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WORKING – IN – PROGRESS

Si kele onye nti chiri; enu anughi, ala g'anu - Salute the deaf; if the heavens don't hear, the earth will hear. (*Igbo proverb*)

A Work in Progress?

September 16th 2017. I was sitting on the threshold of my Grandfather's house, staring at the right corner of the faded pink walls that opened a view to a mango tree, a dozen palm trees, a large expanse of green shrubbery, and the mound of stones that marked my Mother's grave. The funeral was yesterday, the earth under the stones were reddish-brown clay. Underneath the green shrubbery were the graves of my uncle who had died from pneumonia in 1975, and my Grandmother from diabetes in 1994. It was about 8:30PM, and my village was quiet. The men had gone to their shops at the small market (*Afia Orié*, we call it) just off the tarred road, a road I could see from here, where the foot track began from my Grandfather's compound and ended beside a gutter. The women had either gone to the limestone quarry at the other side of town, or to their farms. I was alone at the front yard, watching the shadows the trees left on the clay under my bare feet, listening to the birds that called to each other from the palm trees. In my hands were photographs I had found in my Mother's boxes. The boxes had been caked with dust. She had packed them in 2004 when we had become temporally homeless while saving up money looking for a new house, traveled down to the village, and stowed them away in the second room of my Grandfather's house. The photos were still good, thankfully she had wrapped them up in cellophane bags. My mother, a preserver. Under the photographs was a larger cellophane bag, and in it was a stack of papers stapled together in a book-like format. On the "cover" was a childish illustration of a woman and little girl, and at the top was written in an equally childish cursive, "The Fate of Ngozi." This is where I will begin.

I am no stranger to the world of writing. At eight years ten months old, I began a work-in-progress which finally became the manuscript I held in my hands that morning of September 16th, 2017. As a child, I had started the book with a starry-eyed curiosity that ended the moment I was done writing it. My mother noticed my abilities as a writer, and saved the book. I never saw it again until the morning after her funeral. My brother and I had been looking for pictures to take home with us, things to forever remind us of the mother we once had. And then I opened the box and saw the manuscript.

A year ago, in August 2017 precisely, I made up my mind never to write again. I had written my eulogy for my mother, "The Things We Never Say," as a way of "shutting the door," saying goodbye to a world that I had lived, that eight year old girl who wrote "The Fate of Ngozi." Sitting in my apartment I once shared with her, I apologized to my mother's picture for this decision. I spoke to her in spirit, asking that she understand. What more could I possibly write about? Life as I had known it had crumbled down to ashes—sickness and death had flayed me. I was a prisoner to my own emotions. Dead inside, silence was the only language I could speak—

Until that silent morning of September 16th, 2017.

ICPL and the International Writing Program Panel Series, September 21, 2018

Abani (Nigeria/USA), Bêgné (Argentina), Huang (Taiwan), Takiguchi (Japan), Okolo (Nigeria)

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A Work in Progress...

My Grandmother once said in Igbo, “*O na-abu a si nwata wuba ahu, o saba afo ya.*” This translates to, *When you tell a child to wash his body, he washes his stomach.* It is a way to say that a child is not equipped to make his own decisions because he is young and fragile and will only understand the world from a child’s perspective. This was true for me as a writer. Before sickness and death came into my life, I understood my writing from the vantage point of a free spirit. I believed the world was, even though treacherous, a clash of beautiful lights. It reflected in my writing because I wrote romance. To me, love was not just a feeling. It was a force of euphoric, endless joy. Then sickness and death came and showed me the lengths love should go. How love smelt like the choking antiseptic in hospitals, how love was carrying your mother in your arms as a baby, even though she weighed more than you, because she could not walk. Love was faith. Love was endurance. Love was just...being there.

How can you stop a truth from being told when it is speaking for itself? I realized quickly that my writing was less about me and more about the people in my life. The people I had met. And that was when I knew I could never stop. I began writing again, and my work-in-progress is the first page of this presentation. I have decided that the only time to stop writing is when I have nothing more to say. My pen will cease when the words dry up. The moment I begin to think of how to convey a message on paper without drifting into a place of light and nothingness, I will go back fully to my legal career. But now, I will never stop. I am not just writing a work in progress, I *am* a work-in-progress. I am the pages I type on at dawn every morning, the ink that dents the paper where I re-write dialogues of my characters. I am writing what compels me, what frightens me, what beguiles me. What makes me feel alive. And I will only stop when I feel nothing anymore.

Because, on that silent morning of September 16th, 2017, just under the manuscript entitled “The Fate of Ngozi” in the cellophane bag, was written the best advice I have ever received. It was a little note, written by my mother, probably in 2004, just before she packed the boxes up. Probably before. I will never know.

The message is engraved in my heart. I hope it stays in yours.

“Ada, in case you ever get tired, and want to know where it all began, it began here. You are talented. Never stop writing.”

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