

The Redemption of Mama Ude

My eight-year old self was fairly certain that my maternal grandmother, Mama Ude, was a witch. Before dawn, Mama Ude would be crouched on a stool in the kitchen, knife in hand, cutting raw onion slices, which she would subsequently masticate (for *natural* fresh breath, she often insisted). She also always mumbled incomprehensible Igbo words under her breath. I was sure she was doing *juju*¹, casting spells on people who wronged her. She was sometimes rather strict to my brothers and me. When I was seven, my brother, Chike, ‘accidentally’ threw my Christie doll on the zinc-covered roof of Mama Ude’s three-storey house, and he was unable to retrieve it. Mama Ude did not let anyone climb onto the roof to save my doll from death by melting, threatening anyone who wanted to rescue Christie with “a slap from above.” I watched, inconsolable, as Christie became plastic dark brown gunk against the platinum zinc roof. I didn’t understand why Mama was adamant on letting Christie die or why my parents did not intercede for Christie. To this day, if I think about it too long, I have to resist the desire to throw Mama Ude on the roof to avenge Christie’s untimely death.

We usually visited Mama Ude during those long Christmases that we spent in Eastern Nigeria. My parents would herd my brothers and me into the 2004 Toyota Land Cruiser Land Cruiser that was packed full with yams, garri², yards of cloth and the occasional – unfortunate – fat rooster with its red comb and shiny beak.. We drove thirty

¹ Witchcraft, think ‘voodoo’

² Fermented cassava

minutes from my father's village to my mother's, where Mama Ude lived. Each time we pulled up to Mama's three-storey home, lovingly nicknamed 'lighthouse' because it was such a towering building, Chike would whisper '*Ekukuleku*³' into my ear, causing me to explode with laughter.

Mama Ude is a petite yet buxom woman with firm skin so fair that people often call her '*oyibo*.'⁴ As a teenager, Mama Ude was so beautiful – with her perfectly straight set of teeth and forest of kinky hair – that my grandfather, Papa Ude, swore he would rather die a bachelor than have any other woman bear his children. So in the dry season of 1957, when she was fifteen, and he, thirty, they were wed.

"I once called your grandfather a cradle robber for marrying Mama when she was only fifteen." My mother explained to me, as we sat around the dark mahogany dining table with Mama Ude in our Lagos home last August. My father was away on a business trip to the nation's capital, and both my brothers at 24 and 21 were working full-time jobs in America.

Mama Ude was visiting my mother and me from Eastern Nigeria where we all originally hail from, and where Mama Ude lives. She was different, subtler, sweeter, slower – the doctor called it 'arthritis.'

Mama Ude shook her head, wiggling her outstretched palm at my mum. "*Mba*, No, He was not a cradle robber – I married him, did I not?"

My mother rolled her eyes. "You didn't know better – the man was thirty and you were a child."

³ A chant that it is believed witches and wizards say. It is from a famous Nollywood movie.

⁴ Pidgin word for "white person"

Watching their interaction was like glimpsing into the future. In only a few decades, it would be my Mother and I, roles promoted. My mother would be ‘Mama Yagazie’ and I would be ‘Mommy.’

I interjected, looking Mama Ude in the eyes. I took my chance to be on her side, to show her how balanced I was. “Well Mama Ude is so beautiful, I would have *kukuma*⁵ married her the first chance I got!”

Mama smiled at me, winking. I don’t even think my mother witnessed it; I believe it was the first real intimate moment we ever shared. She tapped my mother mockingly. “You see, Oyi *mara ihe*⁶, the girl has some sense, Yagazie.”

I fell silent, allowing the rich sensation of approval that traveled from my chest to my toes to move as slowly, as enjoyably, as possible.

My mother paused for a second, weighing the possible implications of the point she was about to make, ultimately deciding it was worth the risk. She cleared her throat. “Mama, *ima*, after Papa passed, if you really wanted you could have married again.”

I never met my grandfather, Papa Ude. He died of leukemia in 1990 – only a couple of weeks before my eldest brother was born. My brother was aptly named ‘Nnamdi’ – *my father lives* – because the Igbo believe that when a familial death happens so closely to a birth, the deceased’s spirit clings to the spirit of the newborn. Everyone says that Nnamdi and Papa Ude are remarkably alike, in calm temperament and in good looks, so the Igbo legend must be true.

⁵ This is a pidgin word signifying emphasis. It’s like saying ‘really’ or ‘certainly’ in this context.

⁶ From the Igbo infinitive “*ima*” meaning “to know” – ‘*mara ihe*’ is ‘knows something’ or ‘is wise’

Mama Ude looked slightly irritated by my Mom's comment, adjusting her royal blue *lappa*⁷ as she spoke. "Yagazie leave all that," she slowly waved her hands across her face, swatting away my Mom's words.

A mere year earlier, she would have fought the comment, shot it down with enthusiasm – much like she did her suitors. In fact, I once witnessed her tell a man that she would flog him with *koboko*⁸ if he ever spoke to her again. After watching this event, I could no longer tell if I feared Mama Ude, or deeply admired her. The only thing I was certain of was that I would always stay out of her way. Okom Uchenna, the unfortunate suitor who had ceaselessly pestered Mama Ude for three years, had no clue what he was in for that fateful Friday afternoon.

Okom Uchenna was an ugly man, but people said he was honest.⁹ He was almost as light skinned as Mama Ude, with straggly eyebrows and a mouth that appeared to be stuck in a permanent sneer – but he was an honest man. He often visited Mama Ude with kola nuts and garden eggs. I remember watching him park his iron bicycle under the canopy of orange trees behind Mama Ude's house. "Esther," he called to Mama Ude, beckoning to her to meet him by the trees.

"Mhhmm?" She replied, looking up from the washbasin full of blouses she had been rinsing by the clothesline. She dried her small hands on her purple *lappa*, hissing

⁷ A cloth wrapped around the waist. Lappas are worn across West Africa and are always remarkably well designed. Aim to have one before you die.

⁸ Pidgin word for a long whip made of cow tail. It is renowned for restoring children, men and animals to default settings.

⁹ Some Nigerian tribes insist that honesty is the top quality in a man – others will argue that one cannot have sex with honesty, neither can one's children *resemble* honesty

under breath. “Uchenna, *I choro gini*¹⁰? How can I help you?” Mama Ude re-knotted her *lappa*¹¹ and approached Okom Uchenna, her back straight and arms akimbo. She marched down the concrete steps in the backyard of the three-storey home that my grandfather built from scratch after the Biafran war in the early 1970s. She met Okom Uchenna by the orange trees, bouncing from foot to foot as though she would explode if she didn’t tell him of his life¹² that afternoon.

He pulled out a twenty-naira note¹³ from the pocket of his shabby khaki trousers, grinning as he tried pressing it into her fisted palms. “Esther, I brought you this money and some chops¹⁴. I will just say it now, you should no longer be a widow.” He posed, his hands in his pocket. He was especially pleased with himself.

I’m certain if I had stared hard enough, I would have seen steam escaping from Mama Ude’s ears. She raised her voice, clapping her hands as she yelled. “Uchenna, how many times have I told you to stop disturbing me? How many times have I told you to pluck all the oranges you like, but leave me alone?”

Okom Uchenna appeared genuinely surprised, and replied – in his true fashion – honestly, counting off with the tips of his fingers. “Esther, maybe three – four times.”

¹⁰ Literally “What do you want?”

¹¹ In Igbo societies, re-knotting one’s *lappa* before a confrontation is a declaration of preparation for a fight. Much like taking off earrings or popping off nails in American societies.

¹² To “tell someone of their life” is to insult them so thoroughly that they are forced to reflect upon all their past life decisions

¹³ ₦20 is \$0.12. It has a higher purchasing power than \$0.12, but it is almost insignificant tender – it is like having \$1.

¹⁴ Pidgin for ‘food’

Mama Ude clapped her hands in disbelief before resting them across her bosom. “*Maka Chukwu*¹⁵ if you enter this compound again; I will bring big men from Isiukwuato to flog you!” She glared at him, let out a long hiss and trod back into the house.

Okom Uchenna placed his hands on his head, looking around to check whether anyone had heard a woman berate him so thoroughly. He shook his head when he caught me peeping through the kitchen window, and briskly walked to unchain his bicycle from the orange tree. He certainly did not doubt Mama Ude, because she swore that Okom Uchendu never returned to her compound again.

¹⁵ Igbo for ‘So help me God’ or ‘because of God’

At the dining table, my mother snapped her fingers at me impatiently. “Oyibaby, I said go and get your grandma’s medicine from her box – they are red capsules.”

As I walked towards the guest room to grab the medicine, I heard Mama Ude telling my Mother to ask me *politely* next time. I got Mama Ude her medicine, a glass of water, and a bottle of roasted groundnuts from the pantry.

“Ehen,” she smiled as I placed the medicine in front of her, “*Imeela*¹⁶, *Chukwu gozie gi*, God bless.”

Mama Ude’s blessings are a frequent occurrence. A strict Methodist (the Igbo kind that *pleads* the blood of Jesus so often that the Messiah might soon have to ration it), Mama Ude is always reciting bible verses to herself. Those incomprehensible words I used to think were *juju* spells were often the Igbo version of Psalm 51 or 1 Corinthians 13 – chapters seeking repentance and promoting love respectively. She murmured yet another prayer as she took the medicine, slowly placing both pills at the back of her tongue, before pushing them down with water.

Perhaps it was the arthritis that slowed Mama Ude down, perhaps it was a conscious decision she made, or perhaps I simply grew older and realized that she was a woman designed differently from any other I’d met. Papa and Mama Ude were parents to three young children during the Biafran War (they added five more to the count after the war came to an end). When Papa Ude was helping the Biafran Manpower efforts, Mama Ude was crawling through cassava farms to get food for her children. She once threw herself over my Mom, her youngest child at the time, during a shelling – afraid that even

¹⁶ Igbo for “Thank you” or “You have done well”

the shell casings were sharp enough to harm her daughter. At just 25 years old, Mama Ude was carrying one child on her back, and gripping tightly to two slightly older ones, as she trekked from refugee camp to refugee camp, avoiding shells, bullets and the Nigerian army¹⁷.

Mama Ude had always been *strong* woman, and after the loss of her first son (he was just sixteen when he drowned in a river) and her husband, she chose extreme fortitude, over weakness or any form of daintiness. So even when I was only seven, she didn't want me playing with dolls – she often said to my Mother, “Yagazie, nye nwata a akwukwo!”¹⁸ Undoubtedly, Mama Ude saw Christie's fatal sojourn to the roof as the will of God, and indeed it must have been, because after undergoing the emotional distress of Christie's death, I no longer wanted any other dolls.

¹⁷ The South-South and South-East regions of Nigeria (named Biafra) sought to secede from Nigeria after a series of tribal tensions and pogroms against the Igbo. Bombings, blockades, war crimes and the British saw to it that Nigeria remained one nation. The war lasted from 1967 – 1970. Kurt Vonnegut, an American writer, once wrote of the short-lived nation. “As for the "Republic of Biafra" we know a great deal. It was a nation with more citizens than Ireland and Norway combined. It proclaimed itself an independent republic on May 30, 1967. On January 17 of 1970, it surrendered unconditionally to Nigeria, the nation from which it had tried to secede. It had few friends in this world, and among its active enemies were Russia and Great Britain. Its enemies were pleased to call it a "tribe.””

¹⁸ Igbo for “Give this child only books!”

“Go and get hot water for Mama.” My mother instructed me, pointing towards the kitchen. The taps of the guest bath were notorious for spewing out icy cold water even when the dial was turned to the farthest H.

I filled two buckets with hot water – mixing the buckets with cold water from the tap and adding three drops of Therapy Aches foaming bath gel.

Mama Ude hugged me as she entered the guest bath to wash, calling to my Mother. “Oyi is really becoming a woman – look how well she is treating me.”

If there was an emotion that was a perfect cocktail of pure pride and a dash of regret, I was suddenly sipping on it. I was pleased that she had started to think so highly of me, sad that my brothers had not witnessed this side of her, and glad that my grandmother finally seemed (to me, at least) to be as grandmothers usually are (or at least should be): gentle, generous with compliments and appreciative of the small things.

I walked past the bathroom, listening to make sure she was still bathing, checking to ensure she hadn’t slipped. I listened as she sang the Igbo version of the Lord’s Prayer to the tune of ‘Great is Thy Faithfulness.’

My mother kissed my cheek when she saw me outside Mama Ude’s bathroom door. “I thought this visit would be good for you and her.”

I only nodded.

When Mama emerged from the bathroom, a long lappa tied across her chest and a face towel across her shoulder, she asked me to style her hair. “Let it be like your hair oh! *See as di tin fine no bi small*¹⁹!” She laughed, gently pulling at the bistre coils that fell to my shoulders.

¹⁹ Pidgin meaning “Look how pretty it is”

That night, as I combed through her thick kinky hair, parting it to massage avocado oil onto her scalp, I realized that by virtue of her needing me, Mama Ude became the grandmother I always wanted. I wondered if I was going to hell for thanking God for her arthritis. I was relieved, not because she had become less overbearing or more loving, but that we could finally have the relationship I had always wanted. I wondered if she had become so kind because she was afraid of dying – but quickly banished the thought of her death from my mind.

The next morning, an early Saturday, I watched Mama Ude through the green-tinted French windows in the living room. As discreetly as possible, I peeped as she walked around the lawn in our backyard mumbling to herself. She moved slowly from shrub to shrub – she began at the small bush of pink hibiscuses beside the Boys’ Quarters²⁰ and worked her way through to the rectangular lawn to the papaya tree by the back door. After watching Mama Ude for about five minutes, I simply left *and returned* to heating a bowl of pap²¹ for her breakfast. Two days later, after Mama Ude returned home, I off-handedly told my Mother of Mama Ude’s short walk around the lawn.

“I mean, Mama Ude was just walking round, for so long.” I adjusted the plush baby blue blanket across my feet, my head on my Mom’s lap. We often did this on the days Mother didn’t have to work – simply laid in bed together in the middle of the afternoon, and reflected together. I continued, “and she’d stop in front of one of the flowers and say mouth some stuff, so I just thought she was trying to walk around more. Like probably the doctor told her to do so for her arthritis.”

²⁰ Boys’ Quarters (BQ’s) are a feature of post-colonial houses in Nigeria. Originally built by the Europeans who settled in Nigeria, BQ’s are usually the living quarters for domestic help or distant family members.

²¹ Nigerian corn meal, think of custard.

My mother stroked my forehead, flattening the baby hairs that often stuck up along my hairline. “Or maybe she was praying for us,” she replied quietly.

Upon reflecting on my mother’s observation, I realized that Mama Ude indeed was praying – as she stopped at each bush, her head was bowed. Walking around from bush to bush helped her concentrate in the way that rosary beads would have, and she was displaying the purest form of love that she knew – prayer. The grandmother I once believed was a witch spent her morning supplicating to God on our behalf.

I smiled at my mother, my head still on her lap. “I really love Mama Ude.” It was the first time in my life, that I ever truly meant those words.