

Nnaemezie

Margaret Ugwuja

His laughter came in fits and starts. It made her want to cry, or scream, or run, or hide. It was a violent fusion of repulsion and dread spreading through her nerves, tearing through ligaments and muscles and flesh, seeking ways to express itself. But she held her breath, tightened her jaw, and stayed.

She searched her mind for a timeline, trying to trace when it was he started becoming like this. It is easy to say it was after that day—yes, that day was the beginning of whatever they had become now. Yet, it felt so sudden, the darkness that descended on them. And this darkness did not come alone—creepy creatures and hydra-headed demons were already inhabiting it. She did not get used to it. It was guilt that helped her stay sane, that mitigated the torture of the terrors.

She looked at the man, the orchestrator of her guilt. This is the man who had changed her life forever. And this was not the first time he did.

“*Kedu?* How are the children?” he asked, sitting up on the chair and peering through small-rimmed glasses at his phone.

She adjusted on her seat in reflex. She always chose this seat opposite him and closer to the door on her visits, and let the front door and curtains wide open for “fresh air”. She knew the pretence fooled neither of them, and there was a worm of doubt tunnelling through her being—the knowing that she didn’t deserve the option of flight.

“They are well.” Why was she here? “*E bute m gi nli.*” I brought you food. She took the cellophane bag beside her and kept it on the table in between them. Memories of the first time she managed to bring him food at the prison flashed through her mind unbidden. She had done it because what else could she do?

She sat back on the chair to meet his eyes staring at her strangely.

“Are you trying to poison me?” She froze.

Damian Ugwuja

He had shocked her. Unlike she who was given to pretence, who did one thing while intending another, who said one thing and meant something different, he was straightforward. He had never pretended to be something he was not, not to her. It was her pretence that made their life the way it was now, the bad and the good. She was multilayered, moulting unexpectedly to reveal a new self. It fascinated him, but repulsed him as well. He, the only surprise he had was being unpredictable, which was actually impulsion.

So with her startle and uneasy laughter at his question, he needed no further answer. When she left, he unwrapped the cellophane bag.

Nnaemezie food flask. It's been years but he remembered it as well as he remembered every other thing about him. He had bought it himself for five-year-old Nnaemezie. The little boy had pointed at it that day at the market and said, "Daddy, I want this one." Looking at it now, snatches of scenes of the boy leaving through that door in his school uniform and carrying that food flask flashed across his mind. But there were three dots on the flask he had on his hands now, like a slight melting off from contact with heat. Eerily, they formed what appeared like two eyes and a mouth on the body of the flask. Like the face was staring at him.

Nnaemezie's food flask. She must have done that on purpose. To keep him haunted, which he deemed unnecessary. This house harboured all the haunting there could be. This house where it all happened.

He emptied the content of the flask into a waste bin. Nudged by curiosity or to confirm whether he was being unnecessarily suspicious, he poured a handful for the hefty broiler he had left to strut around the compound. He willed it to live.

When he saw the cock squatted quietly, eyes closed, the next morning, something sank within him.

Why? He wondered sadly. Why did she want to kill him now? His contemplations were painful. And in between everything, he asked himself why he did not just go ahead to eat the food. Did he desire to live that much? This life?

Anioma Ugwuja

There Was a Boy ~ William Wordsworth

There was a boy. ~ Eden Ahbez, “Nature Boy”

He did not come announced or with so much noise. He was quiet, cool, and so handsome it broke her heart looking at him. He settled into her sad, confused space and became not light—light is something she might never know—but the music in her life.

Those days when memories of Nnaemezie were constant shadows in her life that made her miss him the more. Those days when dad was in prison, and she could not walk around in school without hearing whispers and noticing curious stares. She was just nine, in primary four, when it happened. Arinze had done his best then, but he was not always there, and Nnaemezie’s absence was a hole that drained whatever effort he made to be present.

For weeks after the incident, she would see in her dreams the bloodied body slumped on the ground. Sometimes the limbs were twisted at odd angles like dislocation; sometimes the face was contorted in pain, tears flowing. Sometimes, she opened the bathroom to pee at night and the body lay in the bathtub. The same scream would tear through her throat, jerking her out of sleep.

Nobody understood. That even more than her dad, Nnaemezie had been her hero. She was four when he was fourteen, and he would carry her everywhere, feed her, play with her while her parents were at work, and Arinze was off to his friends’ in the neighbourhood.

She was seven. It was the first break Nnaemezie had since he left for the university. The family sat for dinner. She sat next to him, her big brother. She was chirpy after they had said the grace. But slowly, she realized the glum air that hung around the table, and her cooing died down.

“Nnaemezie, why do you have that hairstyle on?” Dad spoke for the first time, his eyes on his food and not on the punk-dread Nnaemezie had made his hair into.

“Nothing,” Nnaemezie said promptly and continued eating. Dad paused and gave him a long look she knew was not good.

Later that night while she watched *Hannah Montana* on the screen in the living room, she heard voices in heated argument coming from dad’s room. She heard two slaps. And Nnaemezie stormed out a moment later. She was grateful dad did not use his belt on him, that she heard no kicks like it used to be when he raged on the boys. She was grateful the hitting in the bedroom was not on mum. Mum stood up from the sofa and followed Nnaemezie to his room.

And so he began to prolong his stay in school, coming home only when he really needed. Her loneliness deepened. Still the short moments he spent at home, he did not miss to read her scribbles and tell her she was going to be a great writer.

She was fourteen when she first saw him. He just moved into the neighbourhood with his mum. She thought he was sent by Nnaemezie to be what he could no longer be and more than that. He reminded her of him, in his mannerisms, in his speech, in the way he looked at her, and waited for her. This boy that thought she was all her name meant — *ani oma*, a land that gave of its richness, a land that did not swallow her inhabitants, a beautiful land. And when she told him her dad was in jail for manslaughter, he did not blink; he did not run away. Not even when she mentioned that the victim was Nnaemezie, her late brother.

Margaret Ugwuja

She downed a glass of cold water. Feeling nothing, she grabbed a bottle of Seaman’s Schnapps from the fridge and poured herself two shots. Did she know what she was doing? Oh, she thought she knew. She placed a palm on her forehead and waited for the effect of the drink to kick in, even a little. In the bathroom, she splashed water on her face, and back in her room, stared at her image in the dressing mirror. The dark circles under her eyes were the most obvious

evidence of the stress she has been through the past years, the sleep apnea she experienced on a steady.

Today, she had wanted to end it all, to pacify her son's restless spirit. What spirit hovered for ten years without resting?

The man, how did he get to know? She had always brought food along on her visits since he returned from prison. What made him suspect this time that she had a motive? She hadn't answered his question. But she knew he was not going to eat it. And now that he knew, how did it make him feel? She hated him and hated herself. Because if she was not trying to protect so much, everything would have ended from the beginning. And she wouldn't be feeling like she was carrying a tray of fresh eggs and walking on slippery ground. Her back and calves ached physically from the weight and pressure of it all.

Arinze Ugwuja

He had to call Anioma. And just as he thought so, his phone rang. Anioma.

"Arinze." She always called his name like it was a question, or she would call it in full—Arinzechukwu.

"Good evening. Has Dad called you?" she asked.

"Yes. And I was just about to call you to ask same. How are —"

"When are you going home?"

"How are you doing?"

"I'm fine," she answered briskly. "And you?"

"I am well, Anioma." He did not like the urgency this required, and he knew the subject of any meeting was not going to be good. That is except Anioma was bringing home a prospective husband, which was unlikely now. "I'll be back by weekend. How is studies?"

"School is....I don't know...just there." He could imagine her shrug on the other end.

“Anioma, can we talk about this over the weekend? Or when are you going home?”

“I’ll be home on Friday night.”

“Ani, one more thing,” he hurried before she hung up. “Don’t go there alone. Wait for me.”

He stared at his phone a while after the call had ended. Why was the man interested in talking all of a sudden? He better not be thinking of dying. At sixty-something? He had a lot to think about in his twenties to start worrying about planning a funeral now. He thought of the immediate years after the incident. How he suddenly had to grow up. How he stepped into that role to protect Anioma from what she did not know because mum was too immersed in her own grief and the appearances she had to keep. Anioma’s pain became his own pain. And his only regret was that he could not stop her from seeing the bloodied body which became her nightmare for weeks after.

He stepped into the balcony and welcomed the sight of an unusually starry night. He could make out Orion’s belt and Pegasus. And he wondered which of the stars Nnaemezie could be watching from. He hoped he was proud of him, of how he had stepped up for their little princess who was all grown now.

Damian Ugwuja

He had not stopped thinking. He asked questions, and he sought answers. The meeting with Arinze and Anioma was one of the answers he had come to. Whatever happened, they needed to know. It might break them, scrape on old wounds, but he would have a burden lifted off him. This last bit made him wonder if he wasn’t selfish. He was. And so was Margaret. The children did not deserve what they had done to them, what he had done to them. Maybe he shouldn’t tell them. It should be his punishment, a lie he will carry to hell.

But he had thought enough to know that if he there was one last thing he should do before he died, it was this.

Damian Ugwuja

He noticed how Arinze made sure he sat in the same couch with his sister, keeping her to his left. There were no hugs—it had been years since there was. He wondered what memories this place left for them. He had learnt Margaret found her present apartment immediately he was jailed. He wondered whether they could see Nnaemezie walking in and out doors, standing by the window, sitting on the couch, one leg on the floor and the other forming an acute angle at the bent knee. He could only wonder how much pain he had caused them, how much shame they had borne because of him—he could only wonder; he had no right to probe. Still he was grateful. They had turned out too fine for the life they met. Tears brimmed at his eyes and he left them there. He did not call them here so he could be pitied.

Then he began speaking. He told them everything. On that day, the day Nnaemezie died, it was not an accidental discharge. He had shot him, in rage at his impudence. He would not now start making excuses about Nnaemezie changing and acting clandestine and rebelling against his authority. It is never an excuse, and he was sorry they did not know until now...

He could see the horror on Anioma's face as he spoke. But Arinze, his face read only regret and anger.

He watched Anioma notice the same thing about her brother.

“Have you known about this all along?” she asked Arinze.

“Anioma...” Arinze pleaded, holding her hand. She snatched it away and turned to him.

“I will never forgive you for this!” Her voice spelt hate and fury. Then she broke into heart-wrenching sob and ran out of the room. His heart sank as Arinze cast him a last glance of disgust and went after her.