

NKEM NWANKIWO

HIS MOTHER

THE market had been full for some time but Mama Olu hadn't sold anything. And it wasn't for lack of customers. Many Europeans had been to market, loved fruits and could pay well for them.

'Customer, you no go buy from me!' routed many other market women, giving the invitation its own quality of guile and tenderness.

But Mama Olu sat beside her stall gazing in the distance. A solitary fly perched on one of her oranges preening its belly. She ignored it. She sat very still, only now and then nodding her head with her thoughts.

'What was wrong with embracing him?' she mumbled once or twice. It was the only compensation that would have come to her. And had he responded she would not have minded the meagerness of her reward. She would even have forgiven his remissness. Yes he had been remiss, not to have written throughout all those years. She had been startled when at last she got his letter at the end of the silence. He was (the letter said) back to Nigeria and would she want to see him. Very much! She had made special efforts to be worthy of him (who knows, he may have become a big man; all who went to England invariably were). She had bought a new wrapper and prettified her hair, and she was flattered by what the mirror showed.

But when finally she got to his home she lost some of her confidence. She was intimidated by the European style door and frightened at the prospect of meeting Olu. Would he still feel sour?

A superior-looking steward, complete in tunic and shining buttocks, opened the door to her timid knock.

'Who are you?' he asked in a supercilious manner.

'I am Mama Olu'.

'Mama who?'

'I am his mother.'

'Oh—' the steward's manner changed slightly. 'Come in', he said, 'I'll call him. Sit down.'

Mama Olu did not sit down. She rubbed her hands against each other, shifted her feet nervously. Then she glanced at the sumptuously furnished room with its gleaming mahogany table and chairs, and a thick velvet carpet. A big television set asserted itself at the right corner. Mama Olu walked up to it and tried the broad face to assure herself that it was real.

What a contrast this house was to the mud-cracked hut in which Olu had been reared. That hut was the only thing their improvident father had left her and her two boys. But at that time Mama Olu's arms were strong and trade prosperous. She was able to retain the boys in school. It was not long before the elder, Olu, passed out of the school, and so well that his teachers declared he must go to college.

'But I haven't any money,' Mama Olu cried though wishing desperately that she had.

'Everybody goes to college nowadays,' said the teachers. 'Think of all he would miss.'

Olu himself in his own quiet, determined way had already made up his mind to go to college and taken it for granted that his mother would not disappoint him. She did not.

He stayed in college for five years. They were five years of hardship and constant makeshift but also years of satisfaction. Then Olu came out with honours. After this there was a year's respite during which he used to send her part of his salary and beautifully written letters.

But at the end of that year he was restless. He was determined, he said, to go overseas and study law.

Mama Olu was alarmed: 'England is so far away.'

And the people will be strangers.'

Relatives had also expressed their misgivings. 'Think well, my son,' they had said. 'Suppose you fell ill, to whose house would you go?'

But Olu overbore them all. And Mama Olu looking at the silver-plush furnishing of that room must admit that he was probably right.

But at that time the great problem was how to obtain money for the trip. Mama Olu had run to her cousin, a senior service man, humbled herself, knelt down and knocked her head thrice on the ground as is her manner when praying to Allah. The cousin had given only a grudging reply.

'We shall see what can be done,' he said.

Then the day came when Olu took off for England with £300 in his pocket, made up of his and her savings, supplemented a little by the cousin.

'Enough to feed us all for life,' Mama Olu had said laughing and sobbing at the same time.

But England must have been a very expensive land; the money did not last a year. Then Olu began to write angry, passionate letters. Trembling with fear, she ran back to the cousin but he firmly told her off. She became desperate, worked day and night, ate only once a day, but the monies she sent apparently were inadequate for the letters became angrier and angrier. And then just at that moment she broke down.

When she got up six months later the letters had ceased. But she nerved herself anew, worked pell-mell, sent money and frantic letters but if he received them he did not acknowledge them. He was too angry. She had failed him when he needed her most. From that time she could never think of him without shame and that was why she was nervous when she came.

He was much fatter, older; but she only saw the eager, broad-faced brat he once was.

'Mother,' he said.

She embraced him, eyes closed. It lasted for a moment but within that time she was keenly aware of something lacking. Olu had put no warmth in that embrace, no joy. He still had not forgiven her. The old guilty feeling began to creep on her again. Her whole life shrivelled into a small ball and burst. Dazed, she opened her eyes but could not meet his. They stood apart.

'Sit down, mother,' said Olu catching some of her nervousness. She sat down. And then he was saying,

'Mother, I have not told you. Meet my wife.'

Mama Olu stood up alarmed, saw a pink-faced girl and disliked her at once, but was too unsure of herself to let her handshake express her hostility.

'Sit down,' the girl said.

They tried to help her, to put her at her ease but only made her more nervous. As soon as she could, she fled to the kitchen. And there she found the cook, a fat, fussy woman who spoke her own language. Gradually Mama Olu recovered her poise.

'Tell me,' she asked, 'does she feed him well?'

'Well, yes. True, they don't eat as much as we. In the morning, for instance, they have only two slices of bread and a cup of tea.'

Mama Olu had been afraid of this. The white woman was deliberately starving Olu. Many stories had been told about such wrong-headed marriages. It had been said that white women who married Nigerians didn't really mean to stay. They would wait for only as long as they could steal bags of money from their husbands then they would poison or starve those same husbands and run back to their land. Mama Olu wished she could kill her.

A little later the young bride herself came into the kitchen. She had sensed that something troubled Mama Olu and wished to reassure her. But Mama Olu only interpreted her smile as a camouflage for deep hostility and did not return it.

The bride was only slightly nonplussed. Turning to the cook she said: 'Will you add another plate for tonight.'

'Yes, Ma,' said the cook.

Mama Olu didn't know what they said but she was sure that the white woman had made a derogatory remark about her.

The bride now turned all her attention to her mother-in-law. But here she felt herself repelled; the other woman had obstinately erected a barrier between the two of them. The bride would have liked to break it but didn't know how. She gave up trying. At the same time she grew resentful. Why must she be the one to make all the advances? Was it her fault that her husband has an illiterate black as a mother? Her anger was reflected in the next question, she asked Mama Olu with the cook interpreting.

'When do you go?'

'Tomorrow,' Mama Olu answered quickly.

Anger drained away from the bride leaving only hot

guilt. How could she . . . Such a tactless question! What has gone wrong inside her? She tried desperately to find a way to make amends but was baffled, her head was in a curious muddle. Panicky, she fled from the nervous situation, though taking care to keep her outward dignity intact.

As soon as she was gone Mama Olu turned to the cook and said: 'What was it she said to you?'

'When?'

'When first she came in.'

'Oh, she asked me to include your plate for food tonight.'

So I am a stranger in my own son's house, thought Mama Olu. Otherwise there would have been no need to start so early to think of a way to arrange plates for the night. They could have waited until supper time itself and then gathered together in the usual way calling for as many plates as they needed. The white woman wishes to emphasize that I am a stranger. She wishes to get rid of me. Perhaps with the consent of Olu! Very well, I will leave their fine house.

That evening without telling anybody Mama Olu fed. All that was two weeks ago.

And now the market was stirring, becoming even noisier. More white men were streaming in and the competition to win them was becoming keener. But

it was not the excitement that stirred Mama Olu . . . Something else . . . She could sense the broken pieces of her life coming together again.

A moment later the other boy, Tunde, stood before her. There was in his eyes the old light that she knew so well, the light of optimism, of unwavering ambition.

'Mother!' he began excitedly. 'I passed the entrance examination.'

'You did?' She lighted up forcing her spirits to match his excitement.

'I came first. There were three hundred candidates but I came first. I have already written the principal to say I shall come.'

'Yes . . . yes, tell him that you shall come.' He bounced away. Tears welled up in Mama Olu's eyes. Three hundred . . . The money would be found somehow. Three hundred mothers' sons had striven and her own had beaten them all. The money had to be found.

She turned briskly to her pineapples. The solitary fly was still performing its toilet. She took up a broom and swiped it dead. Then she looked up and waved to a European family passing by.

'Customer,' she said struggling through the only English she knew, 'Customer, you no go buy from me!

DESPAIR

Doom begins to laugh behind
The eye of galled gloom
And towers of ambition crumble
Before the terrific smash of folly.
Hollowness brims with the seas
Of sorrowing mood.
The dizzling mole mounds up
Its tumbling spoil
Unable to garrison the turkeys
Of its bedded soil.
Circumstance begins to squirm
And reel to and fro, like a child,
Sucking the breast of hope
To emptiness.

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