

Plantain Boy

Munachi Mbonu

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Making A Living

Another unprofitable day. By now my fingers were growing numb as I tried to hold firmly to the tray on my head. My feet wore/gave mild tremors from walking/careening through the maze of cars on the long road. Throughout that day, I did everything I could to make my first sale. It was not my lucky day.

By now it was getting dark and soon nightfall

would set in. I needed to hurry. Grandma never liked me staying out so late, no matter the reason. So I knew I had to make for home. But I could barely carry myself. Partly, I wanted to cry; partly, I wanted to believe it was just a bad day. While these two thoughts fought on my mind, grandma's voice rose sharply to alert me that I was home already. She had been waiting patiently for me to return.

“You don't have to curse yourself on a day like this, Emeka. You don't have to. Nnu na?”

She could read my mood very easily. Grandma was like that.

“Nwanyi-Grandma, I am so sorry and I blame myself for...”

I tried vainly to defend myself. I thought it was my fault. As I put down my load from my head, I came to her and gently lifted up her hands apologizing for not bringing

money home.

“You don’t need to apologize my son. As long as you work hard, you will surely get your reward,” she said.

Her words were always full of kindness but now they put me in even more guilt. I gently put her hands down and helped her up to her room. By now, night had fully fallen.

My grandma and I live in a ramshackle single room apartment, somewhere on the outskirts of Lagos. It was the kind popularly known as face-me-I-face-you. Grandma moved in here a month before the landlord died. When his children inherited the house, they began to harass the tenants for money at every given opportunity. They showed no mercy.

Our neighbourhood was worse. It was a notorious place for petty thieves. No week passed without a cry on one of the

neighbouring streets where a pickpocket would have stolen someone's belongings. We didn't feed well. There was no bakery in our neighbourhood. There was no hospital either. We didn't even have a place to fetch clean water. There was only one well everyone fetched from. We called its water miukwotah, because of its colour.

When we managed to buy bread, it was leftover from the main city. All our neighbours were people like me. They hawked on the roads.

My grandma was in her 80s. She already had early-stage dementia and had started losing her eyesight by this time. But I could still see some facial features that showed how beautifully she looked when she was young. My grandma got married to the love of her life at a very young age just like her peers in those days. His name was Obinna.

They were so fond of each other. She always

called him by his pet name. Even moments of anger didn't change that.

Unfortunately, he died early - and they had had only three children.

Grandma has lived with the pain ever since. She couldn't stand being a single mother and it showed in how she raised my mother and her siblings. Theirs was an emotionally absent mum. Theirs, an unhappy childhood.

Soon, with no values to guide their behaviour, my mum and her brother took to the streets very early in their lives. Grandma didn't even notice when they came in and when they went out.

My uncle eventually took to a life of crime and became a drug peddler. But it was the unlikely thing. Who would have thought that the son of Obinna, the wealthy businessman will become a drug peddler. Back then Grandma's depression was so much that

she could not summon the strength to manage her husband's business. He had one of the biggest printing press companies in Shomolu, Lagos. But it all collapsed. His brother, my grand uncle, who managed his store, was a selfish man. He took everything and used the equipment to start his own business.

My Uncle's early exposure to street gangs and drug peddling hardened him. He would usually leave home without saying a word to anyone. He made some money and fled Lagos, leaving his mother in squalor.

As for my mother, she was a very joyful and sweet-hearted woman. She was clever and had so much love for art. Painting was a hobby for her. She used every penny that she made to buy her tools and do something new on canvas. She painted many artworks which increased her chances of earning an income. She was the only one left taking care of grandma. My mum met my dad at

an art gallery where she had gone to look at other works for inspiration.

“Hey are you the artist?”

He asked with his husky voice, smiling.

“Off course not, this is Picasso!”

She replied, giving a cheesy look.

“Just kidding, anyway. My name is Femi and what’s yours?”

“Stella.”

Their conversation grew into a friendship and a year later into a marriage. By then my dad had just gotten a job with the NNPC in Lagos. He moved from Ibadan where he lived with his mother and sibling. His parents were not wealthy, so much of his education was sponsored through community effort.

No sooner had my parents married than his mother, my paternal grandmother, moved

in with them. She made life a living hell for my mother. She would complain about every little thing. My mum woke up to find mustard seeds and oil in front of her bedroom every morning. My paternal grandma said her son needed protection from sorcerers. My mother, like her mother, my grandmother, soon came down with depression. About this time, she was pregnant with me. She wanted to make her marriage work so she kept her problems from her mother. But things only continued to get worse. My mother started to lose her place as the woman of the house. His mother wanted to take all the major decisions of his life, not able to see that her son was now grown and married to his own wife. My mum was literally living single in her husband's house. But her depression was unnoticed. After she had me, she fell into loneliness and developed extreme post-partum depression. But they didn't realise it initially.

Everyone thought it was the stress of sleepless nights because she had become a nursing mother. But my father was hostile and his mum would not lend her a helping hand. When her head became full with the troubles, she became destructive and would often say things that didn't make sense. She would wake up in the middle of the night and start hitting the walls with so much force that woke everybody up. Other days she will start dancing outside while it rained heavily. Grandma was invited to come over to the house. They took her from one spiritual home to another. Each one made up silly stories about her condition.

“One of her ancestors might have been cursed which made her a victim,” one of them said.

Another claimed that she might have taken candy from a friend which was affecting her. One even suggested it was an ogbanje problem. The false stories didn't stop coming.

They all missed the fact that what my mum had was no more than a mental condition. She was forced into a fast which lasted for three days.

My father soon got fed up. He took to his heels. No one ever saw him from the day he dropped my mother at the church by the beach.

One fateful morning, an old schoolmate of my mum put a surprise call home to us. As far as I remember, my mum didn't say much about Dr. Martina and their days back in the university. But it was a name I had heard her mention a couple of times. There were some others she spoke frequently about to me. But not Dr. Martina. As a mental health specialist, she had just returned from advanced studies in the UK. She had no idea what was going on with my mum. She only wanted to catch up with old friends. That evening was probably one of the happiest days of my mum's life.

They booked a meeting for Dr. Martina to come visit. They hadn't met in a very long time. They had a lot to catch up on. When she eventually came, my mum couldn't stop laughing. Everything Dr. Martina said was fun. She would laugh and laugh very hard stamping her feet on the floor when Ms. Martina said anything, even when she asked questions.

Dr. Martina began to grow suspicious at my mother's excessive expressions. She had to stop and ask her,

“What's up Stella, is everything okay? “

My mum responded by going into overdrive - saying random things out of nowhere, she started saying past events that didn't even happen. Tina, as she occasionally called her, became visibly worried. She went to the bedroom and called grandma asking her if everything was okay with her daughter. Grandma explained everything

to her. Dr. Martina advised that they take her to a psychiatric hospital. Immediately she took my mum to the hospital where the doctors, for the first time, diagnosed her with postpartum depression.

The lead doctor was unhappy to find that the mental illness had deteriorated. My mother refused to believe she was depressed.

She quickly said emphatically,

“You don’t see me crying every day, do you? I haven’t slaughtered my wrists can’t you see that?”

Then she went on, saying things that didn’t add up.

She was placed on admission for two weeks but barely ate nor talked with anybody. The only thing she did was to paint. It was the one way she expressed herself. Art was all that was left of my mother. She created pictures of a melting skull, a human trapped

in someone's brain trying to get out, a beautiful lady lost in the wilderness, etc.

The hospital became negligent with her care after Dr. Martina left for the UK. A few months later, my mother's illness became worse. She slumped into destructive behaviour – screaming out of nowhere and breaking anything she could place her hands on. She stopped taking her medication. The therapist stopped his sessions because grandma couldn't afford his fees anymore. She was locked up in the isolation room. One day she cut off the tube from the drip then hung herself on the ceiling fan and ended her life.

That was too tragic for my grandma to handle. First was the loss of her dear husband. Now her beloved daughter. Two sad episodes in one lifetime. She blamed herself for not being aware of what postpartum depression was. She could not hold back her words and began to speak out loudly:

“If only I had gotten western education when my parents sent me to school, I would have known that my daughter’s illness was medical and not spiritual. My dear daughter, forgive me. I was ignorant. I promise to take care of your son - my grandson.”

My grand ma kept her promise by making sure she took care of me and gave me the best she could afford with her little means.

Another Day...

It's 7 am when I wake up. I go over to check on grandma and see her with a concerned look on her face while listening to the radio.

“Emeka if you're here come listen to the radio.”

I sat on the floor and listened.

The announcer's voice was straightforward

and but could tell her wasn't at rest with himself.

“Welcome back to the GOOD MORNING NAIJA Show, as we report that the cases of Corona virus have increased. The numbers are rising in their hundreds daily. Health workers work day and night not only to have people discharged but to watch some of them -sadly- die. You may not leave your home except for food, medicine and walks only. There shall be a total lockdown until the end of this pandemic. Over here we have...”

Before we could hear the rest of what the announcer had to say, the radio battery died. We had no spare to continue listening. I looked over at my grandmother. She said it almost as my eyes hit hers.

“God will protect us,” her voice very calm.

That week was terrible. People didn't go

to work so our compound was packed. Our ramshackle apartment had five other rooms occupied by young egberos in each who had other several hangers on with them. But now that the parks were empty of commuters, they were all home. That made the small compound overpopulated. The two toilets and bathrooms were sure to be overstretched.

Before the lockdown, grandma would usually wait for everyone to leave the compound before she showered. That way she didn't have to join the long queue and drama of the early morning rush. Some people woke up as early as 2am to queue up with their buckets in front of the bathroom. The troublesome ones will always want to jump the queue. That's the reason we had a fight every morning. But with the lockdown, things got out of hand. People were bored and confused because of uncertainty. They just flocked the bathroom even when they had

no where they were going. When people took long showers, some shouted. There were days we couldn't even shower because of the crowd. We never knew we had such numbers. The bathroom floor was made of tiles but they were loose. In between, there was mud which made everywhere dirty and smell. The toilet on the other hand was far worse. You could smell it six feet away. Now, it didn't matter when we woke up. There was something happening at the bathroom all the time. It was either a fight or a cursing match. One day, grandma's biggest fear happened. Two people fought until the bathroom and toilet were pulled down.

From that day, we began to use another method to meet our toilet needs. We called it shot put. It involved defecating into some kind of container or nylon bag and then proceeding to fling it into the bush as far as one's strength could have it flung.

Soon we would run out of food. All that was left was a little garri and water in the cupboard. We feared the worst. It was only then that the government announced it would ease the lockdown to enable people stockpile food and other essentials. It felt the government knew our needs. We could not be happier.

I jumped immediately. We quickly made arrangements for me to go and make sales. It worked and two days later, I was on the road hawking. I sold every single plantain and groundnut in less than two hours. I ran back to the house with the money and picked up another batch.

“Back so early? What happened?” Her eyes alive with expectation. She wanted me to say what she had suspected.

Then I gave her the news.

“Grandma, I have sold every single plantain

and groundnut. The road is packed! I need to hurry and make more!”

I said as I was already running. My grandma eventually laughed, bending her head downwards.

I came back home two more times until I was tired. I made so much money. I was so proud of myself. I counted the money and it was N30,000 in total. I hid it inside my trousers and avoided contact with anybody. I bought food and necessities from the local market. By the time I got to the house, grandma welcomed me happily.

“Welcome back Nna mu.”

She danced and showered me with praises and blessings.

“My Emesco”

That’s how she called me whenever she was happy.

“Nwam, Egadi!”

She still couldn't hold herself from appreciating me.

I made her supper. I made her favourite meal of fufu and oha soup. She ate with sweet relish, wiping her plate and fingers clean. We had to quickly go to bed before our rechargeable lamp lost power. Just when sleep was about to settle on my eyes, my friend Mike called me on the phone.

“Emeka! Emeka! Come, come. Come o! The government truck is here to share food. Hurry and come before it finishes.”

He barely finished his words before he ran past our corridor in the passage.

I quickly jumped out of bed and woke my grandma up. She had already fallen asleep.

“Mama, mama. I am going out. Government trucks are bringing food. I will soon come

back.”

I spoke and stood up at the same time.

Before I reached the door, I heard her voice.

“I am following you”

“Grandma no. Stay back, let me go and get for both of us.”

“I said I am coming with you. So that we will come back with more food.”

I couldn't stop her because she was already at the door. But her walking stick gave me concern....

We reached the market square just in time.

The government truck was circling back to park. Soon, they offloaded the truck and started bringing out items one by one. We were one of the first people to receive. We got food items: a small bag of rice, garri, beans and cooking oil all packed in a small

sack bag, locally called, ghana-must-go. As we turned back to go home, the crowd surged. A stampede followed. In the dust, I started groping for grandma.

By the time I found her, the food she took was gone and she had a dislocation. Our neighbor helped me to carry her back home. Soon she was shedding tears. There were scratches on both our bodies but hers was more severe. I cleaned her body with water and wrapped it in cloth. I gave her medication for headaches and body pain. She slept in well that night. The only thing we brought back was garri and the medication which I carried. The other ones were stolen in the stampede.

This incident complicated issues for us. Before now, I only had her old age itself to worry about. But a dislocation gave me more concern. What was the extent of the damage? How do we raise money to go to the hospital? Who would take us

there? She is almost 80 years old which means her bones are already weak. And as we eventually realized, we also lost her walking stick.

That night, I thought of many scenarios.

Uncle Chidi

I've tried calling my uncle several times without much success. This very night, not knowing where else to turn, I called Uncle Chidi again.

“Who is this?”

In many years, uncle Chidi's voice sounded the same way. He was always prepared to be angry.

“Uncle Chidi, it's me your nephew, Emeka.”

“Wait, is this my sister's son?”

“Yes sir,” I said in a happy voice thinking he was going to help.

“Ok wait lemme call you back” he said. He never called back. I tried calling his number again but he kept declining or ignoring it.

I cried that night. “Oh merciful God, protect us,” I said before going to bed.

As the days passed, things became better for us. Mama healed fast due to Baba Sola’s herbal medication. He is one of the oldest bonesetters around. Fortunately, he lived not too far from us. He was able to come to the house to treat grandma without collecting a dime. He and grandma met in Badagry, shortly after the civil war. They became friends and have come a long way.

Later on, the lockdown was once again enforced.

In no time, we were running out of food again. One morning, when grandma could no longer take it, she dropped the question.

“Emeka my dearest grandchild. What do

we do?”

It was a question that puzzled me too. I had no answer. The lockdown was yet to be fully eased. The roads were still filled with local boys robbing people of food and money. Marketplaces were shut due to the pandemic. We tried to cut our portions daily so as to save some more food for the next day. Miukwotah didn't help matters. But even that one was drying up. Gradually, I began to emaciate. I was occasionally dizzy and felt warm in my body which was unusual. One morning I woke up with blood particles on my bed. It flowed out of my nose and ears...



I had to get more food. I sold some of my clothes to traders to raise money. When I ran out of cloths to sell, I resorted to begging on the same streets where I once sold

plantain chips. It got that bad. Whatever I made from that was not enough to meet our needs. At some point I thought of something. I offered to help marketwomen sell their wares if they could pay me a little out of the profit. They agreed. I made sure I sold very well and made sure they saw me so that they would know how hardworking I was. Some of the women I worked for were stingy and gave me less than 10% of what they made. Still, I appreciated it. Others were kind and gave me nearly half of what they earned daily.

That was how we thrived. Running up and down the road trying to sell to different cars that passed by. Most of them ignoring you while others said they didn't have the money and try to lower the price. God was kind to us. I returned each day with some to fetch us food and drugs. That's how we survived.

The Escape

One day, I was selling foodstuff as usual when I came across a car. “Aye boy, you there selling groundnut come,” the driver said, as he wound down the glass. “My madam wants to buy,” he said, pointing me to the woman sitting in the back-seat. Immediately she saw my face, she quickly turned back to the man she was sitting next to. He wore a black suit with shades. He leaned forward to look at me and as he saw my face, pulled his glasses in shock.

“Emeka!” he said three times. That was my uncle. The uncle who hadn’t taken my calls in a long time. I wasn’t too pleased to see him. He ordered the driver to park by the roadside and asked that I step over where he was. I obeyed.

He stepped out of the car and took a good look at me shaking his head. “Why are you so skinny?” he asked. I could tell by his facial expressions he didn’t really care and he just wanted to start up a conversation. “I have not eaten o. There is no money for food. I have to sacrifice what is left for grandma,” as I was saying this, he shook his head.

“And you’re not going to school again?”

“No sir”

“What!” He screamed. Or it appeared to be so. But it all looked to me like good acting. I thought a proper street boy of his kind, even

if he was now a man should not struggle to put up an act.

“How old are you?”

“I’m 20 now”

“Ah, ah. You don’t mean it. I would give you a call when I get back home, I promise.”

I didn’t think there was anything special in what uncle Chinedu said that day. It won’t be the first time he will be speaking words and just going on without honouring them.

This was such an occasion and it didn’t bother me much. After all, uncle Chinedu has been grandma’s main prayer point. She will mention his name several times in prayers. Asking God to bring him back the way he brought back the prodigal son in the Bible story. When I told her of how I ran into him, she started shedding tears of joy, shouting.

“God you have finally brought my son home. So, I will use these my two eyes to see Chinedu before I join my ancestors. Chim o, emele.” It was necessary to have her in high spirits. I didn’t share my low expectations with her. Somehow, deep down in me, I wish he would call.

Some years ago, a prophet that had a church in a garage told grandma, that Uncle Chinedu was under a spell. His face had been turned away from his family. He is also not proud of his source of wealth. It was the same prophet who said my mother had ogbanje, when in reality, she suffered from mental health complications. Grandma didn’t take him seriously.

She didn’t bother with the 40 days of dry fasting the prophet had declared for her to embark on, to reverse the misfortune that had befallen her family. Grandma held on to the belief that the good Lord will bring him back. I had hoped and prayed that the

day I saw him in traffic would have been that day grandma had been waiting for. But unfortunately, his call never came, much less a visit.

There were days I woke up from sleep overwhelmed by the feeling that my something was coming; that my uncle would suddenly show up. One particular night, the feeling was so strong after I had listened to Pastor Bola Idowu on the radio before going to bed. I woke up with so much joy in my heart.

By this time, the lockdown had been lifted but life had yet to return to normal. A lot was changing. We had spent everything. There was no money to set us another business. I thought of several ways of raising capital to start a business but to no avail.

On this very beautiful morning, I woke up happy, unusually. I remembered my mum's art work that grandma had kept behind our wooden bed. This piece of work has

been well preserved by grandma and I. We just open it up to clean and then wrap it back again. My mum had titled it “THE ESCAPE.” Looking at it again, I took a deep breath, saying to myself, this will be our escape from poverty. Would grandma even agree for me to sell it? Since it was the only art work left. She had early given out the other works because she felt they were too dark and scary to look at. She doesn’t know or even understand the value of art. Neither do I. I see people hawk artworks in traffic, I have a feeling they make a lot of money because those boys don’t look as wretched as the boys that sell groundnuts and plantain chips. I summoned courage to tell my grandma. To my greatest surprise, she agreed.

“Go ahead my son. Who knows, the good Lord might use this to bless us.”



“Young man, how much you dey sell?”

It was question I wanted to hear on this day. So I rushed to this middle-aged man dressed in white agbada seating in his old Toyota corolla. But I knew he was going to waste my time. I went anyway, reluctantly.

“Oh boy which kain painting be this? Wetin una draw like this? Abeg carry go.”

Just like I predicted, he wasn't a serious buyer at all. I felt so bad and disappointed. This was my third day walking up and down and believing that faith will prevail in the end. People don't seem to appreciate art. One woman even told me off.

“Oh boy, go find correct painting wey person go use decorate house. Wetin be this wey you carry wey no make sense?”

My spirit really dropped at this time, my mind wondering how grandma and I would survive. As I was about to cross the road

The Escape

to go home, a man in a black range rover kept honking at me while I tried to cross the road. I was tired and confused. His driver put his head out of the window and started screaming.

“Hey, hey, stop there. Hey come.”

The guy pulled over and I walked up to him with a tired face expecting the usual. This man sounded different; he spoke good English. He wore a sparkling white T-shirt as far as I could see, like someone who was returning from golfing.

“Hello young man, how are you? Are you the artist?”

“No sir.” I managed a smile.

“My mum painted it”

“Where is your mum?”

“She has since passed”

“Oh wow, tell me some more about this beautiful work. I have never seen an original oil on canvas sold in traffic. You must have a story, right? I grew sombre, feeling this was a man who appeared to be showing some genuine interest in our rather lonely world.

“My mum had post-partum depression; painting was the only way she managed to keep her mind together. She titled it The ESCAPE because she felt trapped and sad.”

Then he gave me a surprise.

“Come in and sit down.”

I saw the empathetic look on his face.

“Come in and sit down,” he said it again, this time motioning to me to step towards him. His voice was calm. I sat in front being a bit scared. The SUV smelled so nice. I felt alive seating down. It was my first time of ever entering a Range Rover. I only see it from afar and imagine what it could like within.

The Escape

It was really beautiful and for once I didn't care if he bought the painting or not.

But that was when he asked, "How much does this painting cost?"

Out of desperation I put the price at N30,000.

"30,000 what?"

He asked with a shock in his face. Then I stuttered and managed to find my voice.

"I-I-I am sorry sir. P-p-p-please just tell me how much you can pay."

"Young man, I will pay you N150,000. This is supposed to be your inheritance. This work is a beautiful piece with a deep story. I will like to take this work to London. I am one of the biggest art collectors in the Nigeria. Have you got some more?"

I was trying to bring myself to the reality of what I was hearing.

“Young man I am talking to you”

He then tapped my hand. That was when I woke up from the shock. N150,000? How? I have never seen this kind of money in my life. I managed to answer in a shocking voice

“No sir.”

He handed over the money to me and asked me to count it.

“No sir, there is no need. I am sure it is complete.”

I was already thinking of how I was going to dance to our favourite song with my grandma when I got home. Miracle no dey taya Jesus. He offered to take me home because he wanted to know where I lived. He wanted to come print a receipt and certificate of authenticity for me to sign for him since I didn't have any.

TO BE CONTINUED.....