

Wineskin in Smoke (A Short Story)

Nigeria is sixty-one. Okalanwuedo thought deeply as she sat at the kitchen stool with her mother who was rather too slow in picking the brown beans in a stainless ash tray, with a nuance which showed that eating dinner would take a very long time.

“Mother! Can we just split once and for all? Okalanwuedo barked angrily at her mother, suddenly jolting her out of her languor.

“It doesn’t mean we would end our blood ties. Hear me out this once mother and speak to me!” Njeria stared nonchalantly at her daughter with an if-only-you’ll-understand look. “I know this is a difficult decision for you to make but, can we just give it a try? We can’t keep on pretending we are siblings and live in the same compound when we obviously act like arch enemies. Even Adam separated from Lot.” She scowled.

Njeria stared at her daughter and yawned derisively. She wanted to talk to her daughter in that way that lovely mothers do to their first daughters at ‘that’ period of their lives, in such manner that would douse all the anger boiling within her and erase the volcanic hatred erupting within her just at the thought of her sister’s thoughtless acts, but sensible words eluded her. Okalanwuedo studied her mother who had become like a wineskin, blackened and shrivelled in smoke. Is there ever a remedy for her? She thought.

Njeria, had been dispirited a long time ago by her series of husbands whose maltreatment had debilitated her beyond her physical endurance, and consequently is being distanced from reality. People had thought it a case of schizophrenia, a kind of disorder that would normally catapult her from her immediate existence and make her seem ignorant of her environment, oblivious of the ceaseless rancour and bloody fights among her daughters, of the estrangements, loneliness, ruins and desolations all around her, the decay – utter decay of everything she had worked and stood for. She had completely been stripped of her being, her essence and personality. Absolutely, everything has fallen apart and the centre can definitely not hold.

Njeria had been a beauty in her youthful days. A beauty so pure and innocent – so much that the foreigners who had heard about her natural endowments, both natural and physical, came to behold and to gain from her benevolence. Even though mostly out of her naïveté, she surrendered her beauty and wealth to them. Her first husband whom she married at a very young age was a foreigner, a British who absconded with her. He had hoodwinked and brainwashed her father into trusting him and believing that he was a man of integrity. Her father had inadvertently sold off their lands to him in exchange of mere gun and cheap rum that would make him break into a silly dance. He even gave her brothers to him as servants and had graciously given her hand in marriage to this albino-like man who seemed to captivate him with his strange language, thinking that he was genuine, that he came to stay.

He had maltreated her until it seemed the maltreatment meted out on her made her stronger. She endured the strange environment, the harsh cold, the physical assault, the forced labour, and all manner of atrocities. Yes! It was severe, but she endured, and at a time, she questioned God's existence. But she was never turn apart because she vowed never to be broken by a foreigner. She knew it was a do-or-die affair so she voiced out her ordeals and grievances, until she was finally heard and broken free from her slavery marriage to the foreigner.

The second husband, the third, fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh to the fifteenth, all from her tribes finally broke her because she could no longer endure. Now she had become a thing of mockery to her neighbours. She who had been the giant, the lender, a pattern to be imitated, had become a laughing stock.

Njeria reminisced when the road that led to her home was smooth and journey was easy while the children visited. She remembered the clean drinking water tap behind her house that ran ceaselessly from year to year. She recollected the government schools her children attended, with the good qualified teachers who made her children what they are now, she remembered the moral values and discipline they were taught rather than using any opportunity to extort money from parents. She remembered how they got their good jobs immediately after school and all the remunerations that followed suit. How there were hardly any news of unemployment among the few University graduates. There were available firms, companies, and manufacturing companies all over because the deteriorations hadn't been so deep. She remembered how people only died of their natural death and not out of stray bullets, unknown gun men, bandits and Fulani herdsmen or Boko Haram, cultism and so on. She remembered how time of harvest of crops was a thing of joy and pride and planted crops thrived because then, there were no grazing animals to trample them. Then, herders had the common sense to graze their animals in their own boundaries and not barging in on people's peaceful communal farms to desecrate and destroy their sweat. She remembered the feeling of peace and complete well-being that exudes from the face of women and their children because they are well fed by their husbands who strive to earn their living and the evidence of their strivings manifested. She remembered how happy she was then, when her children had arisen and had called her blessed ...and the neighbours called her a Giant.

...and now, now all those are past glories. Now, now the hatred and violence among her children – the blood that flows all around the streets... killings and destruction. Corruption! In fact, they have been termed most corrupt amongst her neighbours.

“Ahhhhh! My husbands have completely destroyed me!” Njeria cried in desolation.

Njeria's three daughters Okalanwaudo, Arewa and Oojire who had once been her delight and hope have now become ceaseless source of grief, heart break and agony. They have left her in a state of confusion and doubt about her motherly approach.

Now, the only thing that Okalanwuedo wants to hear is secession and her threat is driving her crazy. Arewa suddenly became a traitor and cannot allow her sisters to drink water and keep cup. Her selfishness and hatred had become so obvious and murderous, as if there's a strange force swiftly pushing her towards her insane actions against her siblings.

“It really makes no sense! Okalanwuedo reiterated. We don't even resemble in any way. I am brown in colour, and almost fair, but she is very dark. I am free minded, a core entrepreneur and a brilliant hustler. She is nothing like me. Arewa is a stick-in-the-mud wanderer, reserved and annoyingly dumb, yet inherently violent and tyrannical. Our language and culture, tradition and religion are completely distinct. The union must discontinue by all means!”

Okalanwuedo looked at Oojire who was gazing at Arewa almost reverently, yet her stance seemed indecisive. Okalanwuedo had for a long time given up on her as a team since her inactions and betrayal aroused antipathy between both of them so she made a decision to fight the fight alone. She had no pleasure on those that want to be second fiddle all their miserable lives.

Njeria looked at her daughter who was now fuming with anger and suddenly jerked up from her sit, suddenly shocking her.

“Go and talk to your father - my husband and your uncles. Tell them your grievances. Tell them that your unemployed graduate children are hungry. That they are hungry not because they are incapable of fending for themselves but because they have been denied facilities to make ends meet. Tell them that they have been termed “lazy youths” unfairly because they are not lazy. They are exceptionally talented. They are astounding fashion designers and hair stylists, intelligent builders and decorators, amazing artists, awesome singers and poets, brilliant actors, optimistic farmers, ambitious Doctors, prospective Engineers and Lawyers.

Tell them that your children go to journey of no return because of the dilapidated roads they are forced to travel on while your father and Uncles fly above them pretending they don't see their blood flowing on the roads and their broken bones lost in the bushes. Tell them how intensely aggrieved you are about the sudden disappearance of your children. How we now sleep with one eye open, afraid of gun shots that wake us up at the middle of the night leaving our hearts beating like heavy rain on roof tops; of how unsecured we are in our own communities and yet they don't care.

Tell them that we are tired of severing relationships with our children who leave us to go for greener pastures in foreign lands, who yearn for the necessities of life which naturally should be at their beck and call in their own home lands but yet, they strive day and night to achieve and it slips away from their grips only for them to find a grip among the Whites. Same Whites who detest them and see them as inferior beings. Tell them that an achievement gained in another man's land is not ours. Tell them that we are tired of injustice and unfairness. Equity is our hearts cry. Tell them that we are tired of their inactions. Tell them not to fold their arms any longer and watch us

die of hunger and starvation while they stark our money into their bank accounts abroad. Ask them why our fundamental human rights suddenly became fallacies that our freedom of speech was termed ‘hate speech.’ Is it for us not to speak our minds and then gulp down our grievances like slaves in our own countries? Go and tell your father thus!

Okalanwuedo stared at her mother wide-eyed, wondering where her strength and agility suddenly came from. She peered through the window to have a glimpse of her father. Through the window, she saw her Uncles surrounding him. Recently, they have been like thick smoke, saturating his senses, veiling his sight, obstructing his hearing, clouding his judgments and all together, making a lead out of his legs that movement became arduous.

“How can I possibly communicate with my father when I have these ‘cows’ of men to contend with? When they have taking charge of everything - decisions and all even when he is alive... or is he even still alive? Mother, is father dead? Is that why my Uncles are surrounding him? Speak to me mother!”

Njeria looked at her daughter with tears in her eyes, her lower lip trembling. “I don’t know my child. I don’t know whether he is dead or alive. Your Uncles made me swear an oath of secrecy. You know how cruel and powerful they are and I don’t want any trouble with them please. I beg you to keep calm and watch what tomorrow would bring...”

“And watch till we are all killed? Okalanwuedo barked, interrupting her mother. I’d rather die in action than live in ignorance all through my life.”

The sound of gun shots awoke the neighborhoods at the wee hours of the morning. Shooting men raised their gun, shooting anyone and anything on sight. Burning down people’s homes and hailing curses beneath their breaths. Sounds of stomping feet scrambling from their homes to the bush for ‘safety.’ Women hurling their toddlers to their shoulders, and running with determination, praying to finally survive and take care of their children. Men dashing to the nearest bush, old men and women lying low on the floor waiting endlessly for the sound of gunshots to stop. A young man trying to escape through the fence in terror slashed his belly hanging on the fence, blood oozing uncontrollably. Young girls shrieking in fear, and the children who could no longer locate their mothers bellowed, calling their mothers. Shouts and cry of horror filled the air while people ran helter-skelter dashing inside the bush, waiting for the day to dawn. The gun men had besieged the community early that morning with the plan of destroying every living thing there.

“Who are those gun men?” A man whispered to no one in particular. Some of the villagers had ran behind the stream and squatted, waiting for the chaos to subside. “You better remove this white

shirt you are wearing oo. It will soon give us out.” Another man whispered to a young man squatting beside him and still in shock. He pulled the shirt over his head with a speed of lightning.

“This is the second time this week. Are they trying to wipe out our community? Where do we run to for safety?”

“Is that not one of the reasons I’m talking about secession?” Okalanwuedo asked Mama Oluebube who visited them the next day after the early morning gunshots. “Fifty five people were killed all together. Out of the fifty five, thirty five were men. Thirty five men died in a twinkle of an eye, making thirty five widows in one community. Whom do we complain to? Who knows whether they will come back tomorrow and kill more? Do we run away from our community? Where do we even run to?”

“Have you not heard about how they butchered the town crier and his whole family at his own farm while they were harvesting their cassava plants and made away with all their crops?” Mama Oluebube asked hysterically.

“Hei Chimoo!” Okalanwuedo bellowed. “Arewa has joined hands with my Uncles to bring this fate upon us, and they said we should not fight back. They said we should not retaliate. If they cannot meet up with our demands, can’t they at least leave us alone in peace?” Okalanwuedo wailed. She untied and tied her wrapper, and, dashing outside the street, ran to the Meeting Place.

The road to the Meeting Place has a distinct ostentatious level of wealth and profusion. A distinction made by the unanimous taxation of the community to alleviate the poor conditions of living and to maintain solid and steady education system. Yet these taxes were not put to use. Rather, Arewa and her Uncles reveled luxuriantly at the expense of the community’s poverty.

As she ran to the Meeting Place, Okalanwuedo remembered the early morning gun shots and increased her steps the more. The agony in her mother’s voice when she demanded that she voice out her grievances to her Uncles reminded her that it is now or never. She ran as fast as her legs could carry her until she seemed faint and tasted the mixture of salty sweat and boiling anger in her tongue.

Reaching the Meeting Place, she banged hard on the huge dark gate, alerting the Soldiers on duty.

“Who are you looking for woman?” One of the Soldiers barked at Okalanwuedo as he opened the gate.

“Let me in this moment!” She said as she gained entrance and swiftly moved in to the Meeting Place.

Inside the Meeting Place sat Arewa, being surrounded by her Uncles who were discussing in a low tone. Okalanwuedo entered and sat down, automatically hushing their conversation. It seemed they were into some kind of conspiracy, as if the atmosphere suddenly became violated by her presence. But she knew one thing – she belongs here as much as Arewa and no one can dispute that fact. She greeted her Uncles and quietly sat down. “If eye could kill” was the kind of piercing glare she received from them all starting from Arewa.

“Speak! Why are you here?” Arewa thundered with a scowl. Okalanwuedo stood up and tied her wrapper properly, raising her right hand to the upper part of her face and chanted:

“I pledge to Nigeria my country
To be faithful loyal and honest
To serve Nigeria with all my strength
To defend her unity
And uphold her honour and glory
So help me God.”

Okalanwuedo sat down sensing the unsettling stares from her Uncles.

“We have all failed our mother.” She said looking at their faces. “Is this how we have kept our vows? Is this how we have defended her unity, by tribalism and nepotism, by fighting and killing each other? Then we have failed woefully. We have trampled on her honour and glory instead of upholding it as we vowed. Can’t we see how deceitful we have been with our words? Are we not supposed to be in this together, striving, sowing and reaping equally together? A child’s heart gladdens when he is treated equally with his mates. The reality is that it seems we can no longer stand as one. What do we stand to gain by destroying our own generation by ourselves? What would posterity remember us for? Don’t our integrity matter to us any longer?”

All I am saying is this: Let the right things be done in this country. Let us take responsibility for what we are here for. Let us give answers to our people’s problems. Let us just give them enough reasons to trust us again. Is that too much to ask?

“What is all this drama? Arewa fumed. “Her presence here makes me sick!” She spat and stormed out.

“Uncle Umar, tell me, where is my father? Okalanwuedo asked one of her Uncles without even noticing Arewa’s outrageous exit.

“Is he still alive? Why is my father silent about the situation of things around here? Why is he neither saying nor doing anything to assure our people of their security and hope for a better tomorrow? Why? Please speak to me. Can I at least see him if he is still alive?”

“Why do you want to see him? Uncle Atanku asked. “Give us your message, it will be conveyed to him.”

Okalanwuedo stared at them marveled, as she shook her head in bewilderment. This is where we are now. Okalanwuedo thought. I cannot see my father whom I have no knowledge of his existence. There's yet no answer to the killings going on everywhere. Njeria still remains a wine skin in smoke, until her creator comes to her rescue.

****The End****

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