

The bustling market in Batoke was always lively, but that particular day, it was exceptionally crowded. The queue at Limunga's fish store stretched further than the eye could see, a testament to the excitement that gripped the town. "Madam, can you be faster?" one customer impatiently asked, echoing the sentiments of others.

The air was thick with chatter as people in line discussed everything from the price of mackerel to the upcoming graduation ceremony at the lone secondary school in Batoke, a small community in the South West region on Cameroon.

Limunga, a young woman in her early twenties, longed for an assistant on days like this. She was well aware that the graduation ceremony was the reason for the massive turnout. Parents, especially mothers, were planning grand feasts to celebrate their children's achievements. Limunga couldn't blame them for choosing her store; her reputation for quality fish was unmatched.

The store was packed, and the queue snaked out of her small shop, encroaching on Pa Fai's space next door. Pa[1] Fai had a talent for drawing Limunga's attention to every infringement, but relief arrived in the form of Ewube. It seemed like Ewube had a sixth sense for when Limunga needed help; call it 'best friend instinct'.

By the end of the day, Limunga had made a remarkable sale. Her refrigerators, once brimming with a variety of fish, crabs, and prawns, were nearly empty. As she locked up the store that evening, Ewube couldn't help but voice her concern. "Why do you subject yourself to this strenuous work, Limungs? Isn't this considered a man's job, requiring strength and stamina?"

Limunga responded with her usual soft and gentle voice, "My dear, we must make ends meet oh. And there should be no gender restrictions on what one can do. Women are just as capable."

Limunga, an averagely tall young woman with a story etched into her features, had lost her parents and most of her relatives in the devastating Mount Fako eruption of early 2000. She lived with her elderly grandmother, Ma Enanga, in their humble two-room house.

Her resemblance to her late mother was striking – willowy, with just the right curves. Her skin was radiant, and her mahogany-tinted eyes were captivating. Limunga often found herself avoiding skinny jeans, which drew too much attention from "jobless roadside guys," as she called them. Instead, she took comfort in her Ewondo skirt[2], practical and unassuming.

On their way home, Limunga and Ewube talked about the future. "What kind of job would you prefer for me, Ewubs?" Limunga asked.

"Something less physically demanding. You're only twenty-three you know; you don't want to risk back injuries from heavy lifting," Ewube replied.

Limunga smiled, and the two friends continued their walk home, slurping long sugarcane stems along the way. They parted ways at the junction, Limunga continuing toward her house while Ewube headed in the opposite direction to her own home.

Upon arriving home, Limunga found Mrs. Sylvia, the nurse who cared for Ma Enanga, waiting impatiently outside. Limunga had worked late, breaching their agreement. "I'm very sorry, Madam Sylvia. I had a busy day at the store. My apologies for keeping you waiting," Limunga explained as she searched her handbag for the nurse's payment.

Mrs. Sylvia collected her pay and left without a word, leaving Limunga disheartened. She had no fondness for the nurse's demeanor, but her grandmother's health was paramount, and confrontations with the healthcare provider were unwise.

After greeting her grandmother, Limunga engaged her in a conversation in their vernacular. Ma Enanga, weakened by years of illness and the amputation of her left leg, didn't speak much. It was

their neighbor, Ndeki, who often kept Limunga company in the evenings. Ndeki, a stay-at-home mother of two, had a talent for hairdressing and was responsible for Limunga's beautiful bantu knots.

Ndeki would often tease Limunga about the fish she brought home. "Where's the leftover fish today?" she'd ask, playfully.

Limunga would retort, "I should be asking you about the fish your husband the most popular fishermen in this whole country caught on his fishing trip today."

The two friends would burst into laughter, their bond growing stronger with each passing day.

One evening, Ndeki came over, and their usual banter continued. "Limunga, my dear, don't you think it's time for you?" Ndeki asked.

Limunga, mouth full of watermelon, inquired, "Time for what?"

Ndeki grinned mischievously. "You're a young and beautiful woman, Limunga, with those child-bearing hips. Have you considered marriage and starting a family?"

Limunga playfully threw some of the egusi[3] she was peeling at Ndeki. "Ah, Ndeki, are you and Ewube conspiring to dictate my life choices today? When the time is right, I'll find a husband. Satisfied now?"

Ndeki wasn't easily deterred. "What about all those men who come to see you? Are you waiting for the Prince of England?"

Limunga sighed, "It's easy for you to say, Ndeki. Your family is well-off, and you were betrothed to your husband from birth. In my case, I don't have male relatives, so there's no dowry to be paid since it can only be collected by a male relative. That's probably why there are so many suitors; because marrying me wouldn't cost an arm and a leg as it would to marry any other young girl with a good family backing. Plus, I'm barely making ends meet with my store earnings, most of which goes to pay Ma Enanga's hospital bills. I don't have the luxury to dress up like you or the time to think about marriage."

As Limunga spoke, she knew that her life was a delicate balance between responsibility and her own dreams. She was determined to make her grandmother's life comfortable and had little time for personal desires.

The next day, Limunga's routine began early. She prepared kwacoco[4], a traditional dish of cocoyams and palm oil, as she did every other Saturday before opening her store. Ma Enanga helped sort out the the plantain leaves which would be used to wrap the kwacoco, while Limunga grated the cocoyams. Afterward, Limunga got ready for work, and the nurse arrived to care for Ma Enanga, ensuring everything she needed was within reach.

Business that day was slow, but Limunga understood that every day had its ups and downs. Some brought in significant profits, while others barely covered expenses. She decided to visit Ewube's tailoring workshop, located nearby. Ewube was swamped with orders for graduation robes, but she always had time for her friend. They talked about their lives, their dreams, and the inevitable topic – men.

Limunga returned to her store, made a few more sales, and then closed for the day. Ewube hadn't closed her shop yet, so Limunga walked home alone.

When she arrived at their compound, Ndeki's children ran toward her, welcoming her with laughter. Inside the house, the nurse was engrossed in her phone, listening to the radio as she always did. Limunga inquired about her grandmother's welfare, and the nurse explained that Ma Enanga had suffered a heart attack and was rushed to the district hospital.

Limunga raced to the hospital, storming into the office of Dr. Martin, a family friend and the hospital's trusted physician. His face was etched with concern as he explained that Ma Enanga's condition was stable, but she needed a major heart surgery to recover fully. Limunga's heart sank, but she was determined to do whatever it took to secure the funds for the surgery.

With the looming medical expenses, Limunga intensified her job search. She submitted applications to various offices in Batoke, hoping to secure a more stable income. However, her lack of formal education limited her job prospects.

After a week of fruitless job hunting, Limunga felt disheartened. Ma Enanga's health continued to deteriorate, and Limunga was desperate to find a way to raise funds quickly. She made the difficult decision to return to her store, despite the challenges posed by frequent power outages, which often led to spoiled fish.

One day, while Limunga was at her fish store, a group of government officials arrived in Batoke. They announced that a major construction project was planned for the area, and it would involve building a large dam to harness the power of a nearby river for electricity generation. The dam would bring much-needed development and prosperity to the region.

However, there was a catch. The proposed dam's location meant that several homes and businesses in Batoke, including Limunga's fish store, would have to be relocated or demolished to make way for the project. The government offered compensation for affected residents, but it was far from adequate to rebuild their lives.

Limunga was faced with a difficult decision. The prospect of the dam promised economic growth for the entire region, but it also threatened to uproot her from the life she had built in Batoke. She had to weigh the benefits of progress against the deep roots she had in her community and the responsibility she felt for her grandmother's well-being.

As the village debated the project's merits and drawbacks, and as tensions rose between those who supported the dam and those who opposed it, Limunga found herself at the center of a profound dilemma. The unexpected turn of events forced her to confront the complex intersection of development, tradition, and personal sacrifice in the African setting of Batoke, where the future of her community and her own destiny hung in the balance.

For weeks, villagers gathered beneath the village's ancient baobab tree, engaging in heated debates about the impending development. The dam promised access to electricity, job opportunities, and improved infrastructure, but it also meant the displacement of families and businesses, including Limunga's cherished fish store.

The government's compensation offers were meager, barely enough in a place where opportunities were scarce. Limunga, torn between her responsibility to her grandmother and her longing for a better life, became a symbol of the village's struggle.

As the face of the opposition, Limunga organized meetings to discuss alternative solutions. She collaborated with Ewube and Ndeki, who had become her pillars of support, and together they sought the counsel of village elders. The elders, who carried the wisdom of generations, shared their concerns about the potential consequences of the dam on the village's delicate ecosystem and the displacement of its residents.

Limunga's efforts garnered attention beyond the village. Environmental activists and journalists began visiting Batoke, further intensifying the debate. The situation escalated when peaceful protests erupted, with villagers demanding fair compensation, thorough environmental assessments, and a say in the dam's design and construction.

As the documentary gained international attention, pressure mounted on the government to reassess the project's implications. Advocacy groups and NGOs joined the cause, providing legal support and resources to ensure the villagers' rights were protected.

In the midst of this whirlwind, Ma Enanga's health deteriorated further, and Limunga found herself torn again between her duty to her grandmother and her commitment to the village's fight for justice. It was a heart-wrenching decision, and Limunga questioned whether her dreams of a better life were worth the pain and uncertainty that had engulfed her.

The unexpected twist of the dam project had transformed Limunga from a humble fishmonger into a formidable advocate for her community. She faced a profound moral dilemma, navigating the complexities of progress, tradition, and personal sacrifice in the setting of Batoke. As the world watched, the fate of the village hung in the balance, and Limunga's choice would have far-reaching consequences for herself and those she loved.

One ordinary Friday morning, Limunga received an unexpected phone call from an unknown number. It was Mukete Pauline, calling from the Community Radio House. After reviewing Limunga's resume, they offered her a job hosting a new radio show called "Melancholy." The show's focus was on inspiring people facing life's struggles. Overjoyed and grateful, Limunga accepted the job offer.

The job gave Limunga a sense of purpose she had never felt before. She realized that she now had a platform to help others who were going through challenges similar to hers. Limunga's newfound role as a radio host allowed her to connect with people, offer advice, and motivate them to overcome adversity.

Limunga's financial situation improved as she received a steady weekly salary from her radio job. She continued to run her fishery business, earning profits from selling dried and smoked fish. With her determination, she managed to save money for Ma Enanga's impending surgery.

As Limunga used her radio show to inspire others, she found strength in her own struggles. She had come a long way from her days at the fish market, and she was no longer defined solely by her circumstances. Limunga had found her voice and her place in the world, proving that strength and resilience knew no gender or limitations.

And so, with her heart filled with hope, Limunga continued to face life's challenges head-on, knowing that she could inspire others to do the same. Her story became a beacon of hope for Batoke, a testament to the power of determination and the unwavering spirit of a young woman who refused to be defined by the limitations society tried to impose on her.

Key:

[1] Pa: Commonly used as a suffix before male elders as a symbol of respect. Ma is it's female counterpart.

[2] Ewondo skirt: A skirt so-named as it is thought to have originated from the Ewondo tribe in the Cameroon grasslands. It comprises of an elastic waist and a flares of brightly-colored Ankara or kitenge fabric that flows all the way down. Famous because of its comfort and how easy it is to put on.

[3] Egusi: Melon seeds. Many people in the rural communities make a living by harvesting them, peeling and selling. They cost more when sold peeled.

[4] kwacoco: the traditional meal of most villages in the southern region of Cameroon, made from

cocoyams, palm oil and fish.