

Hello.

My name is Ugonma. I have a story to tell. The story of my life. Make whatever you will of it, but tell it I must. I was born on the 1st day in November, 1955, in the deep ruralness of Ubakala. My parents told me that I was a twin, even though I came out alone, because at the exact moment I came out, another baby girl was born in the next compound. Chiamaka, she was called. We were practically inseparable, and there were mysterious things about us. Like how one would cry when the other one fell down, or how Amaka almost died of a fever when my parents sent me away to my cousins' for a few days. The village loved us because we were dutiful and pretty; just what every mother desired. A few months after my 12th birthday, on an otherwise normal evening, I saw the village headmaster ride his White Horse bicycle into our compound hurriedly. He did not even nod to my *nnoo* (greeting). It was not the first time Mister Ukaegbu, with his unmissable centre pat, had come to speak in hushed tones with Papa. The sessions were always painfully long. Today, after consorting with Papa for a few minutes, Papa's face turned deathly grave. "Ugonma! Ugonma!!" Papa called out to me, just as the headmaster rode away. He asked me to interpret the fast spewing English of the voice on the radio. It was then I began to understand. A war had been declared. I didn't quite understand it. I had never seen a war before. But I was sure that Papa was overreacting. Mama too. She cried until late into the night. Papa had said he was going

to enlist. His eyes were calm, cold shiny glass balls. I was soon to learn of carnage and evil. Papa left in the morning, with Papa Amaka. They set their houses in order and hugged all of us tightly. As I walked Papa to the village square that early morning, a lot of the men had their torches and were ready to go. In the dim dawn, I could only recognize a few faces, all drawn. A tear ran down Amaka's cheek as we walked back home. She said it was an insect in her eye. So tears ran down my own cheeks. We held each other as we walked. I kept saying to her that they would be back soon. I was struggling to believe it myself.

Then the war began.

For the next 24 months, we would come face to face with the wicked realities of battle; two girls fighting for survival as they entered gracelessly into puberty. We ran from village to village, fed on lizards and vegetables during the foodless days. Fear was etched on the faces of the people as clearly as our proud tribal marks. The enemy advanced steadily toward us, killing our men too easily. After what seemed like an eternity, news finally came of the brave men who picked up their lamps that early morning about two years ago, to defend us. That news came on the lips of Handsome, the notorious village drunk. He used to be permanently drunk, staggering around the village telling small children stories of the big mansions he owned in Enugu. On any given evening, he was encircled by his children friends, wide eyed, as he tickled their imaginations. But on this particular day, Handsome was solemn. The whole village gathered around him as he told his tale. I didn't dare go. But Mama went. Throughout the years of *ogbunigwe* (locally made guns), strange big aircrafts above and the "boom!" sounds from varying distances, through the hunger and sleepless nights, holding onto Amaka and saying prayers to God and all the other gods in our village, my heart held on to hope. Hope that eventually, in the end, Papa and Mama and I would return to the measured, peaceful cadence of

our old lives and Amaka would be there too, with whom I would discuss my fears about my rapidly increasing breasts and bottom and my desire to enrol in a big secondary school far from home. But as I bent, picking sticks for firewood, I heard Mama's voice in such a way that it was not hers. Could not be hers. The wailing came closer, and it was unmistakable. Many strong women delivered Mama and Mama Amaka to our compound. They were both incomprehensible, unconsolable, rolling on the ground, shouting uncontrollably and finding time in between to sniff back the mucus threatening to run into their mouths from their noses. I stood there, unmoving, with a piece of now useless firewood in one of my hands, and in the other hand, I gripped the machet way too tightly. Hope had been snatched from me, and there was no one to direct my anger at, except "the war". The summary of Handsome's testimony was that it was not looking good for our men out there. He left the next morning back into the smokes. The war had taught him hardness and determination. His misty, humorous eyes now stood hollow, holding neither sadness nor joy, holding neither fear nor hope. His visit marked the beginning of harder times. Shortly after receiving news of her husband's death, Uloma, Amaka's mother, slept peacefully and did not wake up the next day. She could have died for a plethora of reasons from hunger to grief to the deep sore under her right heel. I hugged Amaka for days, and I was there to hug her and hold her on the nights when she woke up screaming. We heard rumours of Nigerian soldiers approaching. Indeed we didn't need rumours; the "boom! Boom!!" sounds getting closer were enough to convince any Judas among us. News went round the village one night, and we had to pack what was left, to flee in the morning, until scouts came back and assured us our village was safe, for now. The news did not excite Mama. Nothing ever did, since that black day.

A huge collective sigh of relief went up from our village that morning. We all went back to being deathly quiet, and thinking about our next, saltless meal. One last goat was left in our compound, and Mama was going to kill it tonight. So Amaka and I spent the day looking for wild, edible vegetables, the ones still unplucked. If all went well, we would have something that tasted like soup tonight. War sounds sprinkled the day; the sound of faraway explosions and the rapid flight of bullets from their barrels. These were simply not something one could really get used to. Each time I heard it, it was an almost friendly reminder of deaths long gone, of deaths to come. Evening brought that cool breeze, and some more fear. Before it got too dark, Amaka and I went to catch the goat. It was not that hard. We came at the black animal from both sides. Amaka was just starting a conversation behind me. She walked behind me, while I draped the goat on my neck. "When will all this end?" She had become really quiet lately, after her mother passed. It pleased me to see that she wanted to speak this evening. I paused to put my words together, but before I turned to utter them, I heard her piercing scream. I could make out 3 retreating figures already bundling her away into the woods. I let the goat fall down, paralyzed by fear. Had I not given everything? I could make out military uniforms. I knew they must be the Nigerian soldiers. I turned and ran, screaming at the top of my voice, running back to the compound. But powerful hands sealed my screams and lifted me back in the opposite direction. I flailed like a young antelope in the death grip of a predator. No use. A solid blow to my temple slumped me out into sweet darkness.

“But I think mine are bigger”. Laughter. “Amaka *biko*. You’re just jealous. Is it because Ikechi stares at yours every chance he gets?” More laughter. Two girls comparing bosom sizes during the morning shower. “Ugonma! Will you two run out of that place fast!” Mama shouted in Igbo. We ran out with our bodies half wet, still laughing. On that particular occasion, our breast conversation almost made my entire family late to Sunday Morning Mass.

Coming to, I held my head. It was throbbing painfully where the soldier with fat cheeks had hit me. Amaka was sobbing quietly on the other side of the pickup truck. She crawled to me and hugged me fiercely. The truck presently stopped at a clearing. Then the horror began. Two of the men held us and herded us toward the camp. But this was no camp. There was light coming from a suspicious enclave. Muttering sounds from a single man could be heard as we approached. He was stout, round and squatting with his back to us, in a semi circle of white and red cloth, lit by many candles and torches. It was a hastily set up, blood-stained shrine. For the first time since they seized us, the leader of the group, a tall man with aggressive tribal marks and skin like charcoal, spoke. “We have caught two”. The thick shrine man eventually stopped muttering to himself and turned. I will never forget his face. He had a look in his eyes; there was a starkness about his face. It was like he could see through us. He let out a loud, animal-like laughter that echoed boldly around us. The man exuded so much power for someone so short. “Hold this one”, he said. The voice did not seem like it could be coming from someone so small. I couldn’t pace my breathing properly. Once again I began screaming wildly but a soldier shut me up with wide palms. His breath smelt of alcohol. The priest watched with what must have been relish as two soldiers forced Amaka to lie on her back, as if they were prepping her for a surgery. She didn’t stop looking me in the eyes the whole time. From the look in her eyes, I knew she was certain of death. “Promise me you won’t leave me” she said with her eyes. I didn’t dare break my eyes away, but a tear managed to drop from my left eye. Maybe she was already seeing Death, the black, faceless creature, standing over her, trying to communicate a mocking smile through his facelessness.

The priest began.

The soldiers held her down on the ground for him. His eyes were glazed over. All I could do was sob quietly. Amaka, my sister, struggled, but without making a sound. Her legs flailed in futility as the soldiers ripped away the grey skirt she had on. I remember the day Mama bought them from the market at Umuahia, and how Amaka said thank you too many times. The demon priest was muttering incantations as he went into her, with his eyes closed. There was a slight smirk on one soldier’s face; I saw it as the dim light bounced off his face. When he had spent himself, there was a small puddle of blood between Amaka’s shaking legs. Jumping and shouting wildly, he proceeded to the next evil. The darkness that surrounded us was now absolute. A distant bird chirped its last for the night, as the trees swayed to the wooing of the cold evening breeze. The universe seemed to be centred on ten soldiers, an evil witch doctor and two innocent girls. The flames on the candles and wooden torches flickered lazily. The candles had done nothing wrong but I hated them. Hated them for giving light to this madman. I hated air for rushing into his hellish nostrils and sustaining his life.

But it was with rather lively steps that he moved toward Amaka again. When he began, even the voyeur soldier looked away in disgust, his features rumpled by what he saw. Amaka began to scream in pain. Like a sewer rat rummaging for a morsel in a dump, the witch doctor tore through her blouse, a nice blue top with white flower patterns. Then he chewed off each nipple and swallowed the bloody flesh lump. The flower patterned blouse assumed a darker hue, promptly soaked by Amaka's gushing wounds. I watched my best friend scream in agony. She had done nothing to deserve this visit from *ekwensu* (Satan) himself, just as Papa had done nothing. Just like the rest of us. There was no logical explanation for this specific wickedness, or any of the others for that matter. Fear claimed my insides like ice cold water snaking its way through a dried up stream. I kept trying to rationalise. I had to, if I was to hold on to my sanity. I felt suddenly cold; I could hear my own blood rushing furiously within me. The silent pumping drowned out Amaka's screams. The witch doctor rose, his demonic dancing and incantations ringing loudly into the black night. Anyone could see that this man was clearly possessed by and embrace of the darkest evil. As he chanted excitedly, he licked off the blood from the sides of his mouth. His incantations were not in a familiar language. The man was not from around here. "Kai, Oga finish this thing, make we comot here. Haba!" The soldier in charge spoke again as he lit a cigarette and glanced around. Amaka locked eyes with me again. She was slowly bleeding out. I had to blink back my own tears to be able to see clearly. I knelt beside her and held her face in my hands. In another time far flung from this one, this face was tortured by side splitting laughter as we sat with other gullible children in the evening, listening to stories from Handsome. The only discomfort to consider was the weight of the waterpots on our heads on the way back from a far stream, or the sting of the teacher's cane when he caught us nibbling at our *okpa* in the class. Or the too much pepper that sometimes characterised Mama's *egusi* soup. Or the fear that one of the old men would approach Papa for my hand.

Now things had been snatched from me that I thought would belong to me forever. I have even been snatched away myself. My father, ever the smiling face. I imagine he must have fought fearlessly and dragged his wounded self across a field of blood and smoke, determined to come back to us, until he could take it no more. I thought of my mother, her fair skin, supple shoulders and loving but firm correction; the glue that held us together. Only to be stripped of her security and warmth. I imagine her pain even now, as she sits by the evening fire, uncontrollable in sorrow, accepting the reality and wound of another loss. Her precious Ugo. I imagine Amaka's imaginations of losing her father to battle and her mother to a stupid sore, and now silently passing the same dark road herself. I imagine my breasts harvested by dirty, tobacco-stained teeth, my blood to be used in rituals to fortify soldiers as they prepared to take Umuahia. I imagine this smelling short wizard hoisting his thick frame over me. My life would mean nothing in this world. I would have no children. They would now only live in my imagination. I feel my hands shaking presently. It is Amaka's head shivering in them. Her eyes slowly close. She eventually bleeds out, leaving me alone and taking a chunk of my soul with her. "Go well, my sister" I manage to salute her through my cracked voice and shattered hope.

Then the wizard says, "Bring the other one".