The Life and Times of Two Flared Nostrils

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There was only one thing standing between Mr. Gbadegesin and the door: a table. It was one of those low-lying wooden coffee tables that had come from someone else's house and now housed old newspapers in the sitting room. But, Mr. Gbadegesin was not interested in the news that afternoon. His plan was to escape through the front door without waking up his wife. But that table. Very heavy object. He could not lift it off the ground. Necessity demanded that he drag it across the concrete floor, and that was certain to make a racket.

"That won't work. Mama Joko will wake up, and then it's all over," he muttered to himself, wringing his little hands. As small as they were, his hands could have been mistaken for those of a child. It did not help that they were attached to short, skinny arms, which were of course, attached to a body that was a little over 4 feet tall.

As he exercised the muscles of his brain, a pounding headache followed. The moment the pounding started, his right hand automatically reached for his head. As soon as his hand met his head, sharp jabs of pain radiated from the wound she had inflicted on him a few hours earlier. He felt like his head had been converted to a conga and a crazy drummer was pounding away with reckless abandon. The only layer of protection over this wound was a bloodied bandage. But this was entirely his fault, as his wife had repeated, as she sat on him and beat him without restraint.

Yes, it was his fault that all these small small girls were always calling him at odd hours. Mr. Gbadegesin's excuse was that as the owner of a bookstore that sold mostly romance novels, women formed the bulk of his customer base. Beyond what was written on his business card, he usually gave out his number to some of his customers who wanted to be personally informed when certain books arrived in his store. Top notch customer service. That was what he called it. His wife did not share the same perspective.

When Mama Joko, his wife, asked him why Kingsley, the boy who served as his assistant and who ran the bookstore in Baba Joko's absence, could not give out his own number and provide those extra services, Baba Joko had paused for an extraordinarily long period of time before coughing out an excuse along the lines of "Because I am the oga, and he isn't." Clearly not satisfied with his answer, she had pushed him to the ground, sat on him and with her fists, she had spelt out her disapproval in blows and punches.

Being one of those people who believed in explaining her reasoning while delivering judgment, Mama Joko had bellowed in between the blows:

"You think I am stupid eh? I wasn’t born yesterday! Romance books indeed! From book to real life. That’s your plan, abi? Oya, talk now. Isn't that your plan? Later you will tell me you want to become an actor. Acting bedroom scenes with those small small girls. Not in this house. N-e-v-e-r!"

Baba Joko's pleas fell on deaf ears, and all his efforts to break free were useless. Mama Joko did not relent until she had exhausted herself. Only then, did she get up and retire to the bedroom. Baba Joko had pulled himself up, and then cleaned and bandaged his own wounds. As he had tried to leave the house that Saturday morning, Mama Joko had blocked him and ordered him to return to the bedroom. She warned him not to leave the house, and had dragged the coffee table to block the front door. Baba Joko, who was thoroughly humiliated, and weak from the one-sided, early morning wrestling match with his wife, had obeyed and climbed into bed.
He did not sleep though. He watched his wife fall asleep, and when he heard her snoring, he had climbed out of bed. He planned to leave the house quietly. That is, until he encountered the coffee table.

As he stood looking at the coffee table, he thought to himself how thankful he ought to be that Joko, their own child, was in boarding school while all these incessant fights between her parents ensued. It was not good for a child to see her parents fighting, he thought. He prayed that she would not turn out to be like her mother, so insecure and ill-tempered. Baba Joko did not consider how his own actions had triggered off that response in his wife. But she had not always been like that. Certainly, not ten years ago.

Back then, Mrs. Gbadegesin was a secretary at a small private company. She was known simply as Jocelyn. Jocelyn was the thirty-something year old who was put in charge of recruiting a new driver for her boss. She conducted the interviews herself and had rejected all the other applications on account of their incompetence, until Mr. Gbadegesin presented his application.

From Day One, she had shown her bias for this applicant, to everyone's surprise. The typical "we will contact you later" response she gave the others was never used with Mr. Gbadegesin. Instead, after just a ten-minute interview, she declared that he had been selected for the position. No one understood how a man who did not even have a driver's license was a perfect fit for the position of a driver. She considered that to be a temporary setback and personally took it upon herself to 'fix' it. Jocelyn knew what she was doing.

Perhaps, if anyone's curiosity had led them to investigate further, they would have noticed a certain pattern. The men Jocelyn dated closely resembled Mr. Gbadegesin in stature and character: vertically-challenged, weak-willed and easily manipulated. However, since nobody, not even Mr. Gbadegesin noticed, Jocelyn went forward with her plan. Her plan, of course, was to marry Mr. Gbadegesin. He was her future, the perfect man for her.

A woman would have seen through Jocelyn's craftiness, but men are often not as perceptive as women. Mr. Gbadegesin had no idea why this woman was so kind to him, cooked for him, was so supportive of him. It seemed that she lived to please him. He certainly did not complain. And of course, he did not know that everything Jocelyn did was calculated to reach her goal. Her calculations were right and within six months of their first meeting, Mr. Gbadegesin had proposed to her, declaring that she was the love of his life. Although he was 38, he allowed his emotions to prevail over reason, especially when it came to women. He loved Jocelyn's cooking, the way he felt after she praised him for even the smallest thing he did (as long as she noticed it), and her confidence. At 6' 2", Jocelyn and with an athletic build, Mr. Gbadegesin literally looked up to her. However, he overlooked the fact that the praises she showered only came after doing what she requested such as visiting places that were of interest to her, not him. She made decisions for both of them, without his input and certainly, regardless of his approval. Most importantly, to his detriment and eternal regret, he overlooked the little slaps she generously delivered whenever he did something to upset her. Anything could upset her. If the water he boiled for her tea was lukewarm, he got slapped. Too hot, another slap.

"Are you trying to burn my tongue?" she would ask. Any attempt to reply would earn him another slap.

If he did not apply enough pressure while giving her a foot rub, wham! A slap would land on his face. Or back. The slaps came without any warning and were delivered according to a unit of measurement that was known only to Jocelyn. Her mantra was "this is your fault." After
sometime, Mr. Gbadegesin began to believe her. He deserved to be punished for making her angry.

Mr. Gbadegesin remained passive and accepted Jocelyn just as she was. No one was perfect, he thought. So, one weekend, he married the imperfect woman he could not bear to live without. Two years later, Jokotola, their daughter, was born.

Joko was the answer to Mr. Gbadegesin's silent prayers. She had inherited her father's capacity for love, but none of her mother's cunning ways or temper. She had seen her parents quarrel, even fight, but it seemed to have no effect on her. But Baba Joko knew very well that watching her parents fight, and particularly, seeing her mother assault her father regularly, would affect her, even if the signs were hidden from him. He knew that children are like sponges, soaking up everything in their environment, whether good or bad. So, when his wife announced that she was sending Joko off to boarding school in JS1, he was relieved. At least, his daughter would get a chance to have the semblance of a normal childhood, one that was not poisoned by her parents' toxic relationship.

With Joko in school, Mr. Gbadegesin's thoughts shifted from worrying about his daughter to worrying about himself. He had tried to leave his wife many times, but because he wanted his child to grow up with both parents together, he had stayed. Eight different times he had tried to leave, and eight times he had failed, returning to what was familiar and comfortable. That is, until he met Agnes.

Agnes was the reason why Baba Joko was punctual at the bookstore. The bookstore itself was Mama Joko's idea. After she married him, she had convinced him to leave his job as a driver, and he had tried his hands at several business ventures. The bookstore was the only one that passed the two year mark.

Initially, the bookstore had started out selling strictly textbooks to students. As time progressed, novels joined the textbooks. Demand increased and novels outnumbered the textbooks. Eventually, romance novels joined the others since they appealed to a more diverse audience. Men, women, boys, girls and the general novel-reading public patronized Baba Joko's bookstore.

One day, a certain customer came to buy Harlequin romances. Slightly heavy-set and with a stocky build, she looked nothing like the women on the covers of these books. But, that did not stop Baba Joko from taking a keen interest in her. The reason was simple: instead of just picking a book from the shelf like most customers did, she asked Baba Joko to recommend a few books for her. He liked that; a woman giving him the power to choose for her. His interest was piqued and he started asking her questions. She answered willingly.

Her name was Agnes and she was a 40-something year old primary school teacher who had never been married. Within the span of two weeks, Agnes visited the bookstore almost 20 times. With each visit and each conversation, a real friendship blossomed between her and Mr. Gbadegesin. Miraculously, Mama Joko who was now a full-time housewife, and was notorious for paying unannounced visits to the bookstore, never met Agnes during one of their lengthy conversations. Meanwhile, Agnes and Mr. Gbadegesin continued bonding.

Agnes was the first person he confided in about his wife and her ways. It was Agnes who first suggested the idea of leaving his wife. The one thing she consistently told him was this: "Life is too short and too precious to be spent living in misery. If that woman kills you one day, she will find another man to marry and her own life will continue."

That last part seemed very real to him. He could picture his wife mourning him for a very short period of time, maybe less than a month, and then looking for another man. Maybe she
was already looking for his replacement. What if that was her plan: to get rid of him and find another man? That woman was capable of anything. Agnes was right. For the first time in his life, he began to see that his own life, not just that of his daughter, Joko, was precious.

*My life is precious.*

That singular idea began to pervade Baba Joko's thoughts. It came to his mind at odd hours: when he was washing his car, shopping for groceries or clipping Jocelyn's toe nails. All these tasks he did not mind doing. But this thought that had grabbed hold of him was particularly strong in the aftermath of Jocelyn's outburst of rage.

*My life too is precious.*

Slowly but surely, his heart began to believe that thought, and it fueled other thoughts, including a plan to escape. Again. But like all human beings, Baba Joko quickly discovered that conceiving a plan was easy. Execution was completely different and certainly *not* easy. After carefully considering the logistics of leaving his wife, he convinced himself that it could not be accomplished in one day. For starters, he did not know *where* he would go. He did not for one second think of kicking his wife out of the house. He was too weak-willed for that. He knew that he would be the one to leave. But where would he go? Back to Ijebu-Remo, his hometown? Who would take care of the bookstore? What about Agnes? What would he do for a living?

The day he presented Agnes with these questions, she dismissed them with a wave of her hand and said the words that changed his life forever:

"You can come and live with me."

Half of the battle was won! When he asked her if she was worried about what people would say, she being a spinster, and he being a married man, she replied:

"Who cares? No matter what you do in this life, people will talk. They have said all sorts of callous things about my being unmarried at this age. I might as well give them something to talk about."

But Mr. Gbadegesin needed more than Agnes' sincere words to make such a life-changing decision. He was still reluctant to leave his wife.

"I love this woman. My love will change her. I just need to try harder," he said to himself every time he wanted to leave. And he did. He tried to be the dutiful husband, jumping to his wife's beck and call, no questions asked. He had somehow convinced himself that she would change if only he did not upset her. But no matter what he changed, Mama Joko continued to pummel him with her fists for any reason under the sun. She did not change.

That afternoon, as he stood looking at the coffee table, a woman selling boiled corn passed by, announcing her wares:

"Langbe jina o!"

That voice. It had a ring to it that forcefully dug up a memory. A happier time. He was ten again, watching a black and white television in a neighbor's house. There were five other children in the sparsely furnished room, and they were all sitting on the floor. The woman of the house entered the room and placed a bowl full of boiled corn in front of the children. Turning to her son, Rufai, she said in a gentle voice:

"Make sure everybody eats."

As the ten-year old Abayomi Gbadegesin - for that was Baba Joko's full name - tried to reach into the bowl for his share, Rufai, who was the biggest boy in the group, slapped his hand away, and yelled:

"Short boys don't eat corn! They eat beans!"
Abayomi was the smallest and shortest boy in the group, even though he was older than Rufai and the other children. Rufai had beaten and bullied him for months. With each attack, Abayomi's reaction was the same: he ran away consumed by fear and thoroughly humiliated. But that day, Abayomi who had been secretly watching local wrestling matches in his neighborhood had had enough.

He knew he was smaller than Rufai, so when Rufai yelled at him, he jumped on a stool. That position momentarily took care of the disadvantage of height that Abayomi felt was partially responsible for his past defeat. Then, crouching forward and breathing deeply, he did what he had seen those wrestlers do: he flared his nostrils, opened his mouth and roared.

The roar of a ten-year old by itself might have been laughable. But when Rufai saw the no-nonsense look on Abayomi's face, like a warrior about to attack his enemy, he did not laugh. He turned around and fled. That was the last time Abayomi was ever allowed into that house. It was also the last time Rufai ever laid a finger on Abayomi.

It was the voice of Rufai's mother that Mr. Gbadegesin remembered when the corn seller passed his house that afternoon. At that moment, Mr. Gbadegesin who was still facing the door, turned to the right, towards the direction of her voice. He had barely turned when another sound startled him. Someone had just entered the sitting room.

He turned around to find Mama Joko facing him. She had just emerged from their bedroom, a crooked smile plastered on her face. But, it was not the look on her face that frightened him. It was the thing she held in her hand: a pestle.

He saw her lips move and the words that fell on his ears froze the blood in his veins: "Baba Joko, there is no yam in this house. So, it is you I will pound you today."

Mr. Gbadegesin did not need a soothsayer to tell him that this woman meant every word she said. She meant to use that yam pestle to beat the living day lights out of him. The reason was simple: she knew he had tried to leave the house without her permission, and she was not pleased with this exercise of independence. This was not the first time she had used this weapon to assault him. The wounds she had inflicted on him that morning were still fresh. He was not going to withstand another round of pounding.

In that moment, a crazy thing happened. Mr. Gbadegesin saw Rufai's face on his wife's body. He leapt on the coffee table, the same one that blocked his exit, and repeated the scene from his childhood: he flared his nostrils and roared. This was not the roar of a ten-year old child. It was the roar of a forty-something year old man who had had enough. Raising his fists to his eye level, his body became tense as he assumed the position of a boxer about to throw a punch. He roared again and stamped on the table like a deranged bull.

Mama Joko's eyes and ears worked perfectly. She heard her husband roar, saw his stance and understood what was coming. Baba Joko's face, contorted into an ugly scowl with his nostrils flared, was the last thing she saw before she dropped the pestle on the floor, and ran back into the bedroom. Baba Joko heard her lock the door and then she started shouting at the top of her voice:

"Ara adugbo! Neighbors! E gba mi o! Baba Joko wants to kill me! Somebody help me, please!"

Mr. Gbadegesin did not wait to see who would come to her aid. Who would believe that he was the victim? Certainly not him, that was for sure.

With all the strength he could muster, he pushed the coffee table out of the way, and ran out of the house.
Less than an hour later, a sweaty and excited Mr. Gbadegesin knocked on the door of a flat, while simultaneously announcing his name in loud tones. A woman opened the door, and leapt out of the way as he flew into her sitting room.

"I did it, Agnes. I finally left Jocelyn!"

The woman was overjoyed and almost choked him as she held him in a tight embrace. 

*When one door closes, another one opens. One man's meat is another man's poison.*

When Agnes finally opened her mouth again, these words tumbled out:

"Abayomi, welcome to a brand new chapter."

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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. She has written several short stories, flash fiction, stories and novellas, including an on-going detective series called The Aso-Ebi Chronicles. 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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