

THE GATHERING



Ma'Kanu was dying, and the family was gathering.

It was a simple thing like this that proved beyond all doubt that Odozi, despite her famous convent, was really more village than town: Igwe Nza had ostracized Ma'Kanu some days earlier and his decree had fallen like an invisible chicken coop around the retired school-mistress' deserted home. Even the teenage housekeeper succumbed to the invidious blackmail and abandoned her half-earned salary. On Tuesday night however, the dying woman had a particularly bad fit of coughing, which pricked the conscience of her nearest neighbour, Dada. At the crack of dawn, while Odozi's snoops were still asleep, she slipped through Ma'Kanu's fabled flowerbeds with a bowl of honeyed pap.

Dada had taken one look at the lonely woman's cancer-ravaged body and bullied her ancient bicycle all the way up to the Postal Agency near Odozi Junction. She had roused the phlegmatic proprietor and telephoned the youngest daughter, Ezinne, a kindergarten teacher in Idah and the closest to Odozi. Ezinne literally dropped her chalk when the message came from the Teachers' Common Room. She spent another half-hour by the phone, anxiously sending word to the rest of the children. Kanu's elopement with his sister, Udeme, had opened a gulf in the family, but if the imminence of death didn't bridge it, nothing would. By 12 noon she was kneeling at the foot of Ma'Kanu's bed in Grace Lodge, the cabin that villagers derisively called Orphan House, massaging her troublesome ankle joints.

Ezinne was an earthy woman. Having no airs herself, she was gifted with an incredulous laughter that could strip conceit off the arrogant. She was most comfortable amongst unpretentious children; and in that sense, her foster-mother, Ma'Kanu, had never grown up. Yet, that afternoon, Ezinne was not feeling particularly comfortable as she massaged a knob of liniment into the gnarled, arthritic limbs. She knew it was the end of the road for the old woman, but the reality was still daunting and she could do nothing

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about the fright in her eyes. She had never seen her mother quite as gaunt. It's not that same... She swallowed. I thought the remission was...

Ma'Kanu's feeble laughter provoked a fit of coughing which quavered on, a small, backfiring generator. It was difficult, looking at her now, to see the irreverent little dynamo that had turned the rundown Community School into the institution of choice between Enugu and Makurdi. But it was not impossible. She had taken life in her stride; what had broken her was disillusionment: five years after her retirement, her patchwork family was back in pieces and her old school had reverted to the bottom of the league tables. With her life's work effaced, it was as though she had never existed.

The fruit is ripe. She managed eventually, wiping tears that were not quite from laughter and not really from pain. Once the fruit ripens, it falls.

When Tobe arrived from his fish farm in Oguta, Ezinne was in the kitchen boiling the cocoyams for the *ede* soup. He entered through the back door, ducking as he came through the doorway to dispense a hug to his sister and a large tilapia into the refrigerator. Tossing his bag into the old Boys' Room, he went in to greet Ma'Kanu. She was sleeping as he stood over her. He could feel the old floorboards creak as he rocked to and fro. He could perceive the familiar smell of pigeon droppings in the low ceiling. He was back home; but it was not the same. Ezinne was a good cook, but Ma'Kanu only had to spend half-an-hour in the kitchen to release an aroma that literally plucked visitors in from the street. As his huge hand settled apprehensively on her shoulder, her eyes trembled open.

How are you feeling? asked his fingers. Her own hands were too tired for speech, and she mouthed a reply, slowly. She was almost out-suffering Job, she explained, only half in jest. But thank God for her dreams! She dreamed a lot about children these days. Flowers and children. Only the night before she dreamt of her long dead orchid! She wished she were strong enough to sit on her veranda and drink in her flowers, and watch the kids at their water games at the public tap.

Generally speaking, it was a dangerous thing to make a wish in Tobe's presence. He was not a man of any words but his actions compensated for that deficit. He had spent his first twenty years with the intense squint of a man struggling not to miss a punchline. In his fourth decade he had grown a confidence that calmed that

intensity, without diluting the powerful generosity of spirit that made him both unpredictably bighearted and dangerous when thwarted.

Right afterwards he strode down to Bacha Line near Odozi Market, where the mad cow had gored a woman fatally back in '86. He hired some tools with which he sawed and planed the timbers of a blind wall right down until a surprised new door gaped out of the left flank of Grace Lodge. One could then look from the living room, over Ma'Kanu's rich flowerbeds, running luxuriantly wild since the advent of her invalidity, right down to the public tap in front of Okolie's house.

Then, as curious village children observed his door from a distance, he went in and moved his foster mother tenderly onto a couch. He was sobered by her weight — or more accurately, the absence of it. Even as he carried her, she held on to a small bundle. It was wrapped up in a rich purple length of velvet with tasselled ends. He had scooped it up earlier along with the beddings but she had struck at him cantankerously. He had grinned and shaken his head at the eccentricities of age. Swiftly now, he broke down the ancient poster bed, reinstalling bed and occupant in the living room, and propping her up with pillows.

Within three hours she was able to watch the children and her flowers to her heart's satisfaction.

Further south, in Abonnema, the radio message had reached the base station after Somto had boarded the company speedboat for his one-month rotation on the oil rig. He had been hailed by megaphone and after debarking to receive the news from the Port Harcourt head office he had grimly pulled off his hard hat, stripped off his life jacket and removed his gear from the prow of the speedboat. My Ma is dying and I'm going to the village, he had told his supervisor, pulling a notepad from his gear.

His supervisor was a sixty-year-old, hard-boiled oilman from Houston. He had worked with Somto only six months but already he knew that the easy-going man that the work gang called 'the Saint' could always be relied upon to take instructions. Don't be a goose, he'd warned Somto, you're still on probation, miss this trip and you'll lose your job. — But don't worry about the old woman; I heard the same thing three times before mine finally kicked the bucket.

Somto had been surrounded by several other world-weary types, all clad like him, in orange overalls, as he ripped out his application for a casual leave and passed it on to the amazed officer. I

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didn't say *the old woman*, he had explained as he turned for his jeep in the car park. I said my Ma; and I'm going.

He hadn't hesitated over the decision, but that didn't make it any easier to reach: his heart was pounding for the first hour of the drive to Odozi. Over the last decade he had done a dozen jobs in as many towns. He had stalked this one, his best yet, for a year and a half before landing it six months earlier. Yet, if he met his foster mother alive, it would be well worth a sack.

That drive itself was his longest five hours yet. For perhaps the first time, his well-used cassette deck was silent throughout the trip: the hours were barely enough to wonder how nine months had slipped past since his last visit to Odozi. The family had been pulling apart since the nasty business between Kanu and Udeme. Of course the root of his own disillusionment stretched back to his adolescence. Denied any knowledge of his real parents, he had been gutted to discover that 'Wiggle' wasn't even the original surname of the secretive Ma'Kanu. Quietly, he had dropped the surname. When importuned for a last name, he'd chopped his first name, Somto-Chukwu, in two to satisfy protocol.

Yet, Ma'Kanu was dying. Surely, that changed everything.

His muffler was broken again. By 2.20 pm the familiar roar of his gray jeep descending the hill from the old convent brought a smile to Ma'Kanu's face, a good ten minutes before he clumped up the wooden steps of the veranda to hang his baseball cap behind the door in a twenty-year old gesture.

It was almost 4 pm before Agabi's interstate taxi, which did the Enugu-Odozi shuttle thrice daily, brought Njide into the village. She had arrived at the Enugu Motor Park from Obubra since 1 pm. After a nail-biting wait for passengers to fill the cab, she had paid for all the seats and they'd set off on the fifty-minute run into Odozi. As Agabi pulled to a halt in the Odozi Park, she forgot her bag in the taxi and ran all the way to Grace Lodge, barely acknowledging the greetings of the bemused Acha sisters frying *gari* a little before the public tap.

Yet, when Njide finally reached the side-gate into Grace Lodge, she couldn't go in. All their lives, Ma'Kanu had been quite emphatic: there were to be no tears at her deathbed; there was to be no weeping at her funeral. Gripping the bamboo palings fiercely, she stared at her shoes for a long minute as she caught her breath, thinking

desperately of her graduation, and when that failed, of her wedding day — which was a big mistake.

She wasn't to know that the family was at that moment watching her through the trembling muslin of Tobe's new living-room entrance. When the tears were in full flood she hissed with feeling and turning from the gate, hurried further down the lane to the refuge of Ekwutosia's provision store.

There was a long silence in the living room, then Tobe returned to the corner of the room. He knelt in the fine sawdust on the floor as he resumed the painstaking planing of the door panel with which he would seal the new entrance by nightfall. Somto was at the foot of Ma'Kanu's bed, plying her swollen joints with an analgesic liniment.

This crybaby of mine! Fretted Ma'Kanu, as a grumbling Agabi stomped up the veranda with Njide's forgotten travelling bag. She must be crying her eyes out somewhere!

Ezinne was sitting by Ma'Kanu's head, soaking and wringing out a face towel, which she laid, from time to time, on the old woman's feverish forehead. Let me check the soup on the fire, she said, escaping into the kitchen before her own tears came.

No one contradicted Ma'Kanu.

An hour afterwards, Njide finally entered Grace Lodge. The rest of the children had grown inwards, but she had flowered outwards, accumulating far more cares in her tumultuous marriage than her constitution could bear. It had slurred her physical beauty, with her accumulating a kilogramme or two for every year over thirty. Her face was careworn, her eyes, darting with an anxiety that, though currently focused on the woman on the bed, was plainly part of her lifestyle. She had a wan smile in place and an unaccustomed pair of brown glasses on her nose bridge. She hugged her brothers and sister quickly, and wordlessly embraced her mother. The heat from Ma'Kanu's corrugated cheeks alarmed her. Dropping her handbag, she took the towel from Ezinne, but within a few minutes, she was sniffing and her sister pushed her gently from the bedside.

Njide busied herself in Ma'Kanu's room. Tobe's evacuation of the matriarch's bed had exposed a confusion of cartons and boxes under thick coats of dust. Odds and ends, accumulated over the decades, had taken refuge under the bed. She fell to sorting and cleaning, glad for anything to take her mind away from the sombre reason for their presence in Odozi.

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Somto had taken down the thin drapes in the four-room cabin and carried them down to the public tap to wash. As he worked, an unconscious song had slipped from him, floating three hundred metres to bring an incredible scent of normalcy into the rectitude of the living room. Already the drapes were sunning on the clothesline and the bamboo palings of the fence, while a balmy breeze aired out the mustiness of Grace Lodge.

Ma'Kanu lay trembling on her bed, slipping in and out of a restless sleep, savouring the long-forgotten sights and sounds of a gathering of the family.

With the coming of dusk, they ate together as they last did, perhaps a decade earlier; except that this time Ezinne took her own meal in between feeding Ma'Kanu. The food was the main course and the accompanying conversation was made halting by the presence of a courteous death in their midst.

Tell us about Margarita, asked Ezinne, without much expectation. All Ma'Kanu had ever revealed about her family could be related in a sentence: her mother's name was Margarita and her brothers had died in a fire. She had arrived in Odozi just before Kanu was born. Her life before that was a complete mystery.

The old woman shook her head firmly. The past is dead.

Did she teach you how to cook? asked Somto, nonetheless.

How many brothers did you have? asked Tobe. Did you name us after them?

Where is your *real* hometown? asked Njide.

Their persistent questions brought a mood of thoughtfulness over her. Her eyes slid shut and they leaned forward expectantly, then she opened her eyes and nodded at Ezinne, Can I have some more soup? It's really nice.

Njide uncasked nostalgia by producing the cache of black-and-white pictures she had discovered while cleaning Ma'Kanu's room. A picture of a ten-year old Somto, in the self-possessed pose that helped to earn him the nickname 'the Saint', sent Njide into stitches — until they discovered one of her in her birthday suit at four years. The pictures passed from hand to hand, evoking sighs and laughter, the old years flickering to life again in those precious moments.

Ma'Kanu shared silently in the mirth — until Ezinne put a picture in her hand, a group photograph of Kanu, Ezinne and Udeme, with the exclamation: How we've grown! They continued to eat and reminisce casually, the pictures passing from hand to hand, but all

the while they watched their foster mother discreetly. When the photograph was quietly ripped into pieces there was a collective sigh from her children.

A moody silence followed as a tremor of pain ran through the old woman's body. When it subsided, she breathed, Reminds me of the trick you played on me when Chekwa was born, she said. Whose bright idea was that one?

No one spoke till the culprit owned up. Njide hung her head and sat back against Somto's huge *ekwe* drum. Mine, Ma. I knew you were really mad at Kanu and Udeme, but I thought your love for children was stronger than any anger. I thought, if I could just get you to carry Chekwa for one day, your heart would melt towards his parents.

There was a faraway look in Ma'Kanu's eyes and a tension in the air around her bedside. It was the first time in thirteen years that the subject of Kanu and Udeme was being *discussed*; and in such quiet tones!

The child was beautiful, she mused, if I knew Udeme was already pregnant when they eloped, I'd have been suspicious; but it was just five months since they got married. When Dada brought what she said was a foundling to me, all I thought was: I was too old to raise another baby. Yet, she said she had sent to the Ministry in Enugu, that it was just for a week or so...

She turned her face fretfully and Tobe carried his plate around the bed to continue reading her lips. A pillow blocked his view and Ezinne began to amplify Ma's words with her hands, finger-spelling Chekwa's name: a week passed and I fell in love with the kid. I called him Chekwa. I decided he wasn't going to be raised in any orphanage... then you all started to drop in on those silly excuses. With those innocent looks in your faces. — And I *knew*. So I put down the baby. And I never picked him up again.

Why? Agonized Ezinne softly. Dada told us that the bonding was complete. You loved Chekwa, he cried all night for you to carry him again. Kanu is your only blood son. Chekwa was your only blood grandchild. He was your blood in a way none of us can ever be.

Ma'Kanu coughed painfully until Tobe brought a glass of water to her lips. His hand was trembling uncharacteristically. At length she replied, gaining strength from a vein of bitterness that seemed to physically overcome her features. I just grew cold inside. I couldn't bring myself even to look at the boy again.