad at all." "Ugh, don't be modest." she laughed, I laughed too. "Does your family still live there at GRA?" "Oh, yes yes but just my mum mostly now, my dad passed away 4 years ago." "Aw, IB, I'm so sorry to hear that, I know how much he meant to you." "Oh, no it's fine, he was sick before he passed, I'm happy he's no longer suffering." "If I'd known you guys were still there I would've come to say hi the last time I was in PH to kill my mum." "This is one of your jokes right?" "You never can tell."

Thankfully, the female mechanical voice filtered through the airport's speakers announcing it was time to board the flight. "Can I please take a look at your boarding pass?" I ask as we walk towards the gate. She handed it over, her seat was 12A, typical Mmeso, always by the window, by herself. Mine was 9C, I hated having to say "excuse me," if I had to leave my seat for any reason but I was willing to give up that comfort to sit close to her. Then I saw her name, "Mmeri Ajonne". "Why didn't you correct me?" "On what?" "You changed your name." "Yeah, it's just to spite my mum, I really don't mind being called Mmeso though I'd prefer Mmeri." "I like Mmeri, what does it mean?" "It means victory and my surname translates to bad mother. Essentially, I'm saying I won my mum." she laughed, she was always laughing even at the saddest things even before now, that's who she's always been.

"It's a nice name but bearing Ajonne could mean you're a bad mother too." "Only I'm not a mother at all, I'll never be." I didn't respond, I didn't know what to say, I wasn't a mother also but I wanted to be. I prayed fervently that I could get pregnant. My first husband left me because I couldn't bear a child, I hated being reminded about that problem so I didn't pry into why she didn't have or want children. "You want to sit close to me right?" She asked, smiling. "Oh, yes yes" "Okay then, once we're in just follow me." I did as she instructed. The next seat was occupied by a huge white man. "Excuse me please, can you and my friend here swap seats? She's pregnant and suddenly having serious panic attacks, I want to hold her hand and care for her."

The man didn't protest, he just asked for my seat number and went to sit there. I looked at her amusingly, "You look like you swap seats all the time." She laughed. "Not on planes, this is my first one, ever." she eased herself onto her seat, and I sat down too. "You know it's high time people began addressing poverty for what it really is, I'm not trying to absolve myself of responsibility but it's saddening that I had to take part of my savings to pay for this flight only to go see a dying woman that I sincerely don't care about. I mean, I had a mental battle to finally make the decision to buy this ticket, I kept thinking of a million things I could do with the money and to think there are people who believe not being able to afford this ticket is as a result of my choices, actions, and inactions? Pfff"

I tentatively held her hands. "I understand you, sometimes our hard work is just never enough..." She cut in, "You can't understand me, Ibisio, you come from old money and besides, I'm not a hard worker, I'm a lazy fuck, it's part of the reason why my mum nearly killed me." She was laughing again. "So what really is poverty?" I removed my hand from hers. "Poverty is largely a result of systemic inequality and oppression. Like I never had a chance against poverty, it didn't matter how much I worked and invested and manifested, I was born very disadvantaged and bound to be poor regardless."

I ruminated on her words, truly, she never stood a chance. She has to be one of the strongest people I know to have had the kind of traumatic past she's had and come out unscathed, or was she? But, I mean she's more mentally stable than I am, I give her that. "Get out of your head IB, I recently read that poverty stuff in a book and I've been using it to justify my laziness." We both laughed.

We were quiet the rest of the trip and I couldn't help but reminisce. My first encounter with Mmesomma was when I saw her being punished with other offenders for overgrowing their hair, the teachers used scissors to rubbush their hair in a bid to coerce them into cutting it. Other students were sad, some were angry and some were crying but not Mmeso. "If only I were a celebrity." she'd said. Even I who was sitting leisurely in the corner with my privilege and overgrown hair was taken aback. "what do you mean?" one of the other offenders finally asked. "Don't you see how they all look insane lately and everybody just follows the trend because they're popular? If I were popular, this jagajaga hair Mrs. Oma gave me would've been a fashion statement or trend or something and I still wouldn't have to cut my hair." I was totally in awe of her and I don't think I ever stopped being amazed by her even now, all these years later.

That first encounter happened when we were both in SS1. I had to change schools because my Dad and his family were being investigated for fraud and all his assets and bank accounts were frozen. It was a government-owned school which meant I automatically had proximity to the less privileged and life's disadvantaged but even then, Mmeso was one of the poorest. Her poverty however wasn't her greatest enemy, her mother was.

Her mother was a local church prophet who prided herself in being a disciplinarian and all she did was discipline, extreme discipline, torture even. It was worse for Mmeso because her mum branded her a witch and blamed her for the family's downfalls, nothing she ever did was right. Her punishment for existing was to be starved for days, whipped with koboko during deliverance sessions, made to sleep outside in the cold, carved with razor blades, and her vagina inserted with pepper. I can't begin to narrate the hell Mmeso went through but it truly isn't my story to tell. I'm sorry if you believed it was but I couldn't tell it all even if I tried.

Anyway, I soon got close to Mmeso, one could even say we were best friends. The first time I saw her scar I'd yanked on her uniform to stop her from running away with my diary and her shirt buttons fell off to reveal the daily physical reminder of having a demon for a mother. "Jesus, what's this?" "Definitely not as serious as whatever you're hiding in that diary." She angrily handed me back my diary and walked away. I later learned her mum had marked her with a hot knife during an exorcism but apparently, all the demons didn't leave because she kept on marking Mmeso.

"IB, we've landed." She looked closely at me, smiling. "Where did you go?" I smiled back. "Nowhere, let's go". We sat at a small airport restaurant. "It was really nice meeting you again today IB, when will you be going back to ABJ?" "I don't know yet, how about you?" "Same, yunno, I heard my mum is really critical so I might stick around till I can bury her." "That's terrible, what about your younger sister?" She grimaced. "I only heard from her for the first time in 15 years last month when she called to tell me about Aunty. I left when I was 20 and never looked back." I touched her hand. "Well, I'm sure she's fine." "I'll know soon enough right?" "Yeah, I guess," I said, smiling.

We got snacks and drinks and she ate like she was actually hungry. "So what have you been up to all these years? She asked. "You know, not much. I studied medicine and went on to become a doctor then I got married and remarried, I'm the typical Nigerian." "Only you're not, you've just always been too modest and quiet, I'm sure your diary knows everything you're choosing not to say." "I don't keep one anymore, I'm grown-up." I lied. She smiled. "So why aren't you asking for my number? I told you I was kidding." "Mmeri can you be serious for once?" I laughed. We exchanged contact and said our goodbyes. "Please call when you're about to leave so I know if we could at least hang out one last time." She'd said but she didn't have to, now that I was close to her again, I wasn't about to let go again.

I got home to meet my mum sitting idly in front of the house. If I didn't know better I'd have preferred it if my dad was still alive, maybe her pains and misery from being physically and verbally abused almost every day were better than this loneliness she'd been feeling since he passed away. In any case, I have no regrets about what I did, he deserved to die. "No no, IB I'm fine really, I don't need your sympathy and I sure don't need you putting your life on hold to care for me, I can handle myself, stop coming back here every month." my mum protested when I asked her for the hundredth time if I can come live with her. I didn't argue, I ate, had my bath, and went to sleep.

Approximately three weeks after I came back to Port Harcourt, Mmeri called me. "Since I didn't get any call from you yet, I'm assuming you're still around." I laughed. "Yes, but I'll be leaving soon, I planned on calling." "Ugh, don't lie." We met up at our former secondary school. I found it suspicious that she'll choose there as our meeting spot but you know sentiments, they get the best of us and I wasn't about to be a killjoy. We sat at that same spot where I met her for the first time, where Mrs. Oma cut her hair. It was still the same, nothing much had changed about the school, yet another evidence of a failed governmental system.

"Yunno, I buried my mum three days ago but I'm indifferent which is shocking because I thought I'd feel pure ecstasy, I've been practicing my celebratory dance all these years but now that it's happened I feel nothing." "But that's grief, Mmeri, regardless, she was still your mum." "Yeah, no denying that she was. The last time I told you I was in Port Harcourt, I obviously didn't come to kill her, I came to take a DNA test and the devil was indeed my mum. I've never been so disappointed in my life before." She paused and glanced around, I knew she expected a response but I still hadn't found my words. "It's funny yunno, her evil is in my DNA, it runs through my blood that's why I don't want children, I can't stand another generation of bile, I pray my sister dies without procreating too."

I finally found some words. "Well, I'm so sorry to hear about that, I can't imagine how much pain she put you through but I'm also sorry to hear that she's dead..." She cut in. "Only you're not really sorry, IB." I was alarmed, seriously, what's with this girl? "Pardon?" "Yunno, it's one thing to lie to the world but it's a different brand of evil to lie to yourself IB and you've been lying to everyone including yourself for ages."

"I have no idea what you're on about, Mmeri." "You killed my mum, IB, the exact same way you killed your dad with your drugs and heavy medical terms. Look, I'm not even mad at you at all, they both truly deserved it." I was shocked beyond my core, scared even. Now how in the world did she find out and why was she so calm about it all? If she knew how dangerous I was, why was she meeting me here, alone and acting all chill? "Please tell your diary the truth since you wouldn't tell it to yourself, you didn't run into me but don't worry, I won't report you if you promise to stop stalking me. I promise that I will go straight to the police if I ever find out you're still stalking me. Thanks for killing my mum." She said as she handed me my diary and walked away leaving me there in utter distress.