

“This Faithful Evening”

“When will the cake be baked, Mom?” My younger brother whined. I awoke from my slumber at the sound of "cake" and sprinted into the living room, hoping she had already begun to bake. Mother had been wanting to bake for more than a year, but this was the first time she had tried. Considering that Mother wasn't the finest baker, she had to call her sister, Auntie Ngozi, for advice on how to follow the recipe. We always loved the pork pies and sausage rolls she could only make as pastries. Mother said in Igbo, "You and Chisom would have to go the market first to buy garri and some other things for me." "Ooohh!" Nathan grumbled and groaned.

"Mummy, good morning" I greeted and she replied, "Chisom, you're just waking up". It was about 12:30 pm. During school holidays, I was allowed to wake up late. On normal school days, my alarm rang at 5:30 am, I would snooze it till 6, then I would finally arise from my bed that had gotten too warm. "You people are going to the market today" "Ah! So when are we going to start baking the cake then?" I quizzed taking a seat at the dining table as I watched her arrange some books on the brown wooden bookshelf with successive layers of secondary and primary school books of my brothers and I. Whenever I wanted to relive our childhood memories, I went to the bookshelf and compared our old handwriting to the jargon we wrote in textbooks that we thought made sense at the time, as well as the sketches we created of each other. They were all entertaining to me. "We'll start as soon as you get back from the market," she added, her voice tinged with trepidation. I was starting to wonder if we were going to bake the cake again. It was around 2 p.m., and Nathan and I still hadn't finished our duties. Saturdays were set aside for cleaning, which included cleaning the toilets, mopping the floors, doing laundry, sweeping the compound, and washing dishes. It was about 2 p.m. and Nathan and I were still not done with our chores. Two of the latter were our regular daily tasks. At 4 p.m., we were halfway through and still hadn't baked the cake. My mother, impatient, asked us to hurry to the market before everything was sold out.

On a small sheet of paper, she wrote the items we were to buy and we headed to the market. This was the second time Nathan and I came to the busy market ourselves, Mother was tired of shielding us and wanted to expose us to the real world. This was her way of doing it: sending us to the market. We arrived at the first stall, with Garri first on our list. "Oga, we want to buy garri. How much for one kilo?" I asked looking at the young-looking man. "Nine Hundred!" He affirmed.

"Ah, make I pay you Seven Hundred" I bargained. "Ahh! Small girl, na money you call o, but it no fit buy 1 kilo garri" he said and I stared at him, giving him my cutest eyes so he could agree, After all, puppy dog eyes worked in movies, didn't they? "Oga, please na" I pleaded and he turned his face to another side, giving me the "aunty come dey go" look. And I did so begrudgingly. "Your garri sef no good" I muttered. I walked to the next stall and the seller had agreed to sell it to me for Seven Hundred Naira, after so much bargaining.

The pepper came next. Mother had specified a specific type of pepper. They were those long, short ones that came in green and crimson. We looked at the market but couldn't find any, so we got conventional ones. I could feel the eyes of young boys and men burning holes into me as we walked along the muddy aisle of the market with numerous tables lined on both sides, each vendor showcasing what they had to sell, so I looked forward and put on a stern expression. We walked past them, secretly inspecting the vendors' tomatoes as they called us to come and buy them. "Oh, Madam! "I have a fresh tomato right here!" A woman screamed. We eventually discovered one that was somewhat good, as opposed to the other terrible ones we had seen. Some were not rotten but were simply too small, and Mother would send me back to the store where I bought them to collect her money. The sun had cooled down after a hard day at the market. Instead, we were greeted with pleasant weather. "Obudu! Obudu!" As we neared a blue bus, a conductor yelled. We jumped in and were on our way back home, eager to create the long-awaited cake. "Isn't it illegal for someone to smell this way?" The stink from the bus conductor's armpit was smothering me. "Who even asked me to sit near him?" Mentally, I grumbled. Nathan was seated behind me, between two women. I turned to glance at him, wondering if he was seeing what I was seeing, but his gaze was fixated elsewhere. "Bring una Transport Fare!" The conductor lifted his arm, pleading with the customers to pay their transportation costs. As his armpit was now in full view, I lowered my head and scrunched my nose. I looked at the ' stop' sign, which I used to indicate our intersection, and told the conductor I was stopping there, relieved that I would be rid of the noxious odor originating from his armpits. The conductor slapped his hands on the side of the bus through the glass to notify the driver, who then came to a stop. "Jesus! Omo! The last time this conductor had a bath was a year ago". When I yelled, Nathan started laughing. But it was no laughing matter; the conductor needed a bath and some deodorant.

We returned home with bags of the stuff we had purchased and placed them where they belonged. Mother was pleased, so we began baking the cake when she contacted Aunty Ngozi. The cake mixture was ready after hours of tossing and whisking. Mother brought out her large gas cooker with an oven, while a pot of stew that was still cooking rested next to the large gas. She then placed the cake batter in the oven and it began to bake while I went to stir the pot of stew now and then. "Mummy, when will it be ready?" Nathan inquired, his mouth-watering. "Within the next hour, depending on the speed of the gas," Mother said, dispersing to her chamber. "Chisom, make sure you're turning this stew off," she hollered as she entered the room.

"Mummy! "I'm smelling something in the parlor," Nathan said 35 minutes after our mother left the kitchen. When I heard the creak of Mother's chamber door as she opened it, I dropped the video I was watching on my phone and dashed to the kitchen, pretending to be stirring the stew. She got to the kitchen in thirty seconds. "Oh, Chisom, are you turning this stew?" "Good job," she said, and I nodded innocently, immediately sensing the odor of gas. Mother gazed confusedly through the translucent glass of the oven, verifying whether the flames were still on, as I searched the kitchen for its source. Alas! My gaze was eventually drawn to the source! The cylinder hose had unexpectedly become disconnected from the gas. However, getting sight of it resulted in an immediate explosion. Gboa! My face and torso immediately caught fire, and I found myself outside the kitchen. I must have run out. Everything was moving so quickly. While Nathan went to call our father, I ran out screaming. "Mummy! "Come on out!" I shouted this while peering through the flames for her. I received no response. With pains all over my body, I hurried out of the home into our neighbor's to seek assistance and to use their tap because we didn't have any water in our house.

I turned on their faucet quickly, and the rush of water on my legs felt like hot water had been dumped over my body. I screamed, and people gathered, all wondering what was wrong. When I told them our kitchen had caught fire, they all gasped. I looked down at my injured leg, which was peeling the most. The fire had barely made a small inroad. My entire face felt as if I had applied Aboniki balm to it. Daddy dashed into the neighbor's house in search of me. "Chisom, are you okay?" He inquired, "Daddy, no!" I'm in pain! "Where has Mummy gone?" The water was still rushing when I yelled. People had already gathered at my residence, and some stayed to ease my

anguish with their "sorry" and "it's okay" statements. "Your mother is fine, she's out of the fire," he assured me, and my heart plummeted. "Are your eyes affected?" he asked again, and my anger swelled. "Just hurry up and take me to the hospital!" I screamed, and a neighbor agreed, getting out of his car and inviting me in. Mother was also invited to join me in our next-door neighbor's car. My heart was at peace when I saw her, but it broke when she started crying on the way to the hospital. I couldn't blame her; the lack of water made the discomfort intolerable. Nothing could express how I felt. It seemed like a nightmare, and I needed to get out of there as soon as possible. We traveled to the nearest hospital with my father in the passenger seat and my neighbor in the driver's seat, while Nathan was left alone in the house after the fire was out. I sobbed uncontrollably on the way to the hospital.

We arrived thirty minutes later and slowly exited the car, taking care not to injure our legs any further. We were given a chair outside the hospital, and a nurse approached us, asking us our names, ages, medical conditions, and so much more. I was already irritated with the nurse for taking too long to fill out the documents; we needed to see a doctor as soon as possible. "OK, you can go in," he murmured, removing the blood pressure monitor he'd wrapped around my aching arm. We sadly followed my father into the hospital. He asked the nurse receptionist for two seats to sit on while we wallowed in pain as we waited for the doctor.

I licked my upper lip and saw that it had been badly affected. My hair had been burned as I reached for it with my hands, and some black particles dropped out. "So now I'm going to have to cut my hair?" I asked myself. I began to speak in tongues, my lips quivering as I did. A nurse was on her way to see us soon. He briefly chatted with my father and asked us what had transpired. That had to be the most annoying question for me. "Oga start the treatment and stop asking questions!" I wanted to say but restrained myself. My father narrated to him what had happened. He had a look at our legs and began to prescribe different drugs that my father had to buy from their pharmacy down the road. I looked around me, and all I saw were different sick people who had worse cases than mine. I sang praises to God in my heart, grateful to be alive. I watched my mother's leg swell before my eyes while it was still hurting. It broke my heart to see her cry. "What if Nathan and I had not requested cake?" "What if we Aunty Ngozi had not taught mummy how to bake the cake?" All these what-ifs ran through my head.

Daddy returned with the available drugs and was sent to a different pharmacy to get more. A nurse clad in blue scrubs and crocs on her feet approached us and administered injections to us one after the other. I was terrified of the syringe and screamed lightly when it was punctured into my skin: My body was reminded of the pain it came with. I had not taken a shot since my JSS2 days. The nurse did the same for my mother yet the burning sensation did not stop. I bowed my head to the desk in front of me and cried for a little while, while mother was on the phone with my brothers who had traveled abroad to complete their Education- Tony, and William together with Nathan who was still left in the house after the fire had been quenched. They were on a WhatsApp group call. I was given the phone to speak with them. "Hello, Nathan Are you there?" I asked, I had missed him a lot. I craved a back rub as that would distract me from the pain I was feeling but got none as mother was in pain too and daddy had gone out to get more drugs. He was the only one who would have been willing to give me one but sadly wasn't with us in the hospital. "Yes, Chisom, I'm here" replied Nathan which was followed by a loud cry from him. At that moment, I regretted every fight I once had with Nathan, cherishing all the good times we had together. "Nathan" "Nathan listen to me, please stop crying" I tried to pacify this twelve-year-old. It hadn't occurred to me that he loved me this much. We talked for a long time when the sobbing stopped, with Tony and William supporting me with words. When I spoke with them, I felt at ease. I handed the phone back to my mother, who said a few words to them before hanging up.

I turned to look over the table where I had rested my head while crying, which had burned parts of my hair on it. A different nurse came in and put us on drips, informing us we were going to sleep at the hospital, which we did. Mother's clothing for the next day's church service was now useless. "If I survived this, there's nothing I can't handle" I muttered and drifted to sleep. I flickered my eyes open. The bright light blurred my vision and I rubbed my eyes regretting it afterward as my eyelids were slightly burnt too. I turned to my side and saw my mother sitting as she stared into space. My legs didn't hurt as much as it hurt last night. I realized the things I had taken for granted; the use of my legs. I was ever so grateful that I didn't lose my life and could walk after a few days. The wounds healed but the scars never left, a pointer that I was a survivor and a reminder that God was always faithful.