

CHETANNA *(REMEMBER...)*

A Story By Soma Obianom.

Prologue .

"I am not ready, sir... please.. You promised to give me time!" my legs continued shaking like a five year old child holding pee in his bladder and about to release it speedily through his penis. Beads of sweat dropped into my mouth.

"You say?" He moved closer. At this point, I knew if I uttered another word, he would dash the most resounding slap on my face.

"I can't do it, sir. Please, I beg of you. I would pay you some other way." I cried. I surprisingly did not have tears rolling down my cheeks, though. I guess twenty one year old guys do not cry. Except that this was worse. It was my heart that bled. My soul ached. It was an inexplicable pain. I knelt in front of this huge, robust, pot bellied man.

"For every " no" you say, always remember there would be dire consequences. *Anuofia*." He cursed. There was no time Mr Okafor did not curse at me. My family had always depended on him. His family. His money. Their money. Yes, their money.

I lay down on the bed that night and began to ponder on how I got here. How— My phone rang.

God..Why was everything this tough? Did— My phone rang again.

" *igbo boy*, you would not pick your phone?" I knew Ikande was going to complain. He hated any noise during his nap. Sundays were the only time we had to ourselves. Ikande was my roommate. The first and only friend I made, when I got here. Infact, he was the only Yoruba guy Mr Okafor had taken in, amongst ten others. Everyone called him "IK" for short. This made him feel among and feel igbo too but when he opened his mouth to speak, his yoruba accent always gave him away.

I stretched to take my Nokia phone on the opposite side of my bed. I stared at its cracked screen. It was Adaobi. Yes, Adaobi. My sister. My twin sister. The only reason I came here in the first place.

"Ada, are you good?" I asked her, worriedly.

"*Hian.. Che Che..*" Ada was the one person who called me "*Che Che*" in the entire world. Funny how I hated it when we were all one happy family but right now, it was the one thing that made me feel at home.

"I should be asking you. You know it's time for our prayer, or have you forgotten?" she responded.

"oh..." I rubbed my eyes with my hands. Can I really do this? Give up my only family? A memory flash came through my head. It was my dad squeezing my hands in the hospital and just before he gave up the ghost, he struggled to mutter the words to me.. "In everything you do, *Che*, *CHETANNA*. Remember your father, *Nna*. Always remember Christ.."

He gave his final breath.

Morning and night..

I have often seen life as a sketch of occurrences. Different strokes for different folks, they always say. Well, my family had it's own sketch, stroked with the pencils of poverty. For all my twenty years on earth, I've always thought of how money made us it's prime enemy. If the family of Obiora featured in a movie, money would definitely be our antagonist. Except that this, this was no movie. This was reality. My family came from abject poverty.

"Our father in heaven, we thank you for this marvelous meal you have set before us. We thank you because even when there is a casting down, your children can say still say there is a lifting up. We love and appreciate you for this meal. May it nourish our bodies as we eat. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, we pray. Amen". Papa cleared his throat as we all chorused "Amen" In response. I looked at the meal placed in front of us, on our centre wooden table in the parlour and thought of how much work papa had done to get this sumptuous meal of *eba and Egusi* soup, right before us. I admired my father. Sometimes, I feared that I may not become half the man he is. He was the sole bread winner of our family. Mama could hardly do any strenuous work or activities because of her health conditions. Still, she made sure we were all satisfied and tried her best to support papa. Papa chewed so loudly and picked his fingers one after the other.

"Nkem, You cooked this soup so well." He remarked. Mama smiled and kept on eating. You could tell she was pleased with how he acknowledged her efforts. It's the way he always called her "*Nkem*", for me. Which means "*my own or mine*" in igbo. I admired their love. It was so pure and genuine. The way they submitted to each other in love. A love devoid of pride or one that has this African mentality of a man being over superior to the woman in a home. Yes, mama was submissive to papa but papa respected mama too. This was because their love was built on the foundation of Christ. I wanted a love like their own, nothing more or less. I kept smiling at them till Adaobi pinched me.

"Che Che, I'll eat your meat o. This one you're smiling and eating slowly." Adaobi was my "second half" or should I say my "better half?". My *Ejima*. We were always at loggerheads. Matter of fact, this was one of the reasons mama made us start eating from the same plate.

"So that you would learn to love and tolerate each other." she said teasingly to us, one day. We both thought it was a joke till we found ourselves eating from the same plate since we were fifteen and now, five years later, we're still at it.

"C'mon leave my meat. What's your own business? Haven't you eaten your own?" I pushed her hands away from the plate.

"These children ehn.." mama sighed.

"Cheta, did you later deliver the cans?" papa asked

"Yes papa. I've given them to mama Ebube. She said she would come and see you later to pay up the balance". Papa's countenance changed.

"This woman and always owing ehn.. She's still owing the money for the last ones I gave to her. It was because of her I set out early in the morning to pick those cans and wash them well. I don't know why people are like this"

"when did she say she would come and see your father? Did she give an exact day or time?" mama asked me.

"No, she didn't" I replied.

"It is well." Mama sighed.

One of the many "occupations" my father did was to gather used cans on the road, wash them so that they become as good as new and sell them to specific people. Some of them already knew papa for this. Some of them like Mama Ebube who used it to package the groundnuts she sold.

"I will see her when we get back." papa said. Get back? I turned to Adaobi who gave me the *"I don't also know what he's talking about"* look and then I turned to mama.

"Get back from where?" I asked.

"Nkem, you didn't tell them?" papa turned to mama.

"*Ewoooo*. I forgot. Your father and I are going to Mr Okafor's side in Onitsha. He said we should come this time and collect what he asked us to."

"Collect what?" I was really confused at this point and Adaobi looked the same.

"The money for you and Adaobi's acceptance fee, Nna." papa responded.

"Ha! Thank God. So we're finally going to school this year! Thank you Jesus.!" Ada squealed in excitement. I don't know why I felt indifferent about this one. I mean, I didn't want to seem like an ingrate. Mr Okafor has literally been the one helping my family since papa met him, three years ago. It was one of those mornings he set about, picking cans on the road that he bumped into him. According to papa, he was in a big Lexus jeep when he wound down the tinted glass of his car and asked papa what he was doing early that morning. He surprisingly took interest in papa and papa, in excitement, invited him that day to the house. Mr Okafor was a big business man and he dealt majorly with importation and exportation of electrical goods. His visit to *nnewi* that day, was to come see the place he had under construction for the retail distribution of his electrical electronics. There and then, Mr Okafor placed papa in charge of his retail shop, here at *nnewi* and offered to pay him a fifteen thousand naira stipend, monthly, depending on how sales were. My father and mother were delighted to hear this. I was delighted also too, but..

"There's just something I don't like about that man" I told Adaobi later that day.

"I think we can just decide to trust him, since papa and mama clearly do. I believe God is in control."

"Yeah.. He is.." I replied almost hesitantly.

Three years passed, and Mr Okafor decided that he was moving his business fully to onitsha. This meant that papa was going to be cut off the fifteen thousand naira stipends he usually received, monthly. Papa beckoned on Mr Okafor to allow him work, till I and Adaobi entered school but Mr Okafor insisted that he had to "urgently" move the entire business to onitsha and unless papa wanted to move with him to do the work there, there was nothing he could do. Papa explained to him how he couldn't leave his family and move to another town to permanently work there. Since then, Mr Okafor never got in touch with my father, until...

"He called on Emma's phone yesterday" papa continued. "He also apologized for how things turned out. I told him how hard things have been and he asked that I and your mother come to his place, at Onitsha for old times sake and also collect the money for you and Adaobi's acceptance fee".

"It's okay, Che. We're going to be back the next day, *inugo?* ." mama patted my back. I assumed she noticed how uneasy I felt.

"Also be checking Emma's phone for our calls. I have told him already". Papa said.

Emma or *pa Emma* as I and Adaobi called him, was a middle aged man who ran a call center just in front of our compound. It was what he did for a living but because of how close him and papa were, we often made calls there for free as we did not have any cellphones in our house.

"It is well. God would continue to take care of us. He always does." papa looked hopeful. Maybe I was being paranoid. Maybe, I should keep my fingers crossed, trust God and hope for the best. At least, that wouldn't kill me. I let out a deep sigh as I watched the lantern light gradually fade.

" We're out of kerosene. Ada, quickly take these plates to the kitchen then come let us pray" mama said.

Yes, prayer. One thing my family lived by. It was our culture, our way of life. It was the only thing we knew. Christ, was the only thing we knew. We

were truly a family that stayed together because we prayed together. Even till death.

"Don't forget to take the bitter leaf inside when it dries o, Ada. In case rain falls. It is what we're going to use for our next soup. You people should stay well o biko and pray. Don't forget." Mama kept tying and retying her wrapper as she moved towards our Volkswagen with papa continually honking to indicate he was still waiting for her. This Volkswagen had been passed down from generation to generation. My father inherited it from his father, who inherited it from his father. Sometimes, I would often think it could disintegrate on the road as a result of its over use.

"There is small Egusi in the pot. I left it there for you and Ada. Che, Take care of your sister" Mama looked at me. Those last words, hit different to me, I don't know why. This wasn't the first time mama had said I should "take care of my sister" but this time, it was like her expression had a deeper meaning and for some reason, I felt this overwhelming aura of responsibility on my shoulders.

"I will, mama.. I will" I replied her and then I hugged her. I was not one for hugs. Pretty sure mama had been surprised. She hugged me back. Tightly. I almost had tears rolling down my cheeks. *"oga, better man up! Wetin be this? Na just today them dey travel o"* my subconscious teased me. Immediately I heard that, I pulled back. True, that. They were going for just a day. So why all this mushy drama especially from my end?

"Nwa mommy" my father teased me from inside the car. Yes, I was "Nwa mommy", my mother's child. I had always been closer to mama. Adaobi was papa's baby. No favouritism in our family, whatsoever but it was always like that. I guess there are just some things that just be, you know. No explanations whatsoever as to why they are that way.

"Good evening, Sir." I greeted *pa* Emma the evening of that same day, mama and papa traveled to Onitsha.

" *Che boy*, how are you?". He chewed his chewing stick so aggressively, as he put things in order to close for the day. *Pa* Emma was always with his chewing stick. They were like five and six. Sometimes, I wondered if he ate actual food because all he was found chewing, was his chewing stick.

"I am fine, Sir". I replied.

"Your daddy have not call yet. I know that is why you come here. How is ya sister?". Unlike my dad, *pa* Emma didn't know how to speak fluent English and he had this konk Igbo accent. Papa once said he told him how he never got to finish his primary school education as his parents died when he was really young and left him as an orphan. He lived with his wicked aunt ever since.

"oh...okay sir" i replied rather confused and unknowingly ignoring the "how is ya sister?" part.

"please let me know if they call, sir" I continued and slowly started walking away.

".Greet Ada for me. You peoplelu should stay well *o*, *you hear?*" he called out after me.

"*Oo..*" I said, absentmindedly. I had so many lingering thoughts as I walked back to our compound. How come it took papa and mama this long to call? I knew papa could be caught up in the moment sometimes, but mama never failed to put a call through, no matter where she is. Something did not seem right.

The next thing that woke me up that morning had to be the loudest noise I had ever heard in my entire life. *Pa* Emma's loud knock at the door, nearly brought down the rooftop. I intentionally waited to see if Ada would stand up to answer the door but who was I kidding? Ada never wakes up from her beauty sleep. I lazily struggled to stand up from the bed as the noise became more and more piercing to my ears. I opened the door, and saw *Pa* Emma's face. There's something about facial expressions telling more than mere words could tell. Then it dawned on me.

“What happened?” Ada came out, yawning.

No one said anything. Not me, Not *Pa* Emma, Not Ada. All we did was stare. I looked at Ada, she looked at me. We knew just what had happened. We knew then that the journey had just begun.