

“Na the last price be that?”, I ask in Nigerian pidgin.

It’s no news that if you can not speak the three major languages of Nigeria which are Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa, you speak Pidgin. My Pidgin is a mix of English and amateur Pidgin I have garnered from my University years. My companion knows this from the slight accent in my speech and stifles a guffaw. I panic. I am losing ground, much bargaining ground at that. I fear my bargaining skills will be put into question. In my mind is an imaginary tussle for power and I must claim that ground back. I can not believe this is happening. I wince as I think of how disappointed my mum must be, if there was ever a Warren Buffett of bargaining, mum will be the female version. I remember our long trips to the market, every price had to be scrutinized and compared, priced down to an outrageous amount. This usually ended in me begging that we give the trader the money she asked for, out of pity or out of extreme fatigue from our merry-go-rounds. It was one of the two, anyone that came first that is, but most usually my fatigue.

“Ehenhen, wetin you talk? How much did get? How much you want pay?”, My companion asks me for the thousandth time that day. The way she talks shows she cannot be made to wait too long. Her questions are like bullet fire and rain on me triadically. I know what will come next after this last back and forth, insults. I have played this game so many times for so many years. I look at the sky, the sun is not taking it easy today. My sweat has stuck hard to the back of my neck, I struggle to pack up my hair and relieve myself of this discomfort.

I am exhausted now and do not think I can handle a barrage of insults in my present state of mind. I concede - one’s life is more valuable than a handful of tomatoes, I think. I give up the money. I can see a look of triumph in her eyes. I know what she is thinking. She wonders why I did all that “shakara” initially. But as a pidgin proverb says, “Na condition make crayfish back bend”. I pay the money and trudge off, a little disappointed in myself but glad I can finally escape the hot sun to the coolness of my car’s AC.

Our family compound is a puzzle. It is like a man going through a mid-life crisis, says my elder brother. He doesn’t hesitate to express his distaste every time he visits in December. However, dad says there is nothing like that. Egbon, my brother was born at a time when the economy was very good, and things were cheap, those years were called the “Golden years” of my country’s history. I am sure mum never asked for the last price those days. I know that because Egbon told me so.

My Egbon is a star. When we were little I always thought mum and dad specially made him, he never made any mistakes. But he is too good for his own detriment.

One time, when I was six and Egbon was twelve, we broke the windscreen of dad's car while playing a game of ball. At six, I was already a master at denying my faults and wondered why at twelve Egbon was still a greenhorn at the act. When dad asked who did it, in that voice that was so deadly low, Egbon did not hesitate to fess up. Despite all the signs I gave him in our secret language designed for such situations, he still did what he wanted. I thought for sure he would land us in hot trouble this time. But Dad said Egbon was a man of virtue and let us off the hook. I did not think so and remained angry with Egbon for the whole week. After which I felt bad for being such a black sheep, ever since, my life ambition was to be just like my Egbon.

The car is now parked at my favourite spot in the compound, under the pear tree, my tree. When dad made the garden, he had the great idea of dedicating a tree to each of his children. I got the premonition that this tree will play a huge part in my life, as time went, I used the tree as my personal growth tally, recording my success at bargaining with it.

I wonder what mum will say this time. I have never impressed or nearly satisfied her with my bargaining skills. Sometimes, I tease her, saying if she needed life-saving surgery, she would still price it down. After I say that she laughs and says I am not serious ignoring me with a shove off the hand. I want that joke to work for me today though I have zero chance of that happening this time around. And I understand why, since Dad lost millions of naira in a failed business, things have been quite tough on the household making mum extra frugal with money. She won't let me off the hook this time, that's for sure.

Sometimes, I wonder if I am crazy; sitting in the car, I imagine myself falling down through the car seat, and the car floor opening up for me, the ground then opening up for me, and I fall, and continue falling through the earth's bowels, down to the hot lava, letting the hot lava burn my skin. At other times, I am sweeping, and instead of throwing the dirt into the bin, I think of throwing it into the pot of stew boiling on the stove. I told Iye, my younger sister about my dark thoughts. She says I am crazy. And I agree with her, what sane person will think that way?

I look out the car window, I don't want to roll it down. I want to leave the AC on and think. But to think of what exactly, I do not know. I rethink leaving the AC on, there have been rumours of a

spike in oil prices by next week. I remember the last fuel scarcity in the country. Many hoarded fuel and sold it on the black market. We did not go to school for a week, everyone was stuck at home. Then, people would hijack tankers carrying fuel and siphon the precious commodity. It didn't end well. TV stations were full of gory images and videos of people being burnt alive when the tankers exploded. Mum would not let us watch the news and would send us to our rooms. I always asked Egbon why the people did not run, he said he had never experienced an explosion before and didn't know why. To my young mind, I had gotten the answer I wanted, I had to experience it before I could truly know. That weekend I set up my experiment, I thought about being the guinea pig for it, to make the experience better. So, I got some fuel from the garage, and I remembered not to take too much. Then, I poured it out at the far corner of the garage, I had thrown the match in when I noticed someone else was standing watching me. It was Dad. He dragged me out and asked me what I was doing. I related the finding of my investigations. He looks at me slowly and alarmed, trying to gauge the sanity of his six-year-old daughter. He starts to laugh, initially, I do not notice he is laughing. The heaviness in my chest becomes lighter. I fake a smile.

“So, did you know you were going to die?”, he asked. I answer “No”. He then goes on to say that we can never know when we will die, for example, he could die the next minute. I am crying and bawling loudly now. Mum rushes out. When daddy relates what happened, her face changes to a fit of anger, which I am now too familiar with. She doesn't think it is right for dad to talk about death to me. To mum, speaking about death was a bad omen.

They argue that night. Dad says mum is too backward for her own good. But I have bigger problems than that, I am now obsessed with the subject of death, what would I think about the second before I die? I ask mum what her mum thought of before she died. Mum said she did not know and tried to dissuade me from my investigation. “Isi, I do not know, besides why are you so interested in death?”. I leave quietly but I hear her mutter that I am the strangest child she has. I like that. To be strange is to be different and to be different is alluring, recalling a line from a movie I had seen, earlier that year.

Iye, my grandmother was so old that I thought she could not have been born in the world I knew. Her eyes were a strange milky colour that frightened me. Mum tells me she has glaucoma. I felt

bad when she died I had never really spent much time with her because of my fear of those eyes. Mum said I cried so much when I met Iye, that she felt ashamed.

Iye, my sister is named after my grandmother. Iye like my grandmother is light-skinned and laughs in the same carefree manner characteristic of women from mum's family and has the most beautiful set of eyes I have ever seen. Mum says grandma's eyes were the same colour too. I like the name Iye for my sister, but dad prefers to call her Iyabo, a name she would later change to Omolara. A name that would change Iye as we knew her. I read in a book that names are a part of who we are and to an extent determine our life course. Egbon says that is merely "Superstitious jargon". But, Iye our sister changed, she no longer laughed in that carefree manner she used to but grew up to be quite serious and responsible, hardly laughing.

I could not help wondering what my grandmother thought of before she died. Egbon said she most likely thought about her family. I think she thought of her dog, Pakurumo and about who will feed her when she died. I told dad and he laughed saying that my speculation is quite silly. Pakurumo is the most unmotherly animal I have seen. When Pakurumo gave birth to her puppies, at first, she performed the duties of a mother and looked after them. Then, we started to notice that she would disappear for weeks on end and not come home till we went out to look for her. I came up with a theory that not all animals or people are meant for parenthood. The puppies died the fourth week she left. Amazingly, she came back the next day, sensing she was rid of her burden. Mum wants to bring Pakurumo to stay with us after Iye's death. I do not want that, because ever since that incident with the puppies, Pakurumo and I became sworn enemies.

My thoughts have wandered too far from the car I have taken refuge in. I take a cursory look at the compound and feel a strange sadness come over me. In a few days, I won't see this, I would miss this. In a few days, I would be on a smelly bus, wedged between market women, on my way to start graduate school at the University of Lagos, Lagos. I am happy and terrified at the same time. I finally get to leave the house after years of searching for work. The compound is coloured a beautiful yellow hue as the sun casts its shadow on the landscape. Finally, I turn off the engine and take the bag of tomatoes inside the house. As I walk towards the house, I notice the familiar shape of mum and hear her signature walk. She opens the door and asks if I got the tomatoes. I answer "Yes" and try to escape to my room. I am too late because I have heard the last question.

LAST PRICE

“Na the last price be that?”

Expressions explained

1. Na the last price be that?- Is that the last price?
2. Shakara- A Yoruba slang used to describe pride
3. Na condition make crayfish back bend- A condition where one has no choice
4. Wetin you talk- What do you say?
5. How much you get?- How much do you have?
6. Wetin you want pay?- How much are you willing to pay?