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My Father's Beer

Ezeiyoke Chukwunonso
Nigeria

My father worships Star Beer. Quite early in the morning at those hours when the day begs the night to drag the remaining of its tattered cloth home, if anything happened to bring you in our veranda, you would find him with his green bottle, drinking. His figure was always like a shadow, like a ghost waiting patiently to strike as he leaned his imposing tall and lanky body at our wall. He had a knack in wearing that singlet's of his that struggled between answering a brown (acquired colour) or white (in which it came with), the type our sanitary teacher calls it-was-white. And it would loosely hang on him like it was given to him by a fat friend who first wore and got tired of it. Or like our tired school flag loosely hung on its pole begging to be changed. He hardly answered any greeting, always in a deep thought. I kept thinking what he was thinking. I kept wondering when he sleeps or should I rather say whether he sleeps at all. He would be the last to go into slumber (if he ever does) and the first to rise.

My obsession during those periods was to breakthrough my father, to get close to him. It was a desperate need that made me get glued to him like a dog to a meat. But most importantly, I needed to see a father like the pictures of the fathers most of my friends in the school painted of their fathers. I needed a father who cared. Not necessarily the one who pet, or some I would watch in Hollywood movies reading for their children beside the bed. I hardly watch Hollywood movies, they don't have guns. They only have charms. Any movie without shooting wasn't my cup of tea. I love seeing gunfire so much so that one day when I was returning from Ogige Market, Nsukka where I bought Gino tomato for my mother, I saw thieves robbing Zenith Bank nearby. They were shooting sporadically on the air. Where most people were running away to a nearby safe distance, people in my group, we were quite many still, were rushing into the crime scene like houseflies would rush to a decayed exposed rotten meat. We thought it was a live movie. We were hailing them. Some adults had to go to nearby shops to get bags of sachet water for them to cool their hands. Some of them I heard were shouting and raising their hands up, "Pull the bank down, this is *naija*". But there were two elderly men who were standing beside me and kept complaining of poverty. I can remember one of them telling the other that he was hungry, never had remembered the last time he had eaten three square meals per day and there were people had the gut to be packing money in a mortuary. But my thrill did not last long. There were stray bullets that got one of us who thought we were watching a live movie. The way the fat man shouted, the way the blood pumping out from his body painted the bullet-torn white shirt of his down to his blue tight jean, red, and the way he fell made a haunting dream for me for years. But the thieves didn't seem to know what they did. Even if they knew, it was nothing for them. It was like nothing had happened. Business went on as usually. Although some of the spectators were shouting, nobody told me to run as much as my leg could carry me home. I however forgot the Gino tomato at the crime site.

I asked my two friends Emeka and Obinna one day during school recreation, the day our teacher asked us to write a composition about our father as an English test, whether their father read beside their bed for them. The two answered no. Emeka said it made no meaning a father doing that. That it would be boring. The reading exercise Mrs. Ngo, our teacher

tortures us with was more than enough without adding any more to it. Besides, his father always barks at him and beats him. He hates him, he doesn't pet him the way his mother does. But Obinna said that he would ask his father to try that with him. The fact that somebody could talk to his father and even ask him for a favour was for me something of a fairy-tale. When would I in my life have such an opportunity? Is it in the evening when around 4.00 pm, my father would stagger back from work, (I wondered if he had ever gone one at all) or from the bar. He hardly left the veranda for work. The only certain thing that takes him out was going to the bar. Mother would tell me later that rather his highest attraction to venture out of that veranda was if he wanted to collect his dividends from the family trustee. But I had even wished to have a father like that of Emeka. A father who knew I existed. A father who I could even say that I hate. With my own, I was in another realm. I was in the world of nothingness, in the world of inexistences.

They asked me whether my father read for me. I continued the lie I began in our composition. I went to the imagery I created in my fantasy and the world I got from movies, to tell them the character of what my father was. I told them how he would come beside my bed before I sleep with a story book. Sometimes it would be folklore, sometimes it would be Christian story and sometimes, it would be just an ordinary one. He would read a whole lot of them to me, slowly and carefully watching me to fall asleep. And when he thought I did, he would kiss my forehead and then would cover me with blanket. He would then stand at the door for sometime atching me before closing the door gently behind him. My friends were perplexed and impressed. They longed to be me. I knew that that would be how Mrs. Ngo would feel after reading my composition. She would charge her husband to do a similar thing to her kid. But Obinna nearly caught me at my lie, although he never knew. He asked me to tell him the names of those books so that he would ask his father to buy them for him. But thank God that I had become a professional liar. Sometimes in my present life, I have told many lies that I hardly know where to locate my truth from my false. I told him that I do close my eyes when the reading goes on and I couldn't have known any of the books' names. But his curiosity was annoying, he wanted me to tell him one of those stories in those books, but God saved me from the embarrassment. The bell signifying end of the recreation went, I took a deep breath. I told him to rush to the class as we did not want canes. He quickly concurred, he hate the cane more than I did. Three of us had to run back.

When I went home that day, I was angry. Not just angry, my heart was heavily beating on my chest as if five abled-bodied young men were bounding fufu on it. I was sure a passer-by would be hearing it. I was angry that my father hadn't been angry with me or happy. I decided that when I would get home I would ask my mother what was wrong with my father. I would ask her why my father was like that. Why did he only drink? But on getting home, I was still in our flower-widowed avenue when I heard my mother's barking with her growling voice. Probably she saw me from the window. Her fierce and wolfish voice was renting off the roof. It could cause earthquake. Ginika would later tell me that her raging made our electric pole one day to uproot and fall flat on the ground. My mother's raging in anger was like a pot of water at 250 centigrade blowing off its top. And the raging was erratic. Nobody knew what actually would make her angry. Sometimes, you would do something you would think she would kill you if she knows like stealing fish or meat from the soup pot in the night. If she realised, and she had knack of doing so, she would just sigh and go away. But if for instance you may make a little mistake like not greeting her in the morning, then you would be surprised to see her rage. It doesn't work like mathematics. The reverse always became the cases often. But I think that today's case was that probably somebody else had annoyed her and she wanted to vent the aggression because I knew I had done nothing wrong. She always transfers her aggression, a second hobby I believe. The first

was watching and wrestling with people. The other day she wrestled with Mrs. Ifeoma over a rumour she had heard. She always wins and it doesn't end only in winning, she injures people. And that was why she abhors me fighting people because she believes I would wound them just like her. But I don't, even in the school, I don't. "Don't try it at home", she would scream at me. But she tries hers not only at home but even outside: at church, at market. The day she fought Mrs. Ifeoma, it was at the market. I don't know who or whatever gave her the rumour but she claimed that she without doubt had evidence that Mrs. Ifeoma was carrying her name around with a false accusation. The false accusation she refused disclosing to people. But Obinna would later ask me about that a day after the fight "Was it true that your mother bewitched your father so that he would be incapable of doing anything apart from drinking?" Mine wasn't fighting, mine was beating. I beat hell out of Obinna and beat heaven inside him. We became enemies for a week before Emeka reconciled us back.

But in my mother's case, she never, (let me be fair), she hardly reconciled with people even after she wounded the person. She nearly bit off Mrs. Ifeoma's right ear. Thank God that she was immediately rushed to Dr. Nnaji's hospital by the passers-by who came to separate the fight. My classmates would later taunt me because of that in the class. 'Cannibal', they would in mockery, call me at my back. I fought, beat up those who I could but when the name became so infamous and was threaten to take my real name in the school, I reported them to our teacher, Mrs. Ngo. The entire school feared her because she knew all types of terrible punishment to give if you happened to fall in her case. From frog jump, the one where somebody would hop like a frog across the field tract, to sit on the air, the one where somebody would bend like sitting, suspending freely oneself. There was also her pick a pin, where one would bed down like a person picking something from the ground then would raise one of one's legs up. She was ever creative in forging punishments like authorities during the dark ages. When she announced in our school dismissing assembly that people should stop calling me that name, it quickly reduced but the few stubborn ones continued. They created a new tactic to call me that. If they were two, one would call 'Canni' and the other would add 'bal'. Depending on how many they were, they would share the name among themselves. It was a precaution they would forge so that I could find it hard saying that one particular person called me that name. Each would justify that what he said was just this, not the name. Anyway that didn't last.

Notwithstanding all these I suffered because of Mrs. Ifeoma and my mother, two weeks later when she returned back from the hospital, I went to buy pepper and rice from her shop. My mother sent me. Naturally, her shop was nearer to my house than any other shop, so I went ahead to buy those items there. I missed her when she wasn't there; buying things were becoming more difficult since other shops were a bit far from my house. When I got home quickly, my mother asked me where those items came from. I told her. The pepper went into my eyes and I nearly became blind. She never ate that rice.

With that her howling and calling me names, I opened the door to the parlour waiting for worst. And surprise, nothing happened. Perhaps she saw my heavy face and knew that something serious was bothering me or just another erratic nature of hers, who knows? The only thing she did before turning back to the kitchen where she was cooking was to dump the cloth I wetted last night on the floor in front of me without talking and left. I knew what that meant and quickly picked my cloth. I went straight to wash them without even removing my school uniform. I just managed to drop my school bag on a nearest cushion in our parlour.

Throughout the time I was washing my cloth; my mind was still with my father. If only he could leave his drinking even for a moment. It was then that an idea came to me. I decided to implement it.

I left the cloth I was washing to go to his bedroom. He always keeps his door unlocked whenever he goes out. I went to his wardrobe and collected his entire singlet. Not long, he staggered back home. I went near his room waiting to hear him fume with anger but not him.. He went to where he kept his drink under the bed and brought one out. As usual, he went to the veranda and started drinking, now wearing the singlet he came with. It was a bit neater more than the rest which had stains all over.

I was angry, I kept wondering what kind of a person my father was. Strange.

Two days later, I had invented what else I thought would make draw his attention.

I had told my mother a lie on a compulsory new book introduced in our curriculum. And that we were mandated to pay for the book. I had told her that without the payment, they would flog me and chase me out of the class. And to put more pressure on her, I refused preparing for school. She under duress was obliged to hand-out the cash.

After the school, when I was coming back home, I went to a shop where they sell alcohol and bought one. When I knew that the likely time for him to come back from God-knows-where had come, I went at the veranda and sat at his usual position. I opened the bottle and began sipping. It was bitter. I spitted it out and I just kept the bottle close to my mouth.

When I saw him coming home, I pretended I was drinking until he got closer. His reaction was of utmost bewilderment and shock. He was transfixed like a ghost that suddenly realised that it wasn't invisible as it had thought. He stood still lost. He quickly regained himself and charged at me like a lion that just completed forty days feasting and saw a pry. His staggering went into thin air. The impulse that came to me was to run but I stood my ground. I wanted his body to touch mine, even if it was his beating.

He pulled away the bottle from my hand. When he was doing this, I didn't struggle, I just hugged his leg. It seemed he understood my need. He held me for a moment before pushing me aside. With the beer, he staggered into the parlour. Immediately I saw our dinner curtain closed. I guess mother was watching us. Throughout the day I was thinking of what it was like holding father's leg. I told Ginka about it but she never gave a damn. She was in her own world. Years later when she was only craving attentions of elderly men and I, refusing to marry, my parents would be sending trains of delegates from our extended families to beg us. "Don't make this family a failed one", they would plead. "People are already laughing at us".

The crashing of furniture from my father's room woke me at night. It was around 2.00 am. I thought it was a war. But later, I mustered courage and wanted to check out what it was. I used my left hand to trace my way in the dark searching for my door. I finally got at my door. Once at the corridor leading my room to that of my father, I was able to hear clearly their fighting and cursing.

"So you want to fight me?" I heard my father muttering out amid heavy breathing like one carrying a load.

“Don’t be ashamed of yourself, you called yourselves a man and a woman is fighting you. Stop running, come and fight”

“What did you say... you think you are a woman... you are a prostitute.”

The running became intensified. More violent sounds from fallen furniture began emanating.

“Wait let me catch you, idiot... you are calling me a prostitute”. My mother said breathing fast

“What are you...?” My father asks giving out sharp breath.

“You are the saint’. My mother said amidst tiring breathing. ‘That you caught me with your best friend since last ten years made you turn to an alcoholic, Mr. Saint, isn’t it? I broke your heart nah... that would be what you would be telling yourself. Do you know how many times you have broken mine?’”

“I did nothing to you.”

“So you foolishly think. You think I don’t know that even on our wedding night that you slept with my best friend, my chief bridesmaid? Didn’t you?”

My father kept quiet.

“Talk nah... do you think that I don’t know the countless numbers of women you fuck? That you sleep with Mrs. Ifeoma virtually every day? Talk nah....”

My father didn’t talk.

“Let me tell you what you never knew, that I slept with your friend for last ten years was revenge. I intentionally made you catch us so that you would see how sweet it was. Stupid you never had a heart. You were the one to break down first. Idiot!”

They were still scattering furniture. Things were crushing on the ground.

“Let me tell you’, my mother spoke again, “It had been long I divorced you in my heart. That I still live in this house with you is because of what people would say if I go home. How they would treat me as if I am a failure, someone who couldn’t handle her home. Whoever you sleep with, whatever you do to your life isn’t my concern. My concern is these children. Be careful with your drinking habit. They are copying you. I will kill you anytime I notice again that Ebuka is copying you. But for tonight, let me show you a tip of the iceberg....”

They started running more fanatically. My father was shouting. They were running towards the door to the corridor.... I quickly ran back to my bed.