

SOUND OF HOPE

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“I don’t want to see her...” my faint voice trails off.

I am fortunate not to have found myself in this situation when hospitals were more cautious in admitting patients. No one wants to contract the virus that makes face masks, soap and sanitizers must-haves.

Nurse Vivian looks perplexed. She opens her lips wrapped in a white and blue coloured face mask to speak but closes them almost immediately. She steps out. After a brief mumbling behind the door with my mother, she enters but moves towards another patient. My mother’s footsteps can be heard fading away into the distance; people do say that she drags her feet while walking like a village girl. This is a visiting hour. Anyone but my mother can visit me.

Here, those who share food after being visited are everyone’s favourite. It is no child’s play to be sick and hungry at the same time. I hate the nauseating smell of the hospital and the rude behaviours of the nurses yet being here has changed a lot about me. I don’t have to share a tiny bed with mother. Uncle Imoh, our next door neighbour, also can’t fondle with my body any time I enter his room to watch TV; I don’t like it but he gives me food. I don’t have to hawk anymore before mother agrees to send me food. But I miss my legs; I would rather hawk under the scorching sun than live without legs.

Weeks ago, mother was in the room cutting vegetables. It was Sunday, the only day we enjoy her presence. I dropped the 50 naira worth of crayfish she sent me to get on the table beside her. Fish or meat was a luxury. She had reluctantly handed me the last 200 naira she had.

“Where is my change?” mother asked.

Change? I checked my hands and was holding nothing. I dashed out like lightning. My eyes stuck to the floor as if my life depended on it until I got to Mama Tina’s shop; I had bought the crayfish from her. I was sure I got the change but how it left my hand was what I couldn’t account for. Everything felt so dramatic.

Going back home terrified me. That money meant a lot to us. My eldest brother, who my late father had sold our two plots of land to send abroad for greener pastures rarely helped; he was probably trying to survive over there too. Mama Dozie once told my mother that white women were ‘merciless spenders’. She said they might be spending his money on makeup, weave-ons and surgeries.

My other siblings couldn’t help. Chima was an apprentice at a mechanic workshop. He didn’t like school. Chinonso would be through with secondary school soon. According to him, his teachers preferred talking to teaching. So, mother was saving to get him enrolled in an evening class. His friend, Nnamdi said that Chinonso was only interested in the lesson because his crush was a student there. Since mother started saving, we consumed soaked garri often. The desire to be called Mama Lawyer was enough motivation for her. I would have to stop school for some time; more hawking time meant more money. Money would be needed to pay Chinonso’s fees on admission into the university. I could continue my education afterwards. Mother didn’t tell me. I overheard her tell her best friend.

I wished I wouldn't have to be my brother's sacrificial lamb but I knew better. Disobedience to mother equaled hunger. Quitting school would be for a while unlike some girls in my neighbourhood. Iyabo, the daughter of the woman whose 6-year-old son was forcefully drugged by their neighbour, stopped schooling two years ago. She actually got pregnant and was ashamed to continue. She moved in with the taxi driver who impregnated her. Not all girls got such acceptance. They bore the responsibility like the cases of Ada, Mariam and Nofisat. Those were the cases I witnessed.

"How are you fine girl?" a masculine voice jolted me back to reality. I looked back to see a man smiling in a funny way. He was inside a black car.

"Why are you crying?"

I wiped my tears with the back of my right palm.

"What's wrong? Come inside the car. Or do you want me to take you to Chicken Republic?"

I realised I had not eaten lunch and was hungry already. The man sounded nice. I wanted to ask him for money but what if after touching the money, I become a yam? He will just wrap me and put me in his car and use me for some money ritual. I took a few steps away.

"Fine girl come na!"

I did not bother to look back. My stomach mustn't rule my head. Bukky, my former classmate had been missing for three years. Her family members have given up on seeing her. She might have been used to renew a wicked person's charm, for money or for something else.

I sighted Aunt Mabel in her shop. She has been a nice woman. I felt shy to ask for her help but I couldn't face mother's wrath.

"The irregularity of power supply is getting worse o. I don't even have any ice block to sell," Aunt Mabel spoke with her phone fixed to her left ear. I was behind her.

She kept quiet at intervals to listen to the voice on the other end of the call.

“Muna is at home. Her schooling is one day on, one day off at the moment. She said it’s one of the ways the government is controlling the spread of the virus. Muna that doesn’t know how to read when school was from Monday to Friday! Is she the one that will know how to read when she goes to school thrice in a week?”

She continued, “Do you think I will be speaking with you for this long if not for WhatsApp call? You know it’s cheaper. Please, send us something if you don’t want hunger to end our lives before you come... Mama is also sick. The doctor said it is typhoid. It must be from the water we drink o. I will get her drug when Harrison gets to his shop tonight. I don’t trust that small girl in his shop o; a girl that just finished secondary school last two months already handling a chemist... My own is that Mama should just get better because I don’t have time to spend in that hospital. You can go in the morning and get to see the doctor in the afternoon. Hmmm... it’s not funny at all...”

She was in a tight situation. So, I left.

It was already dark. I stood at our room’s entrance afraid to go in. I moved back in fear when the door opened. Chinonso came out holding a small bowl of water. They must have just finished eating. “Where have you been? Mother will kill you today.” He gestured with his right hand moving across his neck as a knife is used on a chicken. “Don’t mind him. Mother is already sleeping,” Chima said as he stepped out.

I moved backward, scared that my troublesome brothers might force me into the room.

“See na,” Chima opened the door and moved the curtain aside.

Mother was in bed.

I entered the room, afraid, tired and hungry. Asking for food was not an option. I decided to lay my aching head. Carefully, I climbed the bed to lay quietly beside mother. Suddenly, the torch beside mother's left foot fell and its annoying sound woke her up.

I jumped up.

"Where have you been and where is my 150 naira?" she looked angry. I wanted to urinate. There was no one to plead on my behalf. Chima and Chinonso were outside.

"When did you become deaf and dumb?" she gradually stood up. I ran to the door.

"Where do you think you are running to?"

"I... I... I did not... I did not see... see it," I stammered.

Mother wanted to grab me but I was faster. I ran out of the room, out of the compound to nowhere. I continued running because I could hear my mother running after me. As I left our compound to cross to the other side, I felt something hard hit me to the floor. That was how I got here.

I've lost my legs. Moses, our landlord's son studying Medicine in the university said that if the accident happened in a civilised country, my legs won't be chopped off. I don't know how true his words are but I blame poverty for making 150 naira my mother's millions. I blame my mother for delaying in forgiving me. Her uncontrolled anger has cost me a lot. I blame the driver of the car that was on the move with a bad headlight; the tyres crushed my bones and put me through pain and discomfort. I blame the force personnel who might have ignored the careless driver in exchange for cash; they indirectly exchanged my legs in the process. I blame...

My mother has been mourning. Only a miracle can change my situation. I have stopped her from coming to see me. Chima and Chinonso share the duty of caring for me. It's no easy task caring for

me though they don't say it. Mother keeps pleading for forgiveness through them but I'm still angry.

Chima and Chinonso work in the factory on weekends to assist mother with the cost of caring for me. Our brother sent some money and promised to send more.

The ongoing conversation gets my attention.

"My boss lost two relatives to the South Sudan flood. He has not been himself since that incident. Yesterday, he received the news that his daughter studying abroad tested positive to Coronavirus. I really pity that man o... Such a nice man!" Mama Adeola's visitor sounds hurt.

"What if he decides to relocate to be closer to his family? Many of us will become jobless because he may just sell off that company. It is really difficult to get a job during this pandemic period. The cost of living is also increasing."

"Is the virus truly spreading again? I've heard something like the second wave..." Mama Adeola remarks looking paler than she was before her visitor arrived.

She must be worried for the safety of her children. Every patient in the ward looks curious except Eno. I heard Eno said that she has nothing to lose. Her parents are dead. Even if she contracts the disease and dies, there is no one to cry for her.

"Don't even disturb yourself... Which virus? Go to the market and you will see how people move about freely. It is the 'I too know' set of people that do compress their nose inside this thing. The funny thing is that most of them don't wear it properly."

He tosses his face mask. "I only brought it along with me because it's a criterion to enter here."

"But you said that your boss's daughter tested positive..." Mama Adeola says finding it difficult to be convinced.

“His daughter doesn’t stay here,” he defends his view, “What worries me is not Coronavirus but the conflict in the country. Those of us with children in the force can relate.”

I am confused. My brothers told me that Mr. Chuks, the man who lived in a better part of this state and promised to sponsor ten children from the slum where we stay, through school even to university level has died. He died of Coronavirus. Two distant relatives, according to Moses, lost their lives to the virus too.

There’s a war within me. A war between what is and what isn’t. What is the fate of journalists whose news has lost the trust of many? What is the fate of a government far from the grassroots? What is the fate of a people who lack the necessary knowledge in a fast-paced world? “Doctor!” the visitor calls out to a team of medical practitioners passing by.

They stop and turn to face him.

“Yes?” the lady questions, maintaining social distance.

“I’m not talking to you. I’m talking to the doctor,” he says, pointing at the only male in a team of two females and a male.

“I’m the doctor,” she answers.

“Oh! Alright madam. Please, my head is aching badly.”

“Is that all?”

“Yes doc...doctor.” It seems strange to him to call her that. “I have a terrible headache,” he says.

“Nurse Johnson,” she says facing the male in the team, “administer analgesic.”

“Okay ma.”

The visitor looks confused. Calling a man ‘nurse’ sounds odd to him. It is past visiting time. The visitors are leaving. Some will stay with their sick although the hospital does not provide any provision for them. They are therefore exposed to harsh weather and blood thirsty mosquitoes.

Anita hobbles on crutches to Helen's bed. Helen's bed is next to mine. I know that an argument will soon ensue. That is how their discussions always end.

"See the posts on Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, the Director-General of the World Trade Organisation. I'm so happy for her!" Helen says handing her phone to Anita.

"That is the point I was making the other day. If she hadn't studied abroad, do you think she will get to that height?" Anita continues, "Who will see me and know that I'm a second-class upper graduate?" "Everything is not all about studying abroad. Mamokgethi Phakeng achieved her BSc and MSc in Africa yet she is the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cape Town," Helen replies.

"I have told you about my closest friend at home na!" Anita responds, 'She graduated with a first class but her fiancé got involved in hard drugs to be able to pay her bride price. He was scared to lose her; her mother was already pressuring her to get married even though she was only 28 years old. He got caught and is still in prison. She is a psychiatric patient at the moment. If her uncle did not intervene financially, she would be among those mad people roaming the street, living in misery and wasting their potential."

Helen pats Anita's shoulder, "Have you given up on having a better country?"

Anita flings her hand away, "If the government subsidises the costs or offers free drugs, then those mad people will get healthy enough to contribute to the better country you are shouting about. As for me, I can't wait to leave this country. Do people just wake up in the morning and decide to migrate?"

Anita sounds frustrated, "Mass migration and displacement here is because of poverty, violent conflict and environmental stress. Tell me, aren't you stressed?"

Anita hisses, drops Helen's phone and takes hold of her clutches, "Moreover, it's a man's world here. I'd rather go to a place where my worth will be appreciated."

"It's a man's world as much as a woman's world. If you treat yourself like the queen that you are, others will learn their role in your palace," Helen asserts.

Anita looks at her like she just spewed trash and leaves angrily. My eyes are heavy already. I adjust my bedspread while still sitting on it. A folded paper lay on my bed. Curious, I glue my face to it. Oh! It must have dropped from Anita.

Dear Anita,

How are you? Hope you feel better. I'm sorry about the barrier caused by the distance in your trying times. I've missed you so much and do think about you. It feels ridiculous that I'm writing a letter but your faulty phone gives me no option. I have gist for you.

Do you know that Madam Eno wanted to make me a prostitute when I got here? That one is a topic for another time. At the moment, I work as a nanny for Mr Stanley's family. You still remember him? The man who used to lavish money in our village. The one who impregnated Kachi to be certain she was fertile before paying her bride price. He shouts at Kachi at will telling her how useless her life is without him. While plugging in his phone last week, my eyes popped. I think he has another family elsewhere. Little wonder he protects his phone more than his children.

I lost interest in watching news after I had to listen to talks about End SARS protest, the flood that ended lives and destroyed properties in South Sudan, hunger crisis in the Democratic Republic of Congo, displacement crisis in Burkina Faso, locust outbreak in Ethiopia, conflict in Mozambique... I was getting depressed.

This morning, on my way home, I passed by the COVID-19 vaccination centre though not sure I wanted to get vaccinated because someone said the vaccine can clot one's blood. Despite social distancing, someone stepped on me and still looked at me like I ought to apologise for her fault. So saucy! I couldn't contain my displeasure; I left the place. If I was in my homeland, there would have been no fear of expressing myself.

Hope you got the money I sent to you. Let me know when your phone gets fixed; it's been long since we video-chatted. Get well soon.
Your friend,
Onome.

I fold the paper, unsure of how I will hand it over to Anita. What if she demands to know if I read its content?

Onome is right. Our homeland should provide the shell and freedom our sanity needs. It dawns on me that I am not useless. I don't have legs but I have hands and a brain to contribute to the formation of the country I desire. I choose to forgive my mother and others; strong families make for a standing society. I long for a place to call 'home'. No one truly triumphs and nothing thrives in malice.