

Home



UKAMAKA OLISAKWE

The Sentinel Literary Quarterly

Monday Writer

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Ukamaka Olisakwe, Monday Writer, 28 September 2020

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About Ukamaka Olisakwe

Ukamaka Olisakwe grew up in Kano, Nigeria, and now lives in Vermont, United States.

In 2014, she was named one of the continent's most promising writers under the age of 40 by the UNESCO World Book Capital for the Africa39 project. In 2016, she was awarded an honorary fellowship in Writing from the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa. In 2018, she won the Vermont College of Fine Arts' Emerging Writer Scholarship for the MFA in Writing and Publishing program.

Ukamaka, a finalist for the Miles Morland Writing Scholarship, has had her works appear in the *New York Times*, *Granta*, *Longreads*, *The Rumpus*, *Catapult*, *Rattle*, *Waxwing*, *Jalada*, *Hunger Mountain*, *Sampsonia Way*, and more.

Her novels include *Eyes of a Goddess* and *Ogadinma*.

The Monday Writer Interview

UKAMAKA OLISAKWE

in conversation with **Nnorom Azuonye**

I first got to know about you when we published your short story, 'Girl to Woman', in Sentinel Nigeria in May 2011. Have you continued to write and publish short fiction?

I have, yes! It has been a long time since 'Girl to Woman'. That publication was the validation I needed at that time in my life; it came barely one year after I started writing stories. I have published a list of short stories ever since, some of which have appeared in magazines and journals including *Waxwing Mag*, *Jalada*, *The Sampsonian Way*, the *Africa39 Anthology*, and so many others.

You have dabbled into poetry and essays as well, is that correct?

Yes, I got my first poem, 'Slut', published in the Rattle Magazine last fall. I have had my essays appear in *The New York Times*, *Catapult*, *Longreads*, *The Rumpus*, and others. Most of these are creative non-fiction pieces themed around motherhood and pregnancy, and womanhood.

In a 2012 email to me you wrote "in time I would finally quit the banking job and concentrate on my academics and a life of writing." You were working as a Customer Service Officer in a Nigerian bank at the time. What was the banking experience like and how did it feed your writing of the television series *The Calabash*?

The banking industry was a horror story. The sexism. The blatant misogyny. Enduring bosses who assaulted me and threatened to kick me out of my job. I was bitter. I lost a lot of weight. I was clinically depressed. But then, I met a friend who read my email and encouraged me to tell stories. Writing offered me an escape from that purgatory of a job. After I completed my first novel and got a few short stories out, I began work on the 104-episode TV series, *The Calabash*, which is centred on the banking system. That series was the therapy I needed. It washed me clean, and I was able to move on to other projects.

When would you say the 'life of writing' you craved really took off, with the publication of your debut novel *Eyes of a Goddess* (2012) or with the commissioning of *The Calabash*?

I think it came after I joined 35 other writers from around the world in Iowa for the International Writing Program hosted by the University of Iowa in 2016. Being a part of that community of talented people from diverse cultures opened up something in my mind, and I began to reflect on my writing, the stylistic choices I made, how I interpreted communal experiences in my stories and how I played with language. I am very deliberate with the choices I make these days; gone are the days I paid more attention to the content rather the languaging of the story.

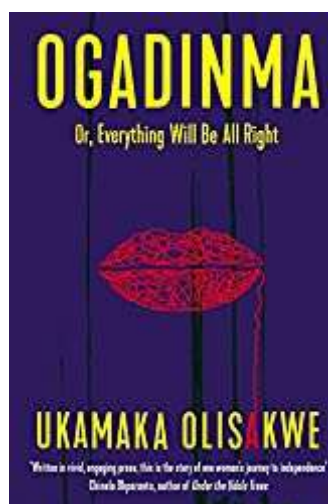
On your academics, you began with studying English and Geography at the Federal College of Education, Kano, and then Computer Science. In what area is your doctoral pursuit?

I am pursuing a PhD in English, with a specialisation in Creative Writing. Ten years ago, I never would have imagined myself in academia. Being on a creative track, with a minor in the critical track, I have learned to be a lot more deliberate with my stories. I am no longer as impatient as I used to be, and I think that is a good thing.

I know how important your family is to you. How hard has it been for you to pursue your dreams in America away from your daughters and son?

A hard question. I miss my family terribly. My daughter, Chidinma, turns 18 on September 28 and I am sad. I want to be there with her. I want to hold and kiss her and tell her that she has grown into the bravest, most courageous, and the most beautiful young woman, and I am lucky to be her mother.

The distance hurts. I am thankful though, because I have my family's blessings; they always remind me to put myself first. They remind me that I gave up so much for marriage and childbearing. They want me to live a little, and say it is okay to be ambitious, to be selfish, to put my mental health first. I am glad. However, I still want my family with me.



Let's go to Ogadinma. I thought I must tackle you about that title and I may not be the first to ask you this; is the correct word Ogadinma or Ogadimma, since 'nma' is knife and 'mma' is well/alright/beauty? Also, why is the book titled 'Ogadinma or Everything will be alright?' Is the translation necessary?

Finally, this question everyone has been asking. First, *Ogadinma* is my love letter to the women in my community, who were shipped to marriages when they were barely teenagers, in the 80s. Ogadinma is a composite of these women, who bore names like Chidinma, Ogadinma, Ositadinma, Uzodinma—a lot of “nmas” in my hometown in Abagana in southeastern Nigeria, at a time when we, as a larger Igbo community, weren't embroiled in the debate about the proper way of spelling that adjective—*Nma*. I chose that spelling, not because I was interested in muddling the waters or engaging with the opposing schools; it simply is a tribute to the various Nmas in my life who lived, who still live. Also, my late aunt, whom my father loved and still mourns, was called Ositadinma, spelt with “nma.” My daughter's name is spelled Chidinma. It's a long family history, and I was not going to tweak or erase that history in my novel for the sake of persuading or opposing the tenuous debate. Every other conversation held in Igbo in the book aligns with contemporary Igbo writing and diacritics.

About the translation in the title of the novel, I thought it was cool. My favourite Bob Marley song is 'Three Little Birds' which includes the famous catchphrase '*every little thing gonna be all right*'. So, when my British publisher suggested including the English nod to the title, I was like, Yeah! Let's do it! My Nigerian publisher, however, chose to stick with just the name—*Ogadinma*.

In the first chapter of Ogadinma, a lot happens; statutory rape and abortion among them. Barrister Chima is the Harvey Weinstein type. Actresses slept with Weinstein for movie careers, girls slept with Chima for university admissions. Like the actresses who knew what they were doing when they submitted themselves to Weinstein, Ogadinma, though young, knew exactly what she was doing. She may have been a victim of predatory sex, agreed, but she also had a choice, do you agree? In fact, reading the story some will say she went to Chima willingly. In your opinion, do women who had the same choice but opted for career ambitions to mask their judgments have a right to claim they have been sexually violated?

Ogadinma wasn't a woman. She was a child, and all she wanted was to go to school. She fell prey to an adult man who had a lot of social and political clout, who chose to take advantage of her. I want my readers to remember that she was a child, just 17, and no adult man should, under any circumstance, exploit such demography, even if these children appear to 'willingly' offer themselves to them. It is why they are the adult in that situation. I also think the word 'willingly' does not belong anywhere in the construction of a sentence or a question about rape.

The Weinstein tragedy is similar to Ogadinma's story. Here we have a man who is influential, who has the power to destroy your career and vanish you off the face of the movie industry; here we have a man who also threatened men, who decided whatever was produced and who got whatever funding. It was the blatant abuse of power for me and the sheer celebration of that abuse. The story makes me ill. I endured the same horror for seven years in the banking industry; I worked with men who threatened my job, who groped me, who tried endlessly to ruin my mental health.

I think it is tragic that our society faults the woman for holding fast onto her job or her career despite the valley of horror she traverses daily. It shocks me every time I see people ask why she didn't quit her job or career, why she remained ambitious, why she dared to 'claim' sexual assault afterward. Language matters; how we word conversations about sexual assault matters. The beam should be on those who choose to assault and rape, who take advantage of children, who abuse their offices. Not their victims.

I feel you, and nobody is says women should not be ambitious and we all know there is no excuse for a despicable man like Barrister Chima. Because of the age of Ogadinma, Barrister Chima's actions qualify as rape. Ogadinma was a child and her father should not have sent her to a stranger armed only with a business card received from a 3rd party, possibly Chima's pimp. To me, it made very uncomfortable reading. No father should ever put his daughter in that position. Keeping emotions aside, do you think that some people may not sympathise with Ogadinma because she never said no, only that she had never 'done it before'? If she had said no and told Barrister Chima to go to hell with his help, would it have made her less ambitious?

I totally understand the point you are making. However, if she didn't go through that, she would have met another Chima as a lecturer, who prey on small university girls, like we saw in the #SexforGrades documentary. That happened to me and the only reason I escaped was because I was pregnant for my husband; I was already married when I joined the polytechnic. I abandoned my schooling at FCE Kano because of the multitude of Chimas in the college, who preyed on my colleagues. I wrote about this in an essay anthologized by the University of Iowa.

I don't think I am asking people to sympathize with Ogadinma; I just want my readers to see what it means to be a girl/woman in societies where patriarchy is ennobled.

Was Ogadinma traumatised in any way by Islamic religious riots she witnessed in Kano, where you also spent your early years. Did you personally witness these riots? What were they like and do they still affect you in some way?

I don't think I would describe her experience of the riot in Kano as traumatic. She didn't have enough time to process her experience because she got wrapped up in the tragedy that led to her exile from home. It was different in my own case; I witnessed the first religious riot in Kano when I was barely nine years old. It was the first time I would ever witness a killing, and it messed with my mind. I witnessed other riots, but the first one haunts me. I am still desperately in love with Kano, though. I have a complicated relationship with that city of my birth.

How do you think Ogadinma's abandonment by her mother when she was a baby and her father's numbness about it all became a blueprint for how her life pans out?

Her mother's absence did play a role in her formation, especially living with a father who obviously was hurt by his wife's decision to abandon their marriage. What Ogadinma was left with was an unforgiving, yet caring, father, who lived by strict moral codes, and who had a warped idea what of female sanctity should be. He was a complicated man. And living in a conservative region in Nigeria, where society had rigid expectations for girls and strictly enforced them, didn't help—it stunted Ogadinma's growth. It was why she appeared to be docile in her tribulations, why it took her too long to push back.

What kind of research did you do for Ogadinma?

I asked a lot of questions. I scoured through the BBC archives for news of the 80s. I read an entire Newswatch collection of articles, including writings by the late Dele Giwa, Ray Ekpu, Dan Agbese, and many others. I also read literatures published before and during that era, to get a feel of the atmosphere, the fashion, the music, what Lagos, for example, was like.

My father had a lot of stories to tell, too. He hoarded newspaper clippings from that time, and had a photo album full of pictures of himself and his peers in their high fashion and fancy cars and motorbikes, and even the greyed photographs taken during the famous Maitatsine riots in Kano.

Who are your writing influences?

I have so many of them, but my first loves were the women who centred Nigerian women in my story, who paved the path for people like me — the likes of Buchi Emecheta, Flora Nwapa, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Chika Unigwe, and most recently, Lesley Nneka Arimah, who I think is the world's best short story writer.

In your writings, your thematic burdens are wide; from family relationships, through the rights and dignity of women to the beauty and sanctity of their bodies. At the risk of craving a label, what kind of writer do you want to be known and remembered as?

A storyteller. Like my late grandmother, who invented worlds and told stories that would be categorised as Fabulism.

Thank you, Ukamaka, for this short chat, and I sincerely wish you great success with Ogadinma.

Thank you so much! *SLQ*

Ogadinma

(an excerpt)

By Ukamaka Olisakwe

It was the early eighties, around the time a group of senior army officers overthrew the democratically elected government, when Austrian lace and aso-oke were trendy and church services were fashion shows – an endless, shameless carnival of women in colourful blouses blended with expensive ichafu which they tied in layers and pleats until the scarves were piled atop their heads like large plants, obstructing the view of everyone seated behind them. Everyone looked forward to Sundays, to going to church. Those who could not afford these processions snuck in very early for the children's service, because that was the graceful thing to do – to worship with children in their simple clothes of cheap blouses over Nigerian wax, and okrika shoes whose heels had worn out and made *koi-koi-koi* sounds on the tiled floor.

It was on a Monday after one of those Sundays that Ogadinma walked into Barrister Chima's office for the first time.

The room was empty. The fan whirled, scattering the papers on the cluttered desk. They floated to the floor, slid under the table, under the chair, by the door and by her feet. She wondered if it would be awkward to walk in uninvited and pick them up. She knocked again, louder this time. 'Hello!' she called out, her voice echoing. There was a click of heels. A girl emerged from the connecting door, her blue skirt so short she would not be comfortable if she were to bend over to get the papers. The name tag pinned to her white blouse said she was 'Amara'.

'What do you want?' she asked, her gaze piercing.

'Your papers,' Ogadinma pointed at the floor, but Amara wrinkled her nose, ignoring the scattered sheets, arching an eyebrow. 'I am looking for Barrister Chima,' Ogadinma said, bringing out the business card her father gave her, holding it up for Amara to see.

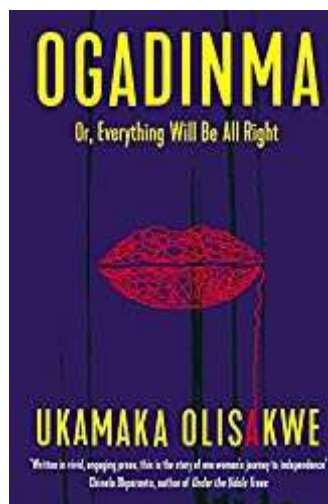
'Come in,' Amara said, waving her into the waiting room, and only after Ogadinma had gone in did Amara crouch carefully – not bend, because she could never bend without exposing her underwear – to pick up the scattered papers.

When her father described the address, Ogadinma had expected a proper workplace, or at least, a hall split into cubicles. She had never been in a barrister's office and so did not know what the place would look like. But this was anything but an office. It was a typical two- or three-bedroom flat, the same model many houses around the area replicated. Without being told, she knew that the 'waiting room' was originally

designed to be a parlour, that the connecting door led to Barrister Chima's office, which most likely had a master toilet. A small TV, half the size of her family's Philips black-and-white TV, was locked away in a metal cage knocked into the wall. She resisted the urge to laugh, because who on God's earth would want anything to do with that toy?

Amara returned but headed straight for the barrister's office. 'Barrister Chima will see you after he is done attending to the client inside,' she said when she re-emerged, an exaggerated air of importance about her.

Ogadinma began to say 'thank you', but Amara was already *koi-koi*-ing away. She looked no more than seventeen or eighteen, perhaps a secondary school leaver like Ogadinma, who was passing time as a receptionist while waiting for a university admission letter.



Ogadinma is available at [Amazon.co.uk](https://www.amazon.co.uk)

Girl to Woman

by

Ukamaka Evelyn Olisakwe

I had a quarrel with my daughter Ifeoma.

I had woken up one night to the sound of noises in her room. It was odd because it was past midnight and she was not the type to be up reading at such a time. The cold hands of fear squeezed my lungs as I crept to her room. I was ready to confront the burglar who might have climbed in through her window. But when I got to her room and pushed open the door, the sight before me froze my heart, and then it started beating again. Very fast.

Ifeoma stood in front of her tall mirror, undressed except for her night trousers. She held a cup of cream on her hand. It would not have been frightening if she was applying them all over her body, but the milky cream was applied only on her chest.

“What are you doing?” I asked her.

She froze. The cup slipped from her palms to the floor, spattering milky cream all over her legs and on the floor around her. I walked to where she stood and picked up the cup. On the body of the cup was emblazoned ‘Instant breast enlargement’.

“WHERE DID YOU GET THIS FROM?”

She stared me straight in the eye, searching for something she wouldn’t find. Her eyes flinched when I squashed her face with a thundering slap and she tumbled to the floor.

“Mum! You hit me!” she shrieked. But I was blinded by anger and fear. My heart thudded.

“Are you mad? Why did you bring that shit into my house? Why? Why?”.

She shielded her face and curled up in a ball on the floor.

I felt hands pull me away, and I saw it was my husband, her father. Tears blurred my vision. Fear clogged my head. I dashed to my room. Ifeoma’s wails pierced the night for a long time.

In my room, I tried hard not to cry. I was afraid, I was paralysed with it, because an earlier nightmare was back to haunt. I cried, because without being told, I knew what was happening to my child. Though I had prayed that what I had vaguely noted was

just a passing phase, it dawned on me then that it was just not so, that it would stretch on into the hurtful months ahead.

“What was that about?” My husband, David, asked when he entered the room. I faced the wall while whimpers racked my ribs. He came down to sit beside me and pulled me to him, to look in my eyes. It was then the loud cries left my mouth unbidden. I felt my body shake.

“It is happening again,” I cried.

“What is happening again?” He asked, but I couldn’t answer. He wouldn’t understand.

I melted into him instead and he crushed me into a kiss and said, “Please stop scaring me. You hit her and you don’t want to tell me why?”

I stared at the spot on his shoulder. Hurtful memories flashed before my eyes, unveiling all that I blanked out years before.

I knocked on her door at daybreak. I didn’t wish to have a long chat with her. But I heard a raspy voice that didn’t sound like my daughter’s. It was a piteous bellow, “Who is that?” and its bruised echo flopped around the walls of her room.

I stood at the door and thought of how to respond.

“Who is that?!”

“It is your mother.”

“What do you want?”

“Please, baby, I’m sorry. Please open the door for me.”

“Go away! Leave me the hell alone!”

Now, on a good day, I would trash her for using the H word, but I deserved it now. I deserved worse.

“Please.”

“Go away!”

"Leave her alone, mum," her younger brother, Chukwudi, said. He stood at the front of his own room which was directly opposite Ifeoma's. I looked into his wise eyes, but he started to retreat into his room.

"Chukwudi, please, I'm sorry." I begged.

He stared at me for a long time, then waved me into his room.

It was odd to sit on the low seat while your own son sat on a higher chair. I felt little. I couldn't hold his gaze or say a word. I didn't know how to start explaining to him. But his first statement shocked me.

"You don't know what she is passing through."

I stared at him.

"You are always in a haste to rush to the office in the morning and you are not here to see her when she comes back from school."

"But I can't resign, Chukwudi, I must support my home financially. Do you know how much your school fees cost?"

"Please, don't start your preaching. Don't justify why you always come back late. Chuka's mother is also a banker, too. But she comes back hours earlier than you."

I tried to defend myself again but he raised his hand, instantly shutting me up.

"Ifeoma is suffering, mum. She is daily being taunted in school."

"Why?" I asked, but I knew the 'why'.

"Mum, look at her. Does she look like a normal girl to you?"

"What is normal?"

"She...she... you know?" he waved his hands idly over my chest before turning red in the face.

I nodded.

"You just nodded!" He screamed, "Look at her mates, they are all grown up. Ifeoma is still like a nine-year-old at fourteen and you think she is happy? You didn't notice that she has no friends!"

Tears began to burn the back of my eyes. I stared at the lines in my palm.

"I want her to be happy, mum. And she is not! And you beat her up! You should be worried more why she hasn't grown breasts at her age!"

He was fuming.

It was the first time I ever saw my son that way. He looked older than his nine years old, and wiser too.

"She will still ... mature, Chukwudi."

"When? When her mates are all married? Are you not even scared that she might be hermaphrodite?"

"Shut up!"

"Ok."

"Sorry," I begged again, "You hit a nerve."

"What nerve?"

"Uhm.. Thank you, dear. I will talk to your sister now. You won't understand."

"I will if you tried. But you don't ever try, do you? It is always rules with you, as if you have planned how our lives will go."

"Chukwudi!"

"Just go, mum. I guess she will be okay." He said and climbed into his bed.

Ifeoma did not come out of her room that day, except on occasions when I heard Chukwudi sneak in to take food to her. I strained my ears to listen to their conversation, but the sturdy walls yielded not a word. I knocked and begged and screamed and threatened, but she stayed put. By evening, I was crying again.

"Honey, you have cried enough. Come," my husband pampered.

Dinner was quiet without my children. David ate quietly and normally as if there was no problem, and that got me mad.

"You are not worried that our family is breaking!"

"Is it?" He asked.

"Can't you see? Have we ever had dinner without the kids?"

"No."

"Ifeoma has refused to talk to me, and Chukwudi has followed suit too."

"Why did you hit her?"

He gaze became intense, his curious eyes hooded beneath the thick bush of his brows.

"She was straying on the wrong path."

"And you didn't deem it fit to show her the right way, abi? Hitting was your best way of direction?"

I knew where the conversation was going, and at that rate, I would end up quarrelling with my whole family.

I tossed and turned on my bed all through the night while David snored away. By morning, I developed a huge headache and had to call to the office for a day off. Ifeoma was out of her room when I came out. She was about to enter the kitchen when she saw me. I stood frozen to my doorway. She stood still too, sizing me up. I didn't know what to say to her, her eyes were red-rimmed.

"Baby," I started...

The feeling that I was losing her gripped me. It was all sudden to me, her change. Her eyes were sunken and she looked too lean as if she had not been eating. When she finally walked back into her room, I noticed that she walked hunched, as if she was hiding from herself. It was all glaring because she was scrawny. And tall.

I went back into my room, to write to her. For the first time, I did what I swore never to do; remember.

Dearest Ifeoma,

I had an interesting childhood. It was filled with challenges, challenges coming from my background and also the challenges from my peers. It was one of tears and joy and hurt. I was

born in a place where religious tensions were as normal as watching the sun set, a place frozen between the saucily modern and the backwardly prim. It was a place where girls were allowed to wear makeup, but trouser-clad girls were perceived as wayward.

Through most of my teens, I moved through life as if in a dream, that sort where you have no control of what happens, as if you were extricated from your very Self. There were no familiar faces to connect to. Everything was surreal. I would walk through a street and wouldn't remember who had said "hi" to me.

It started back in secondary school days, when I tried to find my base on earth and the wheel of the world knocked me down on my bottom, leaving me breathless and lost. And then it went spinning on, as if I had never happened.

While some of my classmates dabbled into religious extremism or became obsessed with academics, some went into boys... I joined the 'born again' crowd because it was safer, and mother would approve. We conducted prayer sessions in our class, long prayer sessions that finally got our teachers angry so we were asked to stop or hold our sessions after school! Mine was a missionary school, so they couldn't frown against prayers. In those prayers, we prayed so zealously and I knew that God saw our innocence, and He really touched us. I had an experience once: one day during our prayer sessions, I saw a steady stream of light that neither came nor reflected from anywhere. It continually zinged through the wall that separated our class from another. I don't know if my friends saw it, but all I remember was that the light beckoned me and I knelt in front of that wall and cried till there were no more tears to shed. It felt good to praise to the Lord. It was awesome to pray until you felt the cold shivers - as if someone was close to you, touching you and making you feel whole.

Then I lost that beautiful relationship. My born-again friends started to grow breasts, though I was still flat-chested. They became aware of their sexuality, and suddenly realized they were beautiful. They left the things of God and experimented with boys. I was shaken and lost because during this phase in my life, I was a follower; friends persuaded me easily. But I couldn't join them in the new craze because mother would kill me if she heard. And, of course, I had no breasts! I was left in limbo, nowhere to belong, with no place to fall in, like a bat.

I fell in love with Geography, but there was no one to share it with me. I loved Maths, but the boys wanted extra things when I studied with them. I loved Integrated Science, but my teacher had a crush on my classmate and spent more time looking at her than teaching us. I loved Literature but the teacher spoke too much old English, more than Shakespeare himself, too much 'thou thee ye's'. Agricultural Science was no-go-area because the teacher was this mean woman who shaved my hair the day I didn't plait the school's weekly hairstyle. Ever since then, I hated Agric Science. I hated any textbook with the diagram of a hoe or its like on the front page!

I had many unanswered questions. I wanted to know what God was thinking when He made me a girl. I wanted to know why I wasn't born into a rich family. I wanted to know why my

mates attended flashy St. Loius and Crescent schools. I wanted to scream at the world and ask why the 'sane' girls in my class refused to walk with me just because I was tall!

*I had questions about sex earlier in life. Why is it that only the ladies that got pregnant, what is the man's job anyway? What gave him the authority to hover around and say "my children" when he didn't do any job? For sex education, the women from the **Always**TM sanitary pad company taught us only how to use the pad and how to take care of yourself when your 'period' came, how to manage puberty signs. Then, they showed us a gory picture of the male and female genital system which was immediately folded up when the girls at the back of the hall laughed and jeered.*

Mother got married at sixteen and was very strict because she was raised singlehandedly by the strictest - her own mother was in a haste to have all of them, all six girls, married before they clocked eighteen. Mother was the type who taught you that you could get pregnant if a boy so much as looked at you, worse still, touched you! Mother wasn't the type you asked why there was a liquid warmth flowing through your stomach when you saw that cute boy, or why your palms sweated when his heated gaze set on you, or why your eyelids tickled when he asked you your name.

Mother didn't know how to say the sweet nothings to us. In the beginning, I hated her for that: years later, I realized why she was strict. It was the product of the kind of youth she had. She lost her youth to have us. She felt no first crush, read no Mills and Boon. She had no romantic dreams like we had; she was saddled with the grave responsibility of catering for us and selling 'mama-put' daily under the scorching sun. She has been, still was, just a child.

The first time I ever wanted more was when I was thirteen. It was the most tormenting moment in my life, and it was the point that determined how I spent the next seven years. I had just been dumped by my group of born again friends. I developed a personality problem because I was yet to show puberty signs. Nothing seemed to change in me. I would stand in front of our tall mirror and examine my flat chest. My nipples were still inverted and weren't even beginning to swell up at thirteen! I read a story of village girls who hunted beetles and flattened them on her nipples to make their breasts grow. And I started hunting the magic beetles. I stored them in a plastic cup heaped with sand, and at night when everyone was asleep, I would flatten them on my nipples. Daily I checked for improvements. Nothing seemed to happen but I still had faith! I prayed. It was my only goal; to grow breasts and prove that I was a girl. But after a month, I freed the remaining beetles and cried myself to sleep.

I recoiled from everyone. The boys flocked around Maria, the most physically mature girl in our class. Next was Edith, the jezebel. She would pull off her shirt to expose shiny white inner lingerie and she would recline on the desk, fanning herself with a book and tell a stupid story. The boys would laugh out loud even if it didn't make any sense!

I became afraid of school. I woke up one morning and felt I would change into a boy. My face was so smooth, without any trace of pimples. My classmates proudly told me pimples were signs of puberty for 'real' girls. I wasn't a girl yet. Edith even teased that I might be a hermaphrodite, and she incited other girls to trap me in the class. They did. Edith tore off my pants to 'inspect' me. It was a blood curdling experience and was the first time I ever fought. Thirty minutes and two bloodied eyes later, I was freed. But Edith suffered for ever the long tribal-mark scratches I vented on her.

Maria was another story. She sneaked out of the class more often than she stayed in. She and Edith wore bum shorts during our PHE. I sat at the back during such trainings. I hid behind the tall grasses or spent time counting shrubs. I would bitedried up Dongonyaro seed and wince at the bitterness. And then I would cry.

It was tormenting to walk with a flat chest. I was tempted and stuffed foam in a bra and wore it, but mother caught me and gave me the head knock of my life! For a long time, the resounding conk of the knock was to ring in my head.

I did badly in school. My grades were poor and my confidence went with it down the trash bin. My teachers didn't like me because of my reclusive nature. They liked the exuberant girls who leaned into them when they came to class.

Until Oscar.

Oscar was the sweetest boy. He was slim and tall, like me, and he wore glasses. He respected me and I fell in love with him because he didn't drool at Maria and Edith like the other boys did. I dipped into the trash bin and dusted off my confidence and wore it about me like a badge of honor. And honor it was.

Oscar came from St. loius, and as if that was not cool enough, he was also intelligent. He was the best at Math - and every other course. I became his best friend. The girls didn't really notice him when he joined our school, but they started to when he scored 29/30 in our Math's tests. It was like, 'Wow! Who is this guy?' The flakes fell off everyone's eyes. Nonso, the hunk, was no longer the best and, as smoothly as killers, Maria and Edith slipped from his group. They started chipping in words to Oscar. They greeted him and carried his bag. I was devastated. The jezebels were back to take away my joy. I felt life drain out of me. I lost appetite, but heaven smiled on me the day Oscar loudly rebuffed Edith from carrying his bag.

"I am not your type!" he barked at her, and quietly he came to sit close to me. "How are you?" he asked. And I fell in love.

Love. Love to me then was like the sweetest ice-cream that would never run out. Oscar walked home with me when lessons were over, though he had a driver there to drive him home. Oscar stayed with me during our long and short breaks. All the distant girls started to come back to

me. Our teachers loved Oscar and they began to notice me again. He challenged them when they made mistakes. He made me proud.

He began to draw me back to the joy of worshipping God. He would pray with me in the morning before classes. And when every other person noticed, they begged him to lead morning devotion. I sang during those sessions. Competed. We solved algebra. We read literature. We read geography. He loved novels and I fell wholeheartedly into novels. I read until there was nothing to read. I practiced for test days on end because he made me promise to become the best. And I did.

At home, mother noticed the change in me. I prompted our night and morning devotions like Oscar taught me. I became a changed person. I began to find my base. Life was like heaven. I would sleep at night and dream of walking hand in hand with Oscar. We would read together in dreams, and go to church in dreams. He attended Christ Embassy, and I, Anglican. He taught me teachings from their church and invited me to join their youth program which was held for students every Fridays. That youth program became my second home. I can't tell now if I attended because of Oscar or God, but I felt a hand touching my life. The meaning of life was opened to me through those teachings and I realized that the love I felt for Oscar was not as same as Edith felt for all those boys. This love was one that surpassed all understanding. It brought out the light in me and restored me.

Then tragedy struck.

At first, I thought it was my imaginations. But I saw that my Oscar began to diminish. He became languid and weak. He missed school so much that he was ruled out from the Junior WAEC list. I spent most school hours with him and his private teacher. I missed school so much that unknown to me, my parents had been summoned. One evening, I came home, bag on hand, head drooped and heart aching. Mother was already raking at the gate and father stood with shoulders hunched. He didn't want to believe that his daughter was visiting a man as Edith had lied to the principal.

When I stopped in front of them, he asked me: "Nne, where are you coming from?"

That question seemed to burst the dam in me. I felt myself rock on my feet, and quake. I felt the world spin off its moorings and implode. I felt the ground open up and swallow me.

And then I was screaming: "My Oscar is dying!"

Mother and father couldn't control me. They couldn't stop the surge of tears. I fell ill. Mother was terrified. The fever overtook me and I hallucinated. Then, one day, as I lay on my bed and cried for my friend, I felt him touch me. I knew it was him. I knew the smell. He smelled of the drugs they pumped into him. He had insisted on seeing me after the American Embassy denied his parents a visa to treat him abroad.

That day, we had a long chat. I can't remember what we talked about, all we talked about. The words have receded to a very far place, away from my reach. Days on end since then I have tried to remember what we discussed. But I had stowed them away, from myself. All I remember was that we hugged for a very long time, I refused to let go. Then he was taken home.

That was the last I ever saw him. He was buried the next day, and I with him. He died of sickle cell anaemia. His parents were both AS.

Life made no meaning anymore. I had lost my base. Each day passed in a blur. I wouldn't remember what you told me. Life became faceless.

While others talked about the class they would enter for the senior year, I counted ceiling boards. I had no plan. Classes were hell. Home became boring. I only found comfort when I visited Oscar's parents. They let me stay in his room. It was the only sane thing I found. We talked about him and stared at his photographs. We breathed in his roaming spirit. I felt it wrapped around me until I slept. My parents suffered, my siblings especially. When we were about to take junior WAEC, father woke me up in the middle of the night. We had our first long chat, a chat that changed me and lit up the candle of my zeal. And that night, for the first time in my life, he cried. He hugged me to him and begged me to end my suffering. He begged me, for his sake and my future. And then he went back to sleep.

I stayed awake all through the night and thought of what my life would be without my family. I thought of all those children who attended impoverished government school because their parents couldn't afford to pay for private schools. I thought of how mother had suffered and how father always went away as early as 3:00 am in the morning, to faraway districts in the Kano emirate, to transport farm produce for farmers, just to make money to support our home. And I was grateful. Even though life still passed in a blur, I aced my WAEC exams and joined the science students. The teachers were kind. I did my best. I had no friends because I was scared that it might be something wrong with me that always took them away or killed them. It started with my born again friends and ended with Oscar, and I maintained it that way until Segun, a youth corp member, who taught us chemistry in Senior Secondary School 2, came along.

Oh! I forgot to mention; I grew breasts finally! Big round ones that jiggled when I walked! I can't remember when they started to sprout because I paid no attention anymore.

I paid interest to Segun's kind eye. I blushed when he stared back at me. I learned zealously when he thought us. He became aware of my staring and invited me to lunch one day. I fiddled with my fingers all through, my food untouched.

*"You intrigue me," he said when he was done with his plate of rice and beans.
"Thank you sir," I said.*

“No. you don’t have to thank me. There is something about you, something that differentiates you from your classmates.”

I didn’t know what to tell him. I stared at my rice of plate.

Segun taught us until the end of his service with the school, and before he left, he asked me to write an essay on where I would be ten years from then. For days, I thought of who I wanted to be, of where I would be. I watched a lot of movies, to see if I would like being an actress, it didn’t work. I listened to a lot of Celine Dion and Madonna, but that didn’t work either. I didn’t want to be a teacher, I didn’t want medicine because I got nervous at the sight of blood.

No other profession was suitable.

On the day he was supposed to leave, I scribbled down on a piece of paper: “I want to be in a place where I would look back and smile and say ‘It was worth it!’”

He read the line for a long time, longer than the time it took him to solve organic chemistry for us, longer than when we held our morning devotions. I began to have a rethink, I felt what I wrote was really stupid. Then he turned to me and said.

“It will be worth, Nne, just trust yourself.”

I didn’t make the top WAEC list, but I came out with an average result, average enough for my admission into Bayero University, Kano (BUK) to go smoothly. I studied like every other girl. I flowed with the school. I had no close female friends; they were either too timid, or too wayward. The girl I would have become very close with happened to be a ‘transaction babe’ as she described herself to me on the night I caught her dressing up as if going for a party.

The turning in my life? It was the day I walked from my hostel to the auditorium. This wasn’t an ordinary walk because an angel walked with me. That angel is your father, David. He whistled at me then walked with me. I didn’t turn to look at him, I didn’t stop to ask why my heart was pounding with adrenaline and something else. But he followed until I got to the auditorium. He sat close to me and listened to the lectures of a visiting professor. It was the first time he ever talked to me and it was overwhelming because girls would literary kill just to have him talk to them. I still wonder what he saw in me. He had been crowned the most handsome guy just weeks before, a final year student of Architecture. He reminded me so much of Oscar. Maybe it was the serene way he looked at you, probably the quizzical eyes. We sat there, listening and sharing. And when the lectures were ended, he said:

“Please have lunch with me.”

Lunch became a date, dates blossomed into friendship. It was an awesome experience for me. I learned then that love could set free. I was free, I bounced on the tips on my feet when I walked, as if I was pumped full of air. The world finally began to make sense.

Love is like a light, chasing all the darkness away, all images become clear, everything begins to click into place. The world makes sense. I saw the beautiful colours that exist. I tasted the sweetness that drips from the juice of things, and it was soul satisfying. He graduated that year and we got married. Yes! I joined the group of the married schooling women. And yes! I waddled to school with a big belly, but it was...it was..it was wonderful. It was wonderful when I gave birth to you. My own story at that point was one of happiness.

Ifeoma, youth, I realised, is the most critical point in one's life. It is what propels you unto greatness, or crushes you. Some lose it along that tough way, the tough way called life. But some bask in it, and enjoy it till the last. I married early like my mother, but at twenty. So, while my mates danced in clubs or studied in schools, I did a double job; family and schooling. It was awesome to watch you and your brother. You inspired me to plan on becoming great. I wanted to make you proud of me. I wanted you to tell the world: "Hey, that's my mom!"

You just have to look again and find that you have a better chance. You are like the eagle, soaring higher than other birds. Life does not present us with equal opportunities, you just have to think it through, and work around it. And you might get it just right with what goal you set for yourself.

A friend once asked me how it felt to already have two kids at such young age. I first thought of you, at fourteen, free spirited, easily forgiving and always happy. I thought of your brother, Chukwudi, almost ten, bold and witty by far for his age. And I smiled. I had you and it didn't interrupt the flow of the music. It didn't interrupt with my youth; instead, it made it sweeter.

I look at you and marvel at how I could do it, one would even think you are my siblings.

Each time, I smile.

*Your mother,
Nneka.*

I knocked on Ifeoma's door and left my long letter on her foot mat. I peeped from my keyhole and saw her open the door. She looked around and was about to go back when she saw the envelope.

That night, I waited with fear. I waited for her response, but I got none. My husband slept on the cushion in the sitting room and I cried myself to sleep. But before the break of dawn, I felt hands holding me. The hands were smaller than my husband's

and when I turned on my side to see who it was, I saw it was Ifeoma. She hugged me for the longest time and I felt the tears begin.

“I love you, mum,” she whispered.

“I love you too, baby,” I whispered.

Women. There were tears in my eyes. And in the eyes of my daughter. *SLQ*

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