

SHORT STORY(ERIMA)

by

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CHAPTER ONE

The musky-fresh scent of damp soil mixed with fallen leaves hung in the air while a brisk wind whistled, blending the scent of petrichor and nostalgia. This fragrance transported me back to memories of the Igede-agba festival, yet there was an unsettling quality to today's rain. It didn't evoke the longing for days when Ocheri and I gleefully splashed in puddles or crafted paper boats pretending to be sailors. It was almost as if the rain and the wind were engaged in a territorial dispute, akin to cats and dogs. My agitation grew, even though it wasn't the first time we had a downpour in Obi.

Sister Alice had returned from Ibadan just the day before, and I overheard her and my mother quietly discussing the possibility of her taking me with her. Perhaps it was why I felt so apprehensive. Although I had always yearned for an escape from the confines of Obi, feeling like I had outgrown the small town and tired of seeing familiar old faces, I didn't have many friends and the few ones I had were either married or taken away by a family member. But I had planned to go to university after my secondary education. Makurdi housed a reputable university, and was conveniently close to Obi. My SSCE was still three years away but I couldn't wait to start exploring different cities, starting with Makurdi. Mama mi knew about my plans, and she was supportive of it. As for Baba mi, he was indifferent, seldom paying attention to our affairs. His presence was only felt when he established household rules or required us to run errands. Education, especially for women didn't seem to interest him.

Mama mi, on the other hand, was a firm believer of education. She considered it the key to success and promised that her daughters would excel. I shared her conviction and dedicated myself to my studies. I aimed to make her proud and provide for both ocheri and her. Mama mi worked tirelessly on the farm and I feared she was growing weaker with time. The thought of anything happening to her scared me. To divert my thoughts, I daydreamed about the success I envisioned for myself. Our schoolteacher frequently spoke of accomplished women who had made their marks in the world; it inspired me to strive for similar achievements. These daydreams offered an escape from the realities of obi, allowing me to envision a different life.

Erima, mama mi called, snapping me out of my reverie: “your father wants you in the backyard.” Baba mi and sister Alice were seated on kitchen stools, with Baba mi leaning against the wall, his legs crossed in front of him.

I glanced quickly from sister Alice to Baba mi, and back to mama mi, who stood behind me. Another knot formed in my stomach as thunder roared, threatening to unleash heavy raindrops. The clouds mirrored my inner turmoil, shrouding the sky in darkness. I was afraid because I had a suspicion of what baba mi wanted to discuss.

Finally, after clearing his throat numerous times, he spoke, “Your sister and I have decided that you will leave with her to Ibadan”. “Go inside and start packing your things.” I searched mama mi’s eyes hoping for her to back me up

“I think it’s best for you to leave with your sister,” she said, pulling me close and cradling my face in her palm. “Alice has found a job for you in Lagos. Erima, you know I can no longer afford to support both you and ocheri’s education. I want the best for you but things are hard now, I can’t work in the farm like I used to, I need all the support I can get. After some

time, you can resume your own studies. I would have found another way besides farm work. Our family needs you ‘oma iho.’”

It felt as though the weight of my emotions pressed against my chest, Tears welled up but I struggled to maintain my composure. I was unhappy but I didn’t utter a word because nothing I said would matter. I couldn’t help but feel resentment towards Baba mi. I wondered why he couldn’t just find work instead of merely sitting around setting arbitrary rules and making decisions on what’s best for everyone. Thoughts of mama on the farm crossed my mind, and my anger subsided. I picked up the bag sister Alice had given me during her last visit and began packing. I was scared; these things happened all the time; girls were either married off or uprooted from their lives for the family’s sustenance. None of the promises about making their lives better were true. Instead, they slaved away in foreign states. Still, I clung to hope, as mama mi assured me that it was only for a while. Besides, sister Alice loved me and she wouldn’t allow this if her business was going well.

CHAPTER TWO

Subsequently, I had come to associate the rain with night terrors, isolation, a profound sense of sorrow and an omen of impending doom. Each time it rained; I would be gripped by the same disconcerting sensations I had felt back in Obi—a pervasive feeling of impending darkness that clung to me relentlessly. I had an unshakable sense that something dreadful loomed on the horizon; I just couldn't fathom the what, how, or when of it. My nightmares were now a nightly ordeal whenever it rained. It was the same every night. It invariably commenced with me back in Obi, a helpless spectator to my own vulnerability. Inexplicably, Baba mi and a strange man would appear, both grinning menacingly. It was as if I were observing this surreal scenario from outside my own body, a mere spectator. Whenever I drew near to glimpsing the identity of the man baba mi was gleefully sharing smiles with, I would jolt awake, drenched in sweat.

Rain also evoked a profound yearning for my sister, I missed those moments when we would frolic in the rain, ignoring our duties of helping mama tend to the yam tubers. We'd share giggles and invent endless games, only ceasing when mama's calls for us rang out. I longed for her inquisitiveness. Even when I lacked answers to most of her questions, I gladly indulged her curiosity. Four years had passed, and these memories were the tether that kept me grounded. I couldn't recall the last time someone had called me "Erima." Sister Alice had made it abundantly clear when she brought me to Lagos that I was to respond to the name "Happy" whenever asked. I found it weird, but I did not question it. All the girls at Aunty Bisi's buka went by similarly cheerful names—Happy, Joy, second Happy. I harbored a strong aversion to these names because they failed to impart any genuine sense of happiness or joy, given our challenging circumstances. Aunty Bisi was an exceedingly meticulous woman, tall and imposing, which only heightened her intimidating presence.

So, when Aunty Bisi handed me the phone, and sister Alice's trembling voice reached my ears, I couldn't help but notice aunty Bisi, for once refrain from her usual scolding. She didn't loom over me with her full stature and her piercing look like a predator poised to pounce on its prey. I knew something had gone wrong. Aunty Bisi's entrance into any room typically cast an eerie and unmistakable aura of authority, tinged with malevolence. Her cold, calculating eyes as she entered the buka bore a sharpness capable of slicing through even the most self-assured façade. Her words and actions dripped with condescension and veiled threats. Yet, today, her countenance appeared strangely serene, her intimidating presence subdued. For a brief moment, I saw tears well up in her eyes and I just knew I didn't want to hear what sister Alice had to say.

"Mama mi has Passed," sister Alice uttered, her voice straining as she fought back tears. I'll come to pick you up on Tuesday for the funeral.

CHAPTER 3

We got to Obi quickly this time, perhaps it was because the route had become familiar. Sister Alice remained silent; her gaze fixed on the passing scenery outside the bus window. I struggled to make sense of my emotions; the reality of the situation had not fully sunk in yet. I clung to the belief that I would reunite with my mother when I reached home. In my mind's eye, she'd be seated on her usual stool, arms wide open, waiting for my embrace, and she would spin me around, and make remarks about how much I had grown. With closed eyes, I drifted to sleep, hoping the rain would hold off this one time, and nothing terrible would happen.

The funeral passed swiftly, leaving me in a daze. I absentmindedly buried my feet in the earthen floor of the living room where I sat, kicking up dust as I stared in the void. My surroundings were a blur, and I was oblivious to the presence of my father until he approached. Startled, I greeted him, but he merely stood there, studying me intently. "Come with me", he said abruptly.

I trailed behind him as we ventured through the backyard and into mama mi's neglected farm. I hesitated briefly, overwhelmed by memories of working alongside mama in the fields, but I hastened my steps to catch up with Baba mi. Our journey led to a modest, unpaved building. He retrieved a key from his shorts and unlocked the door, leaving me bewildered about his intentions.

Inside the dimly lit room, I discovered a woman bound in chains, her eyes vacant and disconnected from the world. She seemed completely unaware of our presence. Questions raced through my mind. Why was she restrained like this? who was this woman? and why were we here? I felt a sense of fear and unease both for her and myself. I struggled to comprehend the situation but decided to follow Baba mi's lead.

Finally, he broke the silence, his voice strained. “This woman here is your mother”, he said swallowing hard as he tried to find the right words. “I know you’ve always known Mama as your mother, but she’s not. We thought it would be best for you to know when you were old enough to understand. I didn’t want you to see her like this. The mother you thought you knew is my sister”.

I was left speechless, unable to process the information. “What happened to her?” I managed to ask. Baba mi explained that she had suffered a mental breakdown while pregnant with Ocheri when I was just a child. Unable to afford her medical bills, they had brought her back home and relied on local healers in obi. There had been some improvement but she still remained in this troubling state.

Numbness washed over me as I stared at the woman before me. Tears streamed down my face and a whirlwind of compounded emotions surged within me. My hands and feet trembled, and I leaned against a nearby wall for support. It all felt like a nightmare, a reality no one should have to endure.

CHAPTER 4

After Baba mi and I got in a heated argument, I decided to leave with sister Alice for Ibadan as an escape from my father's relentless insistence on my marriage to Onoja. I had no intention of succumbing to his pressure and marrying at 17, especially when he could barely provide for himself, let alone Ocheri. His habit of making ill-advised decisions on my behalf had worn thin. I pondered how he had survived for so long. Frankly, he seemed utterly inept.

He would go on about how Onoja was a fine man, a wealthy farmer, and a formidable figure in Obi. "He is the ideal suitor for you, and can provide for you and our family." This was his constant refrain. Onoja was a feared Presence in Obi. Rumoured to possess mysterious powers, and no one dared cross his path. It was said that he always got what he wanted, but I was resolute in my determination not to let a man old enough to be my father ruin my life. One would think My father might have learnt from the mistake of pushing sister Alice into marriage with a drunkard and a deadbeat.

Mrs Adeniji's house marked a significant improvement from my previous situation at the buka. It was a breath of fresh air. I had my own room, reduced chores, and the opportunity to enroll in a nearby school. Mrs Adeniji was a petite, soft-spoken woman, she treated everyone with kindness and even made sure I never did too much in the house so I could have time to study. "That was what Baba mi wanted me to give up?" My dreams were finally materializing, and I couldn't help but think Mama mi would be pleased wherever she was. The atmosphere was peaceful and tranquil. It felt as though the storms in my life had subsided, and days of sadness were behind me. I sent money back home and continued my education despite Baba mi's complaints, I remained undeterred.

My Secondary School Certificate Examinations (SSCE) was just a few months away, and the prospect of going to a university filled me with joy. Yet, something about leaving Ocheri with Baba mi troubled me deeply. Sister Alice shared my concerns, and we reached a consensus to bring her to Ibadan. She would stay with Sister Alice, given her improved business prospects, and we would enroll Ocheri in a school here. It was a solid plan. For once, I felt a profound sense of gratitude for the life I was living. On a Sunday morning, I embarked on a journey to Obi to bring Ocheri to Ibadan. Baba mi, Sister Alice, and I had discussed it, and he had agreed. We promised to keep sending him money, at least eliminating Ocheri as an excuse for his financial grievances.

That recurring sensation churned in my stomach once more, and the clouds overhead appeared ominous, momentarily stirring a sense of fear within me. Swiftly, I dismissed it. I hesitated to entertain thoughts of impending misfortune. It had been a considerable amount of time since the heated argument between Baba mi and I, and now I was on my way to retrieve Ocheri from him. Baba mi was undeniably reliant on others, and I harboured doubts about his ability to fend for himself. Perhaps this was the root of my apprehension. Despite his knack for getting on my nerves and always insisting on having things his way, I didn't want to lose him as I did Mama mi. The prospect of encountering my actual mother once more also weighed on me. I wanted to get to know her but I didn't know how. I wished to get her the assistance she needed. The magnitude of it all overwhelmed me. Nevertheless, I found solace in the fact that I was in a better place now, and I held onto the belief that circumstances could only improve from here.

CHAPTER 5

It was the same petrichor scent, the same fierce wind and the same unsettling feeling, but there was no rain this time, no clash between the rain and the wind today, just dark clouds. I sat there rigid and immobile, unable to move. It was as though I was hovering above myself. My nightmares playing right in front of me but I felt too numb to engage in them. I felt the water roll down my cheeks as colors and shapes blurred. It all seemed like a fragment of my imagination. There I was dressed as a bride, Unable to move, time seemed to have lost its meaning, and all I heard were muffled voices. I saw my baba mi and the man smiling and shaking hands. I yearned for rain today, just this time, I needed hope, anything but no one seemed to be listening to me anymore. I felt like I was sinking in the depths of despair and there was nothing I could do about it. I wanted a break from everything. It dawned on me what my nightmare truly meant, and the rumors were true. Onoja indeed possessed the power to get whatever he desired.

THE END