

Homeless

“Will mother flog me today, Nne¹?” enquired my seven-year-old brother Ebuka, as we walked home from school. He was holding my hand – his small head arched expectantly towards me.

“Of course,” I said and made a face at him. “The way you are looking, one could mistake you for a pig.”

5 His chubby face clouded as he digested² this unpleasant piece of information. Mother’s remonstrations³ was not an event to look forward to. Her outbursts were extremely emotional, and were usually characterized by heart-rending sobs.

He stared down at his crumpled clothes and made a futile attempt to appear presentable. There were several dirt stains on his school uniform – a tell-tale⁴ account of his afternoon indiscretions⁵. It was obvious he had engaged himself in a rowdy playing session during break time.

10 “But Nne, it was not my fault; my friend, Munachi, is responsible. He kept grabbing me with his dirty hands while we were playing. I told him to stop but he wouldn’t listen. He even poured sand in my eyes, and when I told him to stop...”

15 Ebuka went on and on. He was fervently trying to present his case as he half-jogged and half-trotted to keep up with my long strides. His voice trailed off in my ears. I was walking fast and wasn’t paying attention to what he was saying. He was in the habit of getting into trouble and always blamed his friends for his woes⁶.

20 Angry car horns honked right and left. The midday sun was at its harshest, blazing down from the skies [...]. It was a busy time of day and navigating the traffic was a challenge. I held Ebuka firmly in my hand as we got set to cross yet another road. At his age, he still hadn’t realized that motor cars could kill someone. Once I had caught him running after a truck that was ferrying goats and squealing with delight.

Good thing I held him on leash⁷ because at that moment, one of his friends – being ferried home in his father’s car – called out to Ebuka as they sped past us. My brother almost started after the car but I was able to restrain him firmly. He started jumping and waving at his friend with glee.

25 I looked at him as he jumped up and down on his bare feet, obviously overjoyed at seeing his friend. His tattered⁸-looking uniform, like mine, had seen better days. Mother couldn’t afford to buy us new uniforms. To us, going to school with footwear was a luxury. The only pairs we had were reserved for Sundays and other special occasions – to ensure their longevity⁹. But my brother was untroubled by these details. He was yet to know the difference between being poor and rich.

30 Several cars bearing other schoolchildren drove past us as we trudged home, accompanied by the familiar irritating pressure and burning sensation on the soles of our feet. When, after a while, Ebuka became silent, I knew from experience that his feet were hurting. I would have carried him on my back, as I used to do in the past, but he was too big for me now.

To distract him from his travails I spoke softly to him.

¹ nigeriansk pigenavn

² fordøjede

³ irettesættelse

⁴ afslørende

⁵ udskejelser

⁶ ulykker

⁷ held him on leash: havde fat i ham

⁸ pjaltet

⁹ (her) holdbarhed

“We are almost home. I will tell Mother that it wasn’t your fault that your clothes got so dirty.”

35 His face brightened at this suggestion. He looked at me and winked conspiratorially in that unique manner of his that reminded me so much of our father. Ebuka and I were the only children borne by our parents, but we were more than brother and sister. Even though the age difference between us was just six years, I had a strong matronly¹⁰ attachment towards him – maybe because I had been taking care of him since the day he was born. On his part, he treated me rather deferentially¹¹, as if I was his junior mother.

40 The death of Father two years ago was a cruel blow to mother and me. Father was my friend. We shared a close kinship and affinity which was not uncommon between father and daughter. Ebuka didn’t know what it was like to be dead. And, to parry his endless questions about Father’s whereabouts, we had told him that father had traveled “overseas”.

Ebuka often reminded me of Father, because they were so alike, especially in certain mannerisms¹².
45 Father used to wink at me that way whenever he and I colluded to keep something from Mother.

We trudged on [...]. I was hungry and my stomach grumbled repeatedly in protest. I hadn’t had breakfast because the leftover food of the night before wasn’t enough for me and Ebuka. Most times, mother and I had to forsake food so that Ebuka could eat.

50 We lived in a sprawling¹³ neighborhood which consisted of shanty houses, zinc tents, and mud contraptions¹⁴. It was always pervaded by a steady ooze of odor that emanated from the slime-drenched gutters, putrefying carcasses of dead animals and other disagreeable elements of life. There was the occasional cement building in a few areas, but their smoke- and dirt-drenched exteriors¹⁵ had yellowed with age and misuse.

Our home was a rag-tag¹⁶ assembly of wood, zinc and misshapen clay bricks. Mother had ingeniously¹⁷
55 draped a lengthy tarpaulin cover over the roof and it extended outwards over the frontage. This was the reason we didn’t get drenched during the rainy seasons. Under the frontage extension, she had nursed a small kiosk into life – our only source of livelihood.

I had learnt long ago not to be proud of my home. On my first day in school, I had naively exposed myself to open ridicule when during routine personal introductions I had unwittingly told the class where I
60 lived with my parents. [...]

We had moved to this place some years ago when Father lost his job as a railway worker. It had been a shocking departure from the railway quarters where we used to live. It was as if we had fallen from grace¹⁸
and Father took it very hard. Several times before he died, I caught him gritting his teeth in sadness. We all struggled to adapt to the new environment. But it was my home nonetheless, and there was nothing I
65 could do about it – at least not while I was still in school. I lived for the day I would be able to start work and earn enough money to relocate my family to a more conducive¹⁹ environment.

We were already in the neighborhood when we heard the first loud crash.

Ebuka and I tensed, and then sprinted the last few blocks to our home. We were just in time to witness what would become the darkest episode of our lives.

¹⁰ (her) moderlig

¹¹ ærbødig

¹² manéer

¹³ vidtstrakt

¹⁴ *mud contraptions*: (her) underlige beboelser af ler

¹⁵ *smoke- and dirt-drenched exteriors*: (her) tilsodede og snavsede ydre

¹⁶ rodebunke

¹⁷ opfindsomt

¹⁸ *fallen from grace*: faldet i unåde

¹⁹ gunstigt

70 It was with shock we beheld the scene.

We met a pack of people running about frenziedly. The objects of their distress were three menacing-looking²⁰ bulldozers. I had seen similar machines before at construction sites, only this time, they were being used as agents of destruction. The three of them swung around in a vicious circle, pulling and knocking down buildings.

75 There were shouts of anguish and confusion. I watched with horror as a middle-aged woman stripped naked and threw herself on the ground before her dingy zinc hut.

“Kill me!” she shrieked. “Kill me, what are you waiting for?”

Some men of the neighborhood hurriedly draped a cloth around the struggling woman and carried her away. She was kicking and cursing with all her might.

80 “Cursed be the day you were born! You all are cursed from this day!” she cried, her eyes flashing in anger.

The unheeding²¹ bulldozers rammed into her hut and crushed it to pieces.

People were running around in a frenzied manner, trying to salvage properties from their doomed buildings. Mother was one of them.

85 There was a fierce wild look about her [...]. She herded us into the house and started throwing things around. I joined her. Ebuka stood and watched us, as if he could not comprehend what was happening.

It was happening at last – the threat of demolition²² which had hung over our heads for the past few months. It all began to make sense – Mother’s weird behavior over the past few days. She had been irritable, snapping at me and Ebuka and talking in her sleep. She must have known that they were coming and yet her unflinching hope had left her unprepared for this moment. The few families who had the means had moved away from the neighborhood. We only stayed because we had nowhere to go.

90 Mother was whimpering. “Oh my goodness, oh my goodness,” and something unintelligible in her dialect²³ as we desperately shuffled clothes and other household items into bags, battered boxes and suitcases.

95 We heard another loud crash outside. The shanty buildings were crashing on all sides. Dust, debris and startling sounds of collapsing buildings intensified the terror of the moment. It was all too much for Ebuka. He started to cry.

Mother turned and yelled at him. “Pack! Pack something!”

100 It was a miracle how we managed to get our belongings out of the shack before the bulldozers swung in our direction. Mother drew us to her bosom and her hands trembled as she gripped us tightly. I opened my mouth in a soundless scream as one of the rampaging bulldozers shoved our makeshift²⁴ shack aside.

A few hours after the bulldozers had done their bit and gone away, it started to rain. Dusk was fast approaching. Solemn-looking clouds hung low and mournfully from the skies. A few vultures, in defiance of the rain, waited and flapped their wings in earnest expectation. I heard moans of despair and grief.

105 Ebuka and I clung to each other on a nearby bench – shivering. We still hadn’t had our lunch. We watched as Mother moved about in the rain, gathering pieces of our belongings that were scattered everywhere. It was an unpleasant sight: clothes, cooking utensils, books, earthenware and pieces of furniture were strewn across what used to be our front yard.

²⁰ faretruende

²¹ ustoppelige

²² nedrivning

²³ (her) nigeriansk dialekt

²⁴ (her) simpelt konstruerede

110 It looked like a place flattened by war. Our ghetto neighborhood had been turned into [...] battered
fragments of wood and piles of broken bricks. Thick layers of dust and plumes of smoke rose from the
smoldering ground, in the midst of which stood the occasional²⁵ wardrobe, kitchen cupboard or iron bed-
frame, all that remained of family homes.

A few distressed-looking figures picked among the debris like the vultures that were waiting patiently by
the corner, while others gathered in small dazed groups with folded arms.

115 Mother hadn't spoken a word since the bulldozers brought our shack down, but her demeanour spoke
volumes²⁶.

My fear of the dark and unknown seemed to encircle me, but as I watched Mother moving about in the
rain, her back hunched in despair, I knew that could never name the color of her pain.

(2008)

²⁵ tilfældigt efterladte

²⁶ *her demeanour spoke volumes*: hendes ansigtsudtryk talte sit tydelige sprog