

THE HAPPY NOISEMAKER PRIZE FOR STORYTELLING

Ujunwa

UCHENNA ONYISHI

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I am writing this now because for the first time since the day I arrived in Enugu with my husband, Ebuka Agu, and our daughter, Binyelum, I am able to breathe again. Binyelum was two-years-old at the time. And she was a fragile little girl with pale-yellow skin and hair and faded blue eyes; an unforgiving contrast next to my deep and gleaming black skin. And for as long as I could, I occupied myself with protecting her from a world that wanted her to know that she was different.

Five years have passed since that day. And tomorrow, I turn thirty.

Enugu has not stopped raining since the last time Ebuka and I fought, after I tried to make love to him and he refused to touch me. It was cold that night. As is often the case whenever Enugu's skies welcome a parade of clouds looking to shed weight.

He was looking over the company's annual budget at the oak wood table by the bedside, when I walked into the room. He barely paid attention to me. Except for the little glance he took to make sure I closed the heavy-duty door he had installed a few months ago, after the senior pastor at our church shared a revelation he had received about an attempted robbery in our home. He also made sure to install security cameras around the home, and solar panels that will keep the entire system up during a power cut.

Ebuka's father had bought their home in Independence Layout from a good friend of his, a retired Major General, who needed to fund his

interest in the governorship election. But when the General's convoy was ambushed, and he was killed, Ebuka's father was in the car with him.

And so, Ebuka's mother would send him to a private boarding school in London when he was only sixteen, to protect him from all the noise that followed his father's passing.

That was around the time I met Ebuka for the first time. I had just transferred from an all girls school. He was quiet. And mostly kept to himself in class. But came alive in the second term when he joined the school's football team.

Until then, I never really cared to watch football. But after my best friend Adaora invited me to one of our matches against a rival school, and I watched Ebuka become a different person on the field, I knew then that I was never going to miss any of his games again.

But Ebuka stopped playing and discussing football after he tore a muscle in his left thigh during one of our school's matches, and his mother flew in from Enugu to see the headmaster. After his surgery, when he came back to school, he spent most of his time in the library. And that was when he really noticed me for the first time.

I would go back to the library everyday hoping he was there, so that we could talk about all the cities in the world we wanted to visit to read a page of our favorite books in. He talked about Tokyo and Japanese literature. And how candidly they wrote about an ordinary life and its endings. He hated Nigeria's politics. But always insisted that Nigerians wrote the best stories. Because to be Nigerian is to be born with a strong desire to be heard.

He was always sure of himself. I never understood why. But being sure came to Ebuka like death.

On the days that he was not in the library, I would seat there alone and read his copy of Chimamanda's Purple Hibiscus. He had given it to me to read because he believed that Chimamanda was writing about him; "Jaja and I are the same person," he would say.

And one day after he had kissed me for the first time, all over my body, after he told me his mother had visited London and he was going to spend the Autumn break with her, Ebuka left school and did not come back.

Enugu is still pouring. And all the raining has kept me worried.

Ebuka has been away for a week now. And I can leave the heavy duty door that has kept in all our secrets open. I also leave the windows with the cold-white linen curtains he bought from Istanbul open. But I do not change the channel on his favorite radio station when I turn it on.

I have come to appreciate how local the news on the radio is. How flirtatious the radio hosts are with each other. And for a brief moment, I imagine he is in bed with me; him in his blue trunks and white t-shirt, and me, with nothing on, because he always managed to undress me before I could do anything about his clothes.

The song on the radio has abruptly ended. And the radio hosts are not flirting with each other anymore.

They are as serious as harmattan.

“Breaking News! An Eastern Airline flight from Abuja to Enugu damaged its wheels during landing and skidded off the runway at the Akanu Ibiam International Airport.”

There was a similar incident last month and everyone made it out alive, except for Prof. Kanayo Okpara, a retired Dean at the University of Nigeria Nsukka, who suffered a heart attack during all the commotion. And for weeks, he would be the topic of conversation among debaters that called into the radio station.

There were talks then, between the Federal Airports Authority of Nigeria and the Enugu State government, to shut down the airport for maintenance on the runway. But the State government were concerned that it would cause serious congestions on the road, and compromise the flow of passengers into and out of Enugu. So they opted to begin work on the airport at the end of the rainy season.

But the government official that was brought in for an interview to the radio station insists that the governor advised his cabinet to close the airport for two weeks so that the potholes on the runway can be covered; another caller wants to know why the government needs two weeks to cover potholes; a mother of three details her experience coming back from London with her children and how they almost had a similar experience. And she wants to know why a new airport should need maintenance on its runway.

The man on the phone now is grilling the government official. He wants to know if he would defend the governor's inactions if his family were on the flight. They go on for a while.

"I am a father! It is my duty to protect my family from all types of threats." His voice, an endless thunderclap is interrupted by a woman crying in the background.

"Why are you people not reporting what is going on here!" He continues.

"I am at the airport now. I came here to pick up my family. We all came here. Why are you people not reporting what is on ground?"

The government official interjects. "Sir, we are waiting to verify the news we are receiving on the ground from all relevant authorities."

"What do you mean! There is fire. There is nothing to verify. There is fire everywhere and the firemen are on strike because..."

The man is interrupted again. This time by a commercial break.

"Ije Awele by Chief Osita Osadebe" now plays on the radio. And for a second I thought I would hear Ebuka's voice. Highlife in our home often came bundled together with stories about Ebuka's father and his time selling used clothes in Sabon Gari Market in Kano State.

"Nigerians leave their home and travel all over the world in search of opportunities. That is why *The Doctor of Hypertension* made this song ——— It is a song about coming home."

He would be quiet for a while, before he continued.

Most days I listened attentively to his stories. But on the days that I do not want to be reminded of the past, he would turn off the radio, pull me close until my head is resting on his chest, and say;

“I heard talking helps get rid of some of the shadows.” I smile a little even though he cannot see it. But I do not know that he is ready for all the truth that I want to tell him about me and all the misfortunes I have used to hold his wish for another child hostage.

The song has now come to an end. My deep red Rimowa suitcase on the bed is packed, but I keep looking around our room for things I may be forgetting. I should weigh my bag I think to myself. I should leave Binyelum’s things here. They are too small for her now. And I have no use for them. But I take them anyways. She will let me know when she does not need them any longer.

Parents should listen to their children more, I think to myself. I should have listened to Binyelum when she told me she was too tired for school that morning. But Binyelum was always tired. Unless Ebuka was around. Then she had the spirit of a wild panther.

I am tired too. I thought being alone would help but it has not. I am tired of the silences that has replaced the laughters that Ebuka and I used to share with each other.

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Mama Ebuka, my husband's mother, holds two truths very close to her noticeably large chest. The first is that a good woman puts the needs of her family above her own. A convenient truth for a woman that only had one son before her husband passed away. And the second, that I am the reasonable young woman who convinced her son to leave London and come back home to be closer to his mother. But I never wanted to leave London. I had a life that belonged to me there.

London birthed my interest in writing, and cradled it in its second hand bookstores. It was where I wanted to raise Binyelum. And Enugu was supposed to be a babysitter that came and went when I needed a break from my child. But Enugu had become the mother of my child. And it and everything that came with it took turns in mothering my child until the day they killed her; or the day one of the teachers at the nursery school Mama Ebuka insisted Binyelum should attend, put her to bed shortly after lunch and she did not wake up. As they preferred to tell it.

Ebuka and his mother were talking to the proprietor about next steps. He had rushed back home from Abuja the previous night, and they were discussing how to quietly manage the situation. We had argued the previous night about taking legal actions against the school. But he did not want our private lives to become public business.

I could not take my eyes away from his freshly cut fingernails. He was holding my hands. An old habit he developed when we were in school.

His nails were freshly cut. Quite differently from how I usually cut them. I did not like them too short. And I always made sure to file them after I cut them so that the sharp edges do not dig into my walls when he put his fingers inside me.

“Please, is there a way for us to handle this matter without involving the police.” The proprietor asked. “The teachers involved have been sacked. They are not with us anymore.” He repeated.

We were in that office for three hours. Each hour longer than the one that came before it. And the proprietor never looked at me. Instead, he kept his eyes on the two people he knew wanted a less extreme conclusion. And I kept mine on Ebuka’s fingernails.

When we got up to leave, he thanked Ebuka and Mama for their understanding. He wanted to thank me, but there was nothing to thank me for. He got the silence he wanted. Nobody was going to speak up for Binyelum. And no one was going to hear what happened to her on the radio and shake their head in disgust. Instead, her story would spread in the dark, from mouth to ear, slowly changing form; Binyelum died in her sleep. She was asthmatic like her mother. Just as the proprietor waved goodbye to us, his eyes met mine, and he hurried them away.

London was where I thought Ebuka and I would start our family. But somewhere between landing on his knees and rushing back to Abuja on a business trip, Ebuka had decided, for us, that Enugu would be home until he was able to restructure his father’s business and free up his time, enough for us to move to wherever we saw fit.

He had also decided that he would tell his mother that it was my idea. That I was the one who insisted on us coming back to Enugu, because it was the right thing to do. He said that she would adore me for it; for how reasonable and understanding I was. And for a while, she did.

But after five years, after they took Binyelum away from me and deprived me of proper justice, after Ebuka learned about the things I had done to myself without his consent, and Mama Ebuka moved into our home in Independence Layout and occupied the room on the top floor that shared

a wall with our room, after Ebuka started spending less time at home and more time in Abuja, I was ready for my final act.

My name is Ujunwa. And in exactly twenty-four hours, on the eve of my birthday, at which point Enugu's rain must have receded, I am going to leave Ebuka and return to my family in London. And I will call my fiancé, Arthur, the white man that my mother said I should think twice before marrying, to apologize for walking out on the life that we never stopped talking about, before Ebuka jumped out from my past and landed on his knees, with a ring and a plan for a future that I was too stunned to think through.

Arthur is with someone else now. My best friend Adaora. She called me, three years ago, to break the news to me. And when I did not pick up her calls, she wrote to me with details of how things came to be between her and Arthur. I read her emails. All five of them. Each one, a little more resolved than the one before it. Until they stopped coming.

Now, I listen carefully to the names being called on the radio. I listen the same way I have listened to my phone all week, expecting to hear from Ebuka. I listen because the hosts had not said a word since "Ije Awele" ended. And when they finally said something, they asked their listeners to pay close attention while they try their best to go through all the names of the people on the passenger manifest of Eastern Airline Flight EAN7208 from Abuja to Enugu.

I am sitting on the bed with Binyelum's drawings in hand, as they continue to call out the names. I found them in Ebuka's briefcase while tidying up our room.

And as I go through the drawings, I take note of their titles and smile at Binyelum's playful mixing of letters.

"dAddY LAuGHiNG",

I want to take the drawings with me. But I know I should not.

“dAddy ANd MoMMY”.

Binyelum made sure that Ebuka sat for each of them whenever he came back from one of his long trips abroad.

“dAddy THiNkiNG”.

And she also made sure he promised to never lose them.

“dAddy ANd His RAdio”.

I listen to the radio host as he repeats each name two times before moving on to the next. I listen, half wondering if I would hear a familiar name, as all the memories of the last five years hurry back to me.