

LIFE IS A POT OF BEANS

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“Life is a pot of beans,” Iveren said, and everyone in the staff bus laughed. They had been talking about their various challenges as workers, and her statement seemed to summarise it all for them. They were on their way home at the end of a long shift. The journey had got to that slow crawl where after every five minutes, someone would alight. It was a cold night, the streets were quiet, and only a few houses had lights on. Iveren glanced at her watch. It was a few minutes to midnight. She thought of how peaceful it would be to curl up beside her children and rest her aching muscles. They were not so far from her bus stop. She let out a small sigh, navigating her thoughts back to the bus discussion.

“I know that saying is meant to mean that life is full of ups and downs. But I love beans and hate rice! So, why don't you just say life is a pot of rice?” James, the driver, shouted from his seat.

“You are alone on that!” Iveren shot back at him, as her colleagues cheered. There were a few shouts of *How can anybody hate rice!* from various corners. It was soon time to alight, and she bid them all farewell. As she passed him, James held her hand and said softly, “No matter how long the night, there will be morning and smiles. Be strong.”

“Thanks. See you at six o'clock, James,” she said, returning his smile. He was like that, sensitive and kind. He was one of those few people who could see through her daunting exterior and offer words of comfort when she needed them. To her colleagues, she was the jovial, yet principled lady, who never took her job for granted. Her ebony complexion, petite height and easy charm made her a target of her male colleagues' interest and lusts. Several of them made their advances at first, but it did not take long for them to realise that she was also firmly principled. It became a running joke around the office that Iveren was more of a man than most of them. She always seemed in control, and so, hardly anyone noticed when things were not right with her.

Iveren remembered a day when her youngest daughter, Awa, had badly scraped both her knees while playing. Although Awa's wounds were treated at the chemist near her house, Iveren had spent the whole day brooding at work. Her colleagues did not notice her mood, or if they did, did not comment on her disposition. It was James who had seen past her hurried smile that replaced her brooding drawn lips. He probed her till she confided in him. Afterwards, he had squeezed some money into her hand and asked her to be strong. She had looked up to his kind bushy face and saw his eyes glinting with warmth. Yes, James was like that, she thought.

She stared at the bus as it moved on with her colleagues, who were still laughing at some jokes. Life was not easy for any of them, she thought as she dragged herself from the church junction to her house, which was a ten-minute walk away. Her body suddenly felt too heavy for her aching feet. Her thoughts strayed to her children again, who would be sleeping at the moment. Iveren rarely spent time with them.

She always arrived home past midnight, when there was hardly anybody about, then wake up at four to join the staff bus at five to head back to work. It was a strained routine, six days a week. She often wondered whether she was raising them properly when the only quality time they spent together was on Sundays. But it was the only way to survive as a mother of three with no support from anywhere else.

It also had its joys. She remembered the day that she had brought the television home. She had woken her children up, and they had screamed in delight. They wouldn't have to go to the windows of neighbours to push curtains aside to watch television. It had come in handy as they had also watched all the football matches of the Atlanta '96 Olympics. The soccer Dream Team had delivered and given hope to the nation, picking the gold medal. Chioma Ajunwa had iced the cake with her gold medal too in the long jump. And they had watched it all, on their own TV. It did not matter that there were only wooden benches for furniture in the sitting room. She was just glad that the job had provided.

Iveren smiled. Life was not all that bad. She rummaged through her bag for her keys and unlocked the door. Her niece, Torkwase, who helped her take care of the house and the children stood up immediately.

Her words came out in a rush, "Auntie, welcome. Tordoo is shivering."

In the next second, Iveren was beside her son.

"What happened?"

“I don't know, auntie,” Torkwase replied in tears. “He has been shivering all evening. He had a convulsion too.”

“Muum...” Tordoo called out, weakly.

His body was a small inferno.

“Let's go to the hospital,” Iveren said.

His eyes rolled in their sockets, and she screamed. With Torkwase's help, she backed the boy and rushed out of the house telling Torkwase to stay with her other children. It was now well past midnight. The nearest health facility was a small private clinic at the other end of town. She walked as fast as the weight of her son could allow her. She sighed as several thoughts came pouring in torrents.

Life is a pot of beans and had always been.

Iveren had lived a million people's worth of sorrow in her life already. She had come a long way from her humble roots. Memories of her past came to her. Her family's poverty had kept her from achieving much. Her mother had inspired her to aspire to greatness, no matter what stood in her way. Thus, from a young age, she had sworn to do all she could to be as educated as possible. She remembered how she would trek several miles, from their village to go to school at the Queen of the Rosary in Gboko, the closest town. With no one to visit, and hardly any food, she had lived on the charity of the school's reverend sisters till she graduated to the polytechnic. While the other girls at the polytechnic had their cupboards full of provisions, the fanciest clothes and much more, Iveren simply watched with the admiration of one who saw good things but could not touch them.

Somehow, she always smiled. Who would have believed that the smiling girl wore stitched worthless materials from tailoring shops as her sanitary towel? This was only one of her many problems but somehow, she persevered to the end.

After school, she had to stay in her parents' house since they did not believe that a single lady should be on her own. Thus, Iveren after going to school and getting urbane was forced to get back to the rudiments of rural life. Eventually, she met Tor Bua, a man ten years her senior who wanted to marry her. Though he was not her ideal man, she jumped at the offer. This was a visa out of her parents' compound and a chance to make something out of her life.

Her husband provided for her as much as he could and was faithful in all his ways. Life, for the first time, was kind. Iveren gave birth to three children in quick succession. They lived happily. But just when she got comfortable, fate struck. Tor fell ill, and medical bills swallowed all his money. When he eventually passed away, it was Iveren who borrowed money to give him a decent send-off. The burden of single parenting as provider and nurturer fell on her frail shoulders, in addition to catering to the needs of her ageing parents. With no one to cast her cares upon, she ventured to the saturated job market. She found out soon that employers preferred university graduates over those from polytechnic.

Iveren decided to get into business, but each venture seemed to go wrong. Eventually, she found work as a labourer at a cement site. At first, the men laughed at her, wondering how a woman would carry head pans, do the dirty work and all. She soon proved herself a worthy colleague, working as hard as they did, and sometimes, even more. Her colleagues gradually warmed up

to her and openly admired her hard work. The thought of her children willed her to work on, even when her body threatened to buckle under the job's strain.

Fortunately, her qualifications opened the door to a better opportunity for her. She got a job at a hotel as a supervisor, but even there, she had to work two shifts to keep up with her responsibilities and a few treats, like the TV. It was also nice to have James's support once in a while. He had asked her out, but she had declined, telling him that the only space she had in her heart was for her children. He had remained her friend. At that moment, Iveren began to wonder if the burden of all her responsibilities was not a weight she should discard. She remembered what her mother would always say: *Children never ask to be brought into the world, and if you are blessed to birth them, you owe it to them to provide what you can.*

She plodded on through the quiet streets, carrying Tordoo, her thoughts keeping her company. They had to pass by a cemetery on the way to the health centre. In the silence, Tordoo's small voice spoke, "Mummy, I am sorry to have put you through this. I am sorry, mummy. Mummy, sorry. Maybe I should die so you will not suffer again."

She felt a sudden pain in her heart that made her stand still for a moment. Her eyes burned with tears that soon trailed down her face. With a set face, she wiped her eyes and continued the walk.

"Don't ever say that again," she said. "I love you, and nothing will happen."

Years later, that boy would grow to be one of the greatest authors their parts had known. He would mention that the night in question was the one that had changed his life's course and strengthened his determination to succeed. He would say that he never could understand how he had bounced to play the next morning while his mother simply resumed work like it had been a regular night. With every achievement, his first dedication would be to the woman on whose back he rode like a donkey to the distant clinic. The same lady whose work became the foundation for the life he enjoyed as well as that of his siblings...

But all that was many years in the future. At that second, they had no idea. They simply moved on, clutching to the torch of hope with which they groped through the darkness.

For my mother, Chris Nguamo, for many miracles

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