

COLLECTOR OF MEMORIES

Joshua Chizoma

Mother made me a collector of memories. She taught me that we carry our histories in sacks tied around our necks, adding to their burdens as years lengthen our lives. Each time she told me about the night she found me, she added to my collection. We'd be in the middle of watching a movie and she'd go, 'Do you know you did not cry the first two weeks I brought you home? I was so scared you were dumb.' Or, 'I can't believe you like custard now. As a baby, you only tolerated pap, hot pap like this that did not even burn your throat.' She'd then launch into a narrative punctuated by laughter, pausing only to confirm some detail from her sisters or to disagree with them over one.

Over the years, I learned that she found me on a new year's eve, right about the time the harmattan cold was just picking up, but not boil-water-even-for-doing-dishes freezing yet. That I was wearing a yellow pinafore, swaddled in a blanket that smelled of talcum powder, and that there'd been two different earrings in my ear lobes. I also learned that she found me in an empty carton—a Cabin Biscuit box, she added later.

She reached into the air to pluck those memories whenever she wanted to throw jabs at me about my skin, or my face, or my

penchant for eating Cabin Biscuits. However, the first time we had that heart to heart, it had been because of a fight she had with our neighbour, Regina.

We lived in a compound where the houses were spread so far apart as though to pretend it wasn't a public yard. The two-bedroom bungalows squatted in a semi-circle, huddled together like American football players before take-off. It surprised everyone that the landlord who'd had the good sense to build each bungalow separately, would then do something as foolish as making the toilets, shared one to three bungalows, communal. The toilets were often the cause of quarrels. The fights were about who did not flush the toilets well (and left it for their slaves to flush abi?) or who used only one sachet of detergent to improperly wash the toilet (shey those of us that wash with two sachets na fool we be?) or who lost the shared key and was taking their time replacing it. This last reason was the cause of the fight between Mother and Regina.

Regina's son had lost their own key. They'd asked us for ours and had been sharing it with us before the boy, a whole twelve-year-old dimkpa, lost our own key too. Mother had had to suffer the indignity of asking our other neighbour for their key any time we wanted to use the toilet. That day, she made me practically run from school because she was pressed. When we got home, she was about to grab the key when she remembered that it had still not been replaced. Instead of going to ask our other neighbour for theirs, she headed for Regina's house, her handbag still slung over her shoulder.

Regina's church's house fellowship was in full swing when my mother knocked. The tenants had had meetings about these evening fellowships because the attendees sometimes forgot that Regina's parlour was neither their church auditorium nor soundproof. That day, Regina first sent out her son to tell my mother to come back later. When Mother refused, she came out herself.

Collector of memories

She wore the face of someone who was being courteous on the pain of death.

'Ah, neighbour. What is this thing that cannot wait for me to finish listening to God's word?' she asked, retying her wrapper laboriously.

My mother told her she was sorry to interrupt but that she wanted to collect money for the new key.

'Ah, I no get plenty money here. In the evening na me go come find you. Abeg, no vex.'

But Mother insisted. She was firm and malleable at the same time, using the tone she used when telling the obnoxious parents of her pupils that, no, she would not go to their house to conduct lessons for their children, they'd have to come to hers. And it worked, because Regina went in and came out with the money scrunched up in her fist.

Perhaps, it was the way Regina gave her the money, almost throwing it at her, that my mother had had to clap the air to catch the notes. Or maybe it was not really the money that was peppering her, maybe my mother just wanted to be petty, because as she turned to leave, she gave as a parting shot:

'Do I blame you? Is it not because I am sharing a compound with an illiterate like you?'

'Don't even come for me. O gini di? Who does not know children make mistakes?' Regina shouted.

My mother could not have aimed her punch lower. Everyone in the compound knew Regina's story and how she'd clawed her way from poverty.

'If your world is complete, go and fetch water with a basket na. Nonsense and nonsense.'

'It is okay,' her church members said. They were standing on her verandah; an emergency recess had been called, no doubt.

'Leave me. Every time she will be carrying face for somebody like

say na she better pass. She thinks we do not know her shameful secret. If I open this my mouth for her eh, she will pack out of this compound.'

When my mother heard this, she dropped her bag and every pretence of civility with it.

'You see that thing you want to say, you must say it today oo.'

She clapped her hands together and came to stand in front of Regina, pushing her breasts onto her face.

'E pass say I pick child for gutter? E pass am? Oya, talk na?'

Regina did not respond. She was probably too shocked to. Even I had not expected the drama to take such a swift turn.

'Good. I think say you no dey fear.' My mother turned around then and saw me. Her face became a *mélange* of conflicting emotions: anger, shame, remorse. But anger won. She grabbed me and said, 'Who asked you to follow me?' Although she hadn't asked me not to.

That night she bristled with anger, and even grading papers did not help. Eventually, she dropped the pen and called me to her side.

'Chibusonma, come here,' she said.

I walked over from the sofa to the single chair she was sitting on. She shifted and I squeezed in with her. She stroked my arm, and I could feel the flames within her tempering, losing their rage.

Aunty looked up from her phone, and Chidinma paused the movie she was watching, trapping Ramsey Nouah's face on the screen.

'It is better you hear it from my mouth,' she began.

It was one of those things you knew. The way yes was yes and no was no. They were definites, and I could hold them to my breast, my history. That night, my mother did not romanticize the idea that I was an abandoned child she had picked up. She said it in a matter-of-fact way, like she was teaching me to memorize numbers,

Collector of memories

like she wanted me to know just for the sake of it. As I grew older and recognized that bricks and sticks sometimes are no match for words, I was grateful. Because after that day I realized how things could shape-shift if you had no sight. Snide remarks and snarky jokes found context and became decipherable. But because my mother did not burden my story with the weight of shame, I had none to spare. Even beyond that, I was hemmed in on every side by love, from my mother and her two sisters. Their love cushioned the effect of the taunts from the other children, fashioned me an armour that bricks and sticks and words could not penetrate.

Rhoda, whom everyone called Aunty, was the oldest and had a hairdressing salon. Her sisters did not go to her shop. They said her hands were 'painful', although they made sure it was only the walls of our house that heard them say so. She loved 'living' and was the one who bought the TV and paid for the light bill. Each time the bill came, she'd divide the sum and remind her sisters each morning to contribute, placing her share on the centre table so 'everyone could see she had done her part'. Seven out of ten times she'd eventually go to pay it herself, gaining monopoly over the TV remote and daring anyone to change the channel even when she fell asleep watching Super Story.

Chidinma, the middle child, sold recharge cards and phone accessories. She was the most generous of the three, the one with the least savings too. They used to say, 'Except Chidinma does not have, that's why she will not give you. If she has money and you have a need, forget it.'

Mother was a primary four teacher. She taught the class for years, even when she got her teacher's training certificate, even when she got a university degree through distance learning. She refused to leave for another class. Her name was Florence, but most people knew her as 'Aunty Primary Four'.

Mother mothered me exclusively when it came to meting out

punishment. Her sisters would tally all my infractions, waiting for her return so they'd bear witness. At the end my mother would respond, 'You mean she was this stupid, and you did not beat her?' incredulity lacing her tone, after which she'd drag me close and give me a whooping herself. But apart from this area, the three sisters fed me their different flavours of motherhood. It usually was Aunty who bought me clothes and made my hair every weekend. Saturday evenings she'd bring out the kitchen stool to our corridor, spread her legs, and trap my body within her warmth. Sometimes it was a whole family affair, with Mother shining a torch and Chidinma separating and handing out the attachments. I did not have the luxury of protesting her painful hand. It was enough that I debuted a new hairstyle each Monday morning. Pain was a small price to pay.

Chidinma bought me the UTME form for the polytechnic I ended up going to. I'd written JAMB the first time and failed. When I wrote it for the second time and failed again, Mother did not say anything. I knew she was beginning to think that the first failure was not a fluke. I passed the third time with a small margin, and Chidinma bought me a form for the polytechnic.

That day, she called me to her shop, brought out the papers, and in a voice that entertained no arguments said,

'Fill this thing, my friend.'

I stared at the paper on the table. None of my friends went to the polytechnic. Who would? University students were the *shit*. They returned home only during the holidays, bamboo stalk thin and sporting lingo that included 'projects' and 'lectures' and 'handouts'. They got away with many things, especially those who went to schools with ear-famous names like the University of Ibadan and the University of Nigeria. Plus, everybody and their nannies knew that it was the 'not-so-bright' students who settled for the polytechnic.

I considered my options for a while. They weren't many.

'I am going to live off-campus. I will not be going from the

house,' I said.

'Okay,' Chidinma replied. We both understood it was a bargain. That was a compromise she could take to her sisters.

I started dating Chike in my final year, four years ago. He was a customer care agent at a mobile phone company and had once helped me do a SIM card welcome back. Chike was affable and took the job of being a nice person very seriously. He was the kind of person who would never refuse going the extra mile but complained while doing the task. Good-natured complaints about how it was taking his time or how he was tired, in such a way that it was not really grumbling, seeming almost like a normal conversation.

I moved in with him after graduation. By that time, I had spent so many weekends at his place that the one time I did not come home on a Monday, Mother did not bother asking me what happened. It was like a natural occurrence, like night giving birth to day or weeds sprouting in the rainy season. One day I was living with my mother and her two sisters, the next I was going from Chike's house to the bank where I worked.

Every time he mentioned marriage, I packed my bags and went to Binez hotels down the street. The manager knew me and usually assigned me the one room with good netting on the door. Chike always came for me after two days or so; the longest he'd stayed without me was seven days. The last time he came to pick me, he had been dripping with righteous anger and asked me whether it was not time to stop my childishness.

Whenever I think of it, I wonder if I hadn't moved in with Chike, if my attention hadn't been consumed by that puerile drama we were intent on performing, whether the events that followed afterwards would have been different. Whether I would have caught my mother's sickness earlier, or more appropriately, traced its root and found its cure. But like a hen, I took my eyes off Mother for a

minute—such that I was unaware of how dire things were at home the Friday Aunty and Chidinma visited me at work—and a kite swooped in.

That day, I was wearing a new Ankara dress. Chidinma sat on a plastic chair in the reception area and Aunty came to stand before me, speaking to me in snatches while I attended to customers. In between clearing withdrawal slips and receiving deposits, Aunty managed to tell me to come by the house in the evening for an urgent matter and I was able to feign that the most pressing thing then was the zip of the new dress cutting into my back, and not the scary reality of what it meant for my aunts to visit me at my place of work to summon me home.

In the evening, I stopped on my way home to buy bananas, then remembering that Mother preferred oranges, I bought those instead. Then, in order not to offend the seller, I decided to pay for both.

The light was on when I stepped into the house. Mother was lying on the couch in the parlour. The room was thick with gloom such that even though the light was on, it was as though the darkness was winning.

‘How is she? Is she getting any better?’ I asked.

My aunts shook their heads. It was odd how they just sat down doing nothing. I placed the items on the table and sat at the foot of the couch Mother was lying on.

‘Chibusonma, your mother has something to tell you.’ Aunty’s words sliced the silence.

Chidinma went to Mother and helped her up.

Mother stared right ahead, mute.

‘You will not tell her now? What is wrong with you?’ Chidinma said. ‘You don’t want what is holding you to leave you eh?’

Mother shuddered, as though the words actually made physical contact with her. I was quiet. The spectacle, it seemed, was for me.

Collector of memories

'See, Chibusonma, there are some things I've not told you about the night I found you.' Her voice was low, but I listened nonetheless, my ears sharpening to pick up stray words.

'Yes, it was on a new year's eve, and Pastor Gimba gave a powerful message that day. I was still tingling with the power when I saw you at the dump. Or rather, heard you. That in itself was a miracle given all the New Year bangers going off that night. But it wasn't at Crescent Street. I went to the church at Faulks road. We had a combined service that night.'

'How are any of these important kwanu?' Chidinma interrupted.

'Keep quiet,' Aunty said.

Mother gave a deep sigh.

'Chibusonma, I did not find you. Your mother was around then. I took you from her,' she said.

I stood rock still and let the information wash over me.

'She'd given birth weeks before and did not let anyone touch the baby. She even chased the police away when they came. That night she was so tired. When I came by, I told her I'd hold you small, and she said okay. Then she fell asleep. I took you and left.'

She rushed through the story, barely pausing to take a break, suddenly seeming to be in a hurry. When she was done, she was winded and had to lay back down.

'Why was she at the dump?' I asked.

'Your mother was a madwoman. She was not by the dump, really. She had a small shack that she stayed in.'

'I see,' I said. 'So, you lied to me?'

'Technically, it was not a lie,' Chidinma said.

'All my life I thought that my mother abandoned me. That maybe she was one of those careless girls who threw away their babies. Wait, so you stole me from my mother?' I said.

'I am sorry,' Mother said.

'You erased my mother? What am I supposed to do with this

information now?’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘Chibusonma. We felt it was for the best,’ Aunty said. ‘What your mother told you was for the best. Would you have preferred the truth? That a madwoman is your mother?’

‘You probably would have died from the cold or caught an infection or something,’ Chidinma added.

‘You don’t know that,’ I said.

‘You don’t know that too,’ she returned.

I felt ganged up on. And then my mother said again, ‘I am sorry.’

‘Why are you telling me this now?’ I asked.

There was a shift in the mood. It was as though the sisters were waiting for something else.

‘Before I took you.’ She paused and a film of terror slipped into her eyes. ‘Your mother said that if I didn’t hand you back that I will always know no peace.’ She looked away. It was the end.

Aunty took over.

‘Ever since my sister became sick, I told her this thing was spiritual, but she did not listen. Now, after three tests, nothing nothing,’ she said.

‘Look at her. She has been like this since morning. But thank God for Pastor Gimba. He got a revelation from God that your mother offended someone, and she needs to make peace,’ Aunty continued.

‘How?’ I asked.

Chidinma brought out a folder and handed it to me. Their actions were like a well-rehearsed choreography, like actors on a stage acting out a script. I flipped through the content.

‘We’ve managed to trace your birth mother. Her family house is in Nkwerre. They came and carried her from the dump after a while. We believe she is the one your mother has to make peace with,’ Chidinma said.

That night, after I came back from Mother’s, I cried when Chike

Collector of memories

spanked me. He became even more scared when I asked him to make love to me gently. He was fidgeting as though it was our first time. Eventually, I had to climb on top, controlling the rhythm of the thrusts myself.

I woke up the next morning to the sight of him holding a tray and wearing a nervous smile. I sat up and held out my hand for the tray. He'd made pap and fried plantains.

'Sorry, I could not go to buy eggs,' he said.

'No problems,' I said, biting into the plantains. They were well done, and I was surprised.

'So, about yesterday, what happened?' He came to sit beside me. He didn't know what to do with his hands. He kept them on the bed for a while, then touched his collar.

'Just go.'

'Why? You don't want to talk to me?'

'Just go abeg. I'm not in the mood,' I said.

He got up, smoothened his shirt, and left.

On our way to Nkwerre, Chidinma got into an argument with the driver. She thought he was driving too fast, to which he'd replied that she had no business telling him how to drive his own car. I wanted to reach out to smack Chidinma. I did not understand how she had space in her head to notice other things, like how the seats were cramped—she complained about that—or that I used makeup—she didn't think that was appropriate. And how could she have a problem with the driver's speed? Wasn't speed important to us?

When I asked them that morning how they knew the particular place we were going, Aunty said, 'We've been planning this thing for a while now, Chibusonma. Let's just go.'

'How about my mother, is she not coming with us?' I craved a fight, an outlet for the nameless emotions broiling within me.

‘No,’ Chidinma said.

‘We will still go again,’ Aunty added, a little cheerily. ‘That time, we will go with a lot more of our people.’

Chidinma came to me and took my two hands in hers. Her eyes held such kindness and love that I felt my rage buckle.

‘Nne, I know that you are angry, and you should be. But can you postpone your anger one more day? Just after today you can be angry all you want. Can you do that?’

At Ngor Okpala, Aunty bought me a packet of plantain chips, handed me a handkerchief when I started sobbing, and placed my head on her shoulder. No words were exchanged.

The house we went to had a huge bird on the gate. The bird split into two when the gate was opened. The inside of the compound was swept clean. The patterns the broom made on the ground was beautiful. It had rained the night before, so the ground still retained enough moisture to make sweeping less arduous and more like a process in making art.

A group of people sat on the verandah—men and women whose generations were far removed from mine. A man broke away and went straight for Aunty.

‘You must be Rhoda,’ he said in perfectly enunciated English. ‘My name is Peter. I am the person you have been communicating with.’

Aunty bowed a little.

‘Is she our daughter?’ He asked. Aunty nodded, smiling broadly to emphasize the good news.

‘Oh, welcome, our daughter.’

He came and gave me a swift embrace. Several women came out to hug me, as though I’d been declared safe for communal interaction. They held me with an air of familiarity that surprised me. I was led to a seat. They sat around me, smiling and asking questions I didn’t have to think about before I answered: what school I went to,

Collector of memories

whether I was married, if I knew I had my biological mother's nose.

A hush descended when one woman came out from the backyard. Her hair was shaved to a crop and she wore a gown that hung off her shoulder, revealing the strap of a black bra. She had on a static smile, not widening into laughter or extinguishing into a frown.

She came and pulled me up and hugged me. When I looked up, I noticed that more than one woman had tears in their eyes. The woman walked with me back the way she came.

At the backyard, she brought two seats and placed them side by side. She told me that she sold tomatoes at the market and lived here with her brother's family. She was a member of the Legion of Mary and loved going for the Latin mass. She shaved all of her hair because relaxers made her scalp itch, but she wore wigs when she went to church.

She talked and I listened, noting that her life revolved around the church, maybe a little too much, and that she did not ask me anything about myself, this woman that was my birth mother. Some of the women sat nearby, listening too as though they were not familiar with the details she was sharing.

'I know what you are thinking, but I am fine now. I take my medications dutifully, and I go for my doctor's appointment whenever I have to,' she said after a while.

I reached out and flicked lint from her gown.

'It is manageable. Not everyone dies from dementia. That is what my doctor says I should call it, dementia.' She laughed. The women shifted uncomfortably in their seats.

'My mother—'

I began and then paused. I had not considered that there would be a need to call my real mother anything other than Mother. The woman did not respond. I continued,

'My mother tells me you said something to her the night she took me from you. She said you told her something dangerous would

happen to her if she took me.'

Her face remained free of ripples. She still looked up at me as though expecting me to add something.

'I want to know what it is. I want you to forgive her.'

'I can't remember. Is she sure?' she asked.

'Yes, she is.'

'I can't remember. Things upstairs are jumbled up.' For a moment, the smile slipped, and I saw something that looked like fear lurking beneath the mask.

'Okay. But I think you should maybe forgive her.'

'Okay, I do.'

I sighed, exasperated.

'Maybe you should do something, like a ritual?'

'I don't know,' she said. 'Oya why don't you kneel down and let me pray for you,' she said.

I kneeled. She placed her hands on my head.

'May the curse pass over you. I forgive your mother.'

When I lifted my eyes, she was smiling. It was the same smile she had on before. It seemed like mockery now. Aunty quickly looked away when I stood up. But in her eyes, I'd seen prayers.

That evening, a petulant expression sat on Chike's face when he came in. He walked around, his displeasure as imposing as a billboard, but I ignored him. Finally, when we were in bed, he asked, 'Where did you go today?'

'Somewhere,' I replied.

He sighed.

'My people have found a woman for me. Since you are not ready,' he said.

Even though I'd noticed the steady exodus of his clothes from the closet, it still stung to hear him say it out loud. I was briefly scared. What if he left and I discovered that I actually loved him? What if I told him I was ready to marry him now?

'I hope she knows that you like getting pegged?' I said instead.

Collector of memories

'I don't like getting pegged,' he said.

'And all these sex toys, better carry them with you.'

He said nothing.

'Your new bride, you think she'll like being tied up, or she'll rim you well? It did take me a while to learn how to do it.'

'Just stop.'

'Plain vanilla sex, imagine how you'll miss me pegging you.'

I started laughing. He swung over and climbed on top of me. He placed his hands around my windpipe.

'I don't like getting pegged. If you tell people that nonsense about me, I will kill you,' he snarled.

Around midnight, when my phone started ringing, it caught me awake. By then, I was busy rearranging the contents of my sack of memories, deciding the ones that would stay and the ones that would go. It was futile. Even though my mother's betrayal ran deep, I knew which version of that night I was going to hold on to.

'Answer the call na or turn the phone off,' Chike grumbled and then grabbed the phone and said, 'Aunty.'

The ringing stopped, his hands still stretched out to me. It started again, and Chike placed the phone on the bed.

'Are you really going to leave me? Did they really find you another woman?' I asked.

'Jesus! What is this? What is going on?' Chike said, alarm stark in his eyes.

I did not respond. Instead, clouds gathered and a noisy deluge fell from the sky of my eyes. Frustration and anger flowed downwards, accompanied by an unlearned dirge I didn't know I could manage. My voice grew hoarse, and Chike left the room, but the phone wouldn't stop ringing. Aunty called, Chidinma called, and I let them. My tears were helplessness made flesh, an attempt to stretch time's finiteness and leave unchecked possibilities. Because I knew that on the other side of that phone was maybe a prayer unanswered.