THREE MANGOES

By

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About the Author
Mama Risikat set down the large basket of fruits she had been carrying on her head. The small piece of cloth she had used to cushion the rough base of the raffia basket on her head promptly fell to the ground undeterred. It began to unravel from the tight cylindrical form into which it was wound. But, Mama Risikat did not even try to stop it. Although, she had carried the basket for just a short distance - from the bus-stop on her street where the bus had dropped her off, to the front door of her home - she still felt tired. The pounding in her head did not help matters, but she chose to ignore it. Her day had just started.

Turning to her eldest child, a girl of about sixteen, who looked like a younger, fresher version of this woman, she asked for some water to drink. Risikat - for that was the name of this young girl - obeyed and watched her mother gulp down the contents of the cup greedily. She carried out this instruction three more times until the thirst of the older woman was quenched. While her mother sat on an *apotii* - small stool - cooling off, Risikat took an empty bucket and walked to the front of the block of flats where they lived.

This was Shitta, a working-class neighborhood in Surulere, where each block of flats had stationed in front of it, a profusion of water taps for public use. Just about anybody could use the taps, and people often came from miles away to come and get water. Even in a middle class suburb like Surulere, getting water for daily use was a tedious, costly and mostly inconvenient process. To get running water indoors, people usually had to pay for water tankers to deliver water into huge storage tanks. But for the residents of Shitta, which ironically was an experiment in government-subsidized housing, clean, pipe-borne, alum-free water was free and sort of convenient. Everyone who came there to fetch water understood these facts. Notably, on days when there was a significant shortage of water in the surrounding neighborhoods, it was not unusual to see long lines of people with different colors of jerry cans and other portable water storage containers, who had come to fetch water. Luckily for Risikat, today was not one of such days.

It was a typical Wednesday morning, and there was no one else at the taps when she got there. She filled the bucket with water and went back to the house. From experience, she knew that her mother would no longer be sitting in the house. And she was right. Mama Risikat had dragged the basket of mangoes to the back of the house where she stood waiting for her daughter to return. As soon as Risikat arrived, they both simultaneously rinsed off the mangoes and sorted them out into three piles. Each pile contained a specific variety of mangoes: the first pile had mangoes with tones of red, orange and green, as if the mangoes were confused as to what color to assume when they ripened; the second pile had mangoes that were completely dark green in color, but were ripe, nonetheless; the third pile had smaller mangoes that were yellow in color, with a few black spots on some of them. Mama Risikat, who had been selling mangoes at Oyingbo market for more than ten years, had learnt to keep as many varieties of mangoes in stock as possible. Customers who had diverse tastes often wanted to buy more than one type of mango, and it was wise to stay a few steps ahead of them.

After washing the mangoes, Risikat fetched a large metal tray and helped her mother select about ten fresh-looking mangoes from each of the three piles. While they were doing this, her mother told her in Yoruba:

**Three Mangoes**
"You know your WAEC exams are around the corner. And I don't have your exam fees. If you don't sell enough mangoes, I can't pay for your exams, and you know what that means. So, you know what you need to do."

"Yes, ma" was all Risikat said in response to her mother's admonition. Even though Mama Risikat knew that her daughter was aware of all these challenges, repeating it aloud to her hearing was somewhat therapeutic for her. In her mind, if she said it loud enough, long enough and often enough, everything would work out the way she wanted it to: Risikat would be able to go back to school and take her final exams, her husband, Baba Risikat would make more money from his taxi driving business, her other three children would not keep falling sick from poor nutrition, and meat would not keep disappearing from their meals day after day.

After wiping the sweat from her brow with a corner of her wrapper, Mama Risikat gave her daughter some loose change, a few more instructions on which neighborhoods to visit, and sent her on her way with silent prayers. But, she didn't stand by to watch her cross the street with the heavy tray on her head. Rather, she briskly walked back to the house, took her 13-year old daughter Rashidat with her and headed to Oyingbo market where she would sell her wares till nightfall. She left her other two children both under the age of 10, alone at home with a little money for their upkeep.

Although there were a lot of fruit sellers stationed at various junctions and on different street corners in the same neighborhood, Risikat knew that this would not deter her from selling her wares. She understood that what she was really selling was convenience. People who had no intention of buying fruits, let alone mangoes, would quickly change their minds as soon as they saw her approaching or heard her advertising her goods. All she needed to do was to call out every now and then "Sweet, sweet mangoes! Fresh mangoes! Buy mangoes!" and those who were interested would call her to come and sell fruits to them. She usually frequented places where people were known to conjugate, places where her voice could rise above the everyday noise of passing cars, music blaring from speakers, the inescapable power generators and similar distractions.

On this particular day, she walked past bus-stops and commercial stores, but only three people bought a total of seven mangoes from her. And they were all yellow ones. Despite all her efforts, she was unable to convince them to buy any of the other two varieties - the green ones, and the 'confused' multi-colored ones - which remained untouched on her tray. By this time, she had been walking around in the sun for more than two hours. How would she sell the remaining mangoes before nightfall?

She was still asking herself this question when she decided to take a quick break at a shop that sold cold drinks. Knowing precisely how much money she had to spend, she did not even go near any of the bottled drinks that filled the freezer. Rather, she opted for a satchet of pure water, and a packet of locally-made biscuits. The sugar, she reasoned would give her a little more energy to keep going, and the water would quench her thirst for a few more hours. As she sat down on a bench outside the shop, eating the third biscuit in the packet of four, a thought suddenly occurred to her.

Keeping a close watch on her tray of mangoes now resting on the floor outside the shop, she asked the woman who owned the shop, if she knew the places in that neighborhood where people would want to buy mangoes. The shop-owner, a kind woman who had a daughter of about Risikat's age in school, gave her a list of places she recommended. One of them was a mechanic's shop, which was on another street, a few minutes away. Risikat thanked the woman profusely, who in turn gave her a free packet of biscuits and another satchet of pure water, and
then she left for her next port of call - the mechanic's shop. At this time, Risikat still had more than twenty mangoes to sell. Of that number, exactly three of them were yellow mangoes. And as she often did whenever this happened, she made a mental note to pay close attention to the person, or people who would buy the last three yellow mangoes.

The mechanic's shop was not hard to find. A couple of rusted, lifeless, engine-less cars and buses from another decade were scattered over a plot of land overgrown with weeds. These were the irrefutable landmarks that signaled her destination. Several boys, mostly teenagers, and older men milled around the few cars that looked like they were still running. They all wore blue uniforms covered in several-months-old engine oil, and every other gunk that could conceivably come out of anything on four wheels. As she approached the mechanic's shop, she knew that even if she had not intended to stop there, they would have harassed her nonetheless. One of them spotted her, and just like that, the word spread quickly that a girl selling mangoes was nearby. Within seconds, several of them had left what they were doing and began to call her. Some of them even came towards her. It was like watching bees drawn to nectar.

"Eh, fine girl! Mango seller, come here! We want to buy mangoes! How much you dey sell your mangoes? Na dis one I want. I no want that one. Wetin be dis? Na mango be dis abi na paw-paw?"

They all spoke at once as if Risikat had more than two ears that they could see. This was not the first time Risikat had sold mangoes to a group of mechanics before, but something about the way they all came at once, made her very apprehensive. As a precaution, she made sure she did not go to close to the actual workshop, a wooden shed with a corrugated iron roof that was hidden among the cars on the lot. She stood on the very outskirts of the lot, and set her tray down on an old, condemned car battery. While simultaneously keeping the greasy hands of the mechanics from handling her wares, and making sure no one was stealing from her, she sold a good number of the mangoes on her tray. Within minutes, they had bought a majority of the other two species of mangoes: the reddish ones, and the green ones.

As she collected the money from each buyer, she took the naira notes and tucked them away in her sweaty bra - this was the safest place possible, according to her mother. The sight of a well-endowed young girl at the peak of puberty, putting money into her bra, seemed to throw the men's hormones into overdrive. Two of the younger men made passes at her, trying to lock her into an embrace, while calling her "My wife!" as if they had paid her bride price to Baba Risikat. Another one actually succeeded in grabbing her by the waist and was pulling her off to the side amidst her screams of protest. The tray of mangoes lay defenseless while this scene unfolded.

All of a sudden, the owner of the mechanic workshop appeared from nowhere. He was a man in his fifties with three horizontal tribal marks seared into the skin on each side of his face. He barked at the men, ordering them to leave Risikat alone immediately and even slapped the idiot who was trying to kidnap her in broad daylight. Thankfully, they all obeyed instantly and slunk away into the workshop. Risikat stood there trembling at the thought of what almost happened to her. The workshop owner apologized to her and warned her to be more careful around customers, ending his sentence with "You know say you be woman." Finally, as if to make up for the damage his boys had done, he offered to buy some of her mangoes. She selected a few good ones and threw in one of the remaining three yellow ones for free. As he helped her put her tray back on her head, she thanked him again and walked away so fast that it was a wonder the tray did not fall off her head.

With the scene of what had transpired at the mechanic's shop replaying in her mind, Risikat was sorely tempted to go back home immediately. However, she remembered that if she did not
sell enough mangoes, she could not pay her exam fees. That Friday was the deadline to make that payment. That thought was all she needed to convince her to keep going until every single mango was sold. About ten minutes later, she walked into another street.

By now, it was 4 p.m. and the sun had begun its slow descent. However, it was still hot, and as Risikat contemplated finding another place to rest to drink the other satchet of pure water the shop owner had generously given her, she heard a woman's voice calling her. She went towards the source of the voice and walked into a compound that housed a two-storey house building. Several tenants occupied the rooms in this house. On the balcony of the house upstairs, sat a woman who was heavily pregnant. She looked like if she had a choice she would give birth to that child - or those children - right away. But, her due date was still months away, as she later told Risikat. In the meantime, she had a craving for mangoes and Risikat happened to walk by at the moment the craving began.

Due to the woman's condition, she could not come downstairs to meet Risikat. It was the mango seller who mounted the single flight of stairs, which ran on one side of the building, to meet her customer on the balcony. The woman picked four mangoes: three green ones and one of the remaining two yellow ones. After paying for the mangoes, the woman called one of the children of the other tenants to help her rinse them, and as Risikat left, she saw the woman munching the yellow mango, nodding her head in satisfaction. Risikat smiled and went on her way. There were now five mangoes remaining in the tray, and only one of them was yellow.

Risikat decided to complete her rounds on a connecting street before making the long journey home. As she walked to the end of the street, she made the same announcement she had repeated all day long, in a tired voice. No sooner had she said "Sweet, sweet mangoes" the second time, than she heard a man's voice call her to come immediately. Judging from her past encounter a few hours ago, and with the mechanic workshop owner's warning still fresh on her mind, she hesitated a little bit. But, the man's voice rang out urgently beckoning her to come and sell mangoes to him. She reluctantly obeyed and followed the direction of the voice.

She walked into a compound in the middle of which stood another two-storey house. The architecture was similar to the house where the pregnant woman lived. This time, however, the person who had called her was not on the balcony. He was on the ground floor and stood with his arms akimbo, in front of the house. One would think, from the way he stood boldly, that he was the landlord. Alas! He was just a tenant. And he wanted to buy mangoes.

As he stood there pricing the mangoes, a little girl of about five years old wearing a long floral print dress, and with her natural hair braided in a suku hairstyle, emerged from the side entrance that led to the back of the building. Her tear-stained face gave Risikat reason to pause. But it was not just that she had been crying. She kept pulling her dress closer and closer around her tiny little body as if she wanted it to melt and become part of her frame. The man was clearly irritated by what she was doing, and he kept slapping her hands off to keep her from doing so. When he got fed up, he lightly caressed her head, and in a voice dripping with irony, asked her which mangoes she wanted him to buy for her. Without saying a word, the little girl picked up all five of the remaining mangoes, one after the other, and handed them to an amused Risikat. The man did not even argue. He told Risikat to wait while he went to get his purse. As soon as he disappeared into the boys' quarters behind the house, the little girl began to speak:

"I don't like Uncle Adisa."

A very surprised Risikat responded with a "Why? Isn't he your uncle?"

"No. He is our neighbor and Mummy and Daddy told me to stay with him until they come back from work."
"So, why don't you like him?"
No answer. Risikat was not surprised that the little girl was opening up to her like this. It was a natural effect she had on children. In fact, her father described it as a gift. They just always warmed up to her and wanted to tell her all kinds of things. And apparently, this little girl was not different.

"Okay, what's your name? Tell me your name."
She smiled shyly and said, "Tawa."

"Awww! My youngest sister's name is Tawa too. How old are you?"

She held out all five fingers on her right hand, and began to suck her left thumb. Just then, the little girl told her suddenly: "Uncle Adisa always tells me to remove my dress when I enter his room. I don't want to remove my dress." Risikat was shocked. But Tawa did not stop there. Without missing a beat, she described to her new friend, Risikat, the things Uncle Adisa, the same man who was about to buy the last yellow mango, did to her whenever her parents left her with him.

"Uncle Adisa locks the door with his key. Then he will close the windows, and then he will 'off' the light" Tawa continued, playing with her dress. By now she was sitting down on the bare floor beside Risikat. "And then we watch films. In the films, the man and woman 'off' their clothes and that's when Uncle Adisa tells me to remove my dress too … ."

Risikat did not know what to do. It wasn't just that this little girl was sharing such sensitive details with a complete stranger. Her tale forcefully brought to mind a similar ordeal Risikat had faced at the same age. Her own 'Uncle Adisa' was the landlord in the rented flat they lived in at that time. She knew that Tawa was telling the truth. But what was she to do? What could she do?

Just then, Uncle Adisa returned. Not knowing what had transpired between Risikat and Tawa, he paid for the mangoes and began to pull the little girl away. She began to scream and cry and tried unsuccessfully to punch Uncle Adisa on his legs. That's when an idea occurred to Risikat.

"Uncle, abeg leave her. I go play with her until her Mama and Papa come back."

She knew she was taking a fat chance, but she felt this little girl was worth it. Uncle Adisa did not seem to care. In fact, he heartily agreed to her suggestion, noting loudly that he knew she could not carry the little girl away since some of the neighbors had arrived by that time, and many people were milling around the compound. He also knew that her parents were bound to arrive very soon.

He promptly went back to his room, changed his clothes and went out. Risikat changed her sitting position, and set up camp with her empty tray in front of the girl's parents' apartment on the ground floor, waiting for their return. Meanwhile, the little girl had gone to rinse off the mangoes and was eating them one by one. She had just bitten into mango number three, the only yellow mango, when an old gray Peugeot 504 pulled into the compound startling both of them.

As soon as the girl saw the car, she shouted "Daddy! Mummy!" and waited for the car to stop before running up to the driver's door. A man in his early thirties wearing a white shirt and black trousers and a green tie stepped out. The front passenger door opened at about the same time, and a woman wearing a blue dress stepped out. She looked like an older version of Tawa. Risikat boldly stepped up to both of them, greeted them, and then took a deep breath.

"Oga, Madam, there is something I feel you should know about your daughter. And your neighbor, Uncle Adisa." And with that, the mango seller told them exactly what Tawa had told her.
About the Author

Sharon Abimbola Salu was born and raised in Lagos, Nigeria where she lived until she relocated to the United States of America. Her stories are mostly set in Nigeria, and she writes the kind of stories she would like to read. A professed lover of spicy foods, she loves experimenting with new recipes, to the dismay of non-spicy food lovers. Apart from writing, photography is her other hobby.

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