

FAR
FROM
THE ***END***

CHIDIOGO LILIAN EZEJELUE

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Dedication

In memory of Chinazaekpele Francisca Ezejelue. Everything has changed but my love for you remains constant. Rest well, nwannem.

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Prologue

Before I knew who I wanted to be, I already knew how my life was expected to pan out. It was supposed to go in this order: university education, National Youth Service Corps, and marriage during or after youth service. It was important that I be married at no later than twenty-three years old. It was also important that I marry a Catholic man from my home town and begin the vital task of procreation before my first wedding anniversary.

No one sat me down to read me this order or state it explicitly, but it was always hinted at from the moment I could communicate, such that it became part of my own expectations.

Another expectation that was made clear enough was that I could not date while in school. I also had to marry as a virgin.

We all knew this – my sisters and I – but as the Ada, the first daughter of the family, it was clear that I had to set the example.

For this reason, my parents cut me no slack when it came to discipline. My life was occupied with activities that prepared me for this life; one hour after-school lessons immediately I returned home from school, domestic chores, church activities consisting of choir practice and the compulsory daily evening Mass, all carried out under the watchful gaze of my mother. The aim, I suspected, was to keep me busy and focused.

There was also the yearly mmechi ahọ, held to celebrate the end of the year by my town folk living in Lagos. During this event, I had to

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make efforts to socialize, especially with the males, but in as subtle a manner as possible so as not to come across as loose and untrained.

I had a problem with attending this yearly event. Unfortunately, it was not an option as far as my parents were concerned. Prior to my teen years, I loved mmechi ahọ parties and began to anticipate one once we got into the 'ember' months. However, as I grew older, I began to feel like a product being inspected for purchase at this end of the year party where the youth were explicitly encouraged to mix and mingle.

Whoever was the Chairman at the time, during his speech, would say something along the lines of: "Look around you. We have beautiful, young women in our midst. What are you young men looking for in other towns that we don't have here?" And as advised, the assessment would begin.

Those who married ndi mba, someone from a different town, were made to look like sell-outs. Sell-outs were the products of parents who did not train their children well in the ways of our custom. It was up to me not to disgrace my parents in this way.

I was aware of these and had no intention of offsetting the balance which my parents and ancestors had maintained piously. I was a dutiful child, travelling in the straight path set before me, until the events of one rainy day caused my life to veer off course.

Chapter One

Every young girl around me looked forward to their sixteenth birthday. It was a big milestone, second only to one's eighteenth birthday. Sixteen was believed to be the age at which one had the best of both of life's stages; childhood and adulthood. At this age, one still has the radiance and vitality of children while also going through the physical development that bestows upon them the attractiveness of adults. There's also a bit of freedom too. People often refer to a beautiful woman as "sweet sixteen" and I believed it was because a woman is at her most beautiful at age sixteen.

At thirteen, I eagerly waited for the years to fly by so I could be sixteen. I expected a massive transformation to take place in my body as the years went by and that day neared. When passing a glass door or mirror, I would subtly assess my reflection, especially the curve of my backside and breasts. So far, there was little difference, but I expected all that to change as I neared my sixteenth year.

On the morning of my fifteenth birthday, the first thing I did was to look in the mirror, expecting some changes, no matter how small, an indication that in a year's time, at sixteen, I would be the curvy, beautiful woman I always envisioned, but to my disappointment, I looked and felt the same, the only curves on my body that grew bigger were the pimples on my cheeks. This bothered me to an extent as I went about my normal routine for that day. There was the hope that perhaps I could

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not notice the change in myself but others would and for most of that day I expected compliments, held my breath for them, but they were not forthcoming.

When school closed that day, I did not feel interested enough to partake in the compulsory rehearsal going on in preparation for the dignitaries visiting our school in a week. I asked for permission to leave immediately, claiming ill health. Not only was I exempted from the rehearsal, my class teacher also assigned a classmate and friend, who lived on the same street with me, to take me home.

Soon after we left the school compound, I regretted my decision as it began to rain heavily. I brought out the umbrella that was always in my school bag and handed it to Kehinde, who was slightly taller, to hold over our heads.

In my early years, I was afraid of the rain. Once the sky darkens and lightning streaks across the sky, I begin to imagine horrible occurrences; like the world ending in a gruesome manner, the ground opening and swallowing people, buildings collapsing, people being swept away by flood. I stayed away from the rain as much as possible. I did not mind looking through my window at the children playing in the rain and tilting their heads upwards with mouths open to catch raindrops, as long as I was within the safety of home. Not once did I join in their games and I was content with that.

I could not remember when that fear left me, but the thought that it was gone crossed my mind as I pushed my small hip against Kehinde's much larger one, and reached for the handle of the umbrella she was holding, pulling it close to my side. She dragged it back and we both jostled for the small umbrella which barely kept more than our hair dry. We laughed loudly and I wiped water off my face as we jumped the puddle at the entrance to Efutide Street where I lived for years. A heavy breeze blew then, howling like an animal in pain and nearly lifted the umbrella away. Reaching up with as much force as I could manage to counter the effort of nature, I struggled to hold the umbrella in place,

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but the wind was not giving up yet and curved the umbrella upwards, wetting our hair.

We squealed. Not our hair! It was just Monday and we had until Friday to wear the two-step hair style. A cat call followed our cry, drawing my attention to the wooden stall by the side of the street - and the men in it. Though most of their frames were hidden by the stack of biscuits displayed on the table before them, it was easy to see that they were both slightly built from the hollow in their cheeks. One was Ibrahim. I knew him well, but the other was a new face.

“Yarinya, I fit mend your ambrella,” the new face said pointing at my now useless umbrella, then at some disused umbrella parts scattered on the floor outside the kiosk.

I ignored them but Kehinde tossed back. “Aboki, I am not your wife. Go and find another Yarinya.”

Ibrahim and his friend seemed to find this funny. “No be you we dey talk to o. Na the other lepa one wey fine well well,” the new face replied between bouts of laughter. I hissed at them and walked on but, within, my spirit soared because they thought me attractive.

Lightning flashed through the sky and, almost instantly, the sound of thunder had us covering our ears and running faster. As though the weather gained joy from our distress, the sky sent more rain and wind, taunting us.

Old No. 6. New No. 11.

We made a dash for the gate beside the rusted letterbox on which was written my house number and I gave the small gate a nudge. It opened immediately and, before I could catch it, swung all the way in and backwards, making a loud bang as it hit the other parts of the iron gate.

My head was bent all the while against the rain, so I could only see so far in front of me. I blew water from my lips, then gingerly jumped another puddle between me and the steps leading to the corridor of my home. As I started to climb the first step, I looked up to behold a pair of boots.

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Kehinde's parting words went unanswered as I gazed into the beaming face of Obinna.

He was dry, untouched by the rain, and that squelched the instinct to run up and hug him. I remained standing at the foot of the step. His much larger hand enveloped my small one to pull me up the two steps to the corridor. They were warm and for the briefest moment, I wished they could cover every part of me and drive away the chill.

Suddenly feeling self-conscious, I squeezed water off the tip of my wet hair and adjusted my skirt at the waist before asking, "What are you doing here?"

"Won't you open the door and go inside? See how your teeth are shaking."

I reached for the key in my school bag. Every attempt made to get the key into its hole failed. The cold made me shiver uncontrollably. As I made to try again, he pried the key from my hand and let us in.

Once inside, I turned to him again. "I asked your mummy last week and she said you won't come back till Christmas. What are you doing at home?"

"You look like a wet rat. Go and change first, biko," he pushed me gently towards my room and, though stung by being likened to a rat, especially considering how unattractive I was already feeling, I went in obediently.

When I returned to the sitting room, he was sitting comfortably like he was a part of the house. To an extent, he was very much a part of our family - has been for as long as I can remember. My parents often regaled my twin sister and me with stories of how, apart from my parents and the hospital staff, his were one of the first eyes to behold us when we were born. I had heard the story over and over again, so many times that I could tell it the exact way my parents have told it over the years.

Obinna's parents left him with my parents to attend a function in a nearby state and it was at that time that my mother went into labour. With no one else to look after him, my parents took him with them to the hospital.

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As we grew older, he spent as much time in my home as he did in his and I also could be found in his home whenever I was not in mine. He was the only visitor who could come into my house and put his feet on the centre table as he was doing at that moment.

My eyes left his feet to settle on a parcel wrapped in red and gold coloured paper. I reached for it, smiling as I picked it up from the table and began to tear it open.

“Who told you it’s for you?” he asked from behind me.

“It’s my birthday, of course,” I eyed him over my shoulder and continued wreaking havoc to the wrapping paper.

“It could be for Ama.”

Obinna and Ama were close but not as close as he and I were, so, since I could only see one package, I knew he got it with me in mind. In the previous years, he either got us separate gifts or got us one substantial gift and asked us to share.

“Well, she isn’t here, besides...” The rest of my statement was cut off as I beheld what the package revealed. Quickly, I lifted the lid to be sure it was not a trick and, sure enough, there sat a navy blue Nokia 3310 mobile phone. I had wanted a mobile phone for quite a while, but my parents refused, insisting that I had to finish secondary school to be allowed to own one. I had begun counting the months until graduation and it seemed so long. All of a sudden, I was holding a phone, one that was all mine.

“Oh my God!” I managed and turned to find him standing behind me. Bereft of words, I flung my arms around him and squeezed tight. Outside thunder rumbled menacingly and the wind howled, but inside it was peaceful. The warmth of his body and the strong fragrance of the cologne he has worn since he was old enough to start wearing one wrapped me in an embrace that made me feel secure.

Despite how speechless I felt, I knew I had to show my gratitude, so I eased back a little to do just that and was forming the words when his lips closed over mine. I froze, only for a short while, then my reflex took over. I returned the kiss, tentatively at first, then he took it deeper

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and I followed readily, my hands moving up his neck to his head as his caressed my back.

The shiver that went through my body had nothing to do with the cold. Simultaneously, warmth spread through me gradually, steadily, like liquid fire, moving through every inch and pore, but rather than burn, it soothed. I sighed and let go of myself, leaning into him. He, in turn, inched back, taking me with him to lean against the wall.

As we lost consciousness of what was going on in our surroundings, we discovered each other, inch by slow inch. His mouth abandoned mine and moved to my chin, tracing the outline of my jaw with as much devotion. I let my head fall backward and he grabbed the tails of my cornrows pulling my head further back to expose my neck to his mouth.

My knees weakened and nearly gave way, but his arms held me up. I thought nothing, I heard nothing. I only felt. A feeling so overwhelming I never wanted it to end. Then it did.

Alarmed, my eye fluttered open. Had I done something wrong?

“Your sisters...” His breath was uneven, so that the words were almost incoherent. It gave me pleasure realizing that I had as much effect on him as he had on me. “They’ll be back soon.”

I shook my head pulling him back to me. “Rehearsal,” was my laconic reply and he did not question further.

His face broke into a sensuous smile. Tilting his head, he looked at me like he never had: from my face, lingering on my lips, down to my neck and further down. When his eyes settled on my small bosom, which had caused me so much displeasure while comparing with my friends’ and finding mine lacking, I self-consciously folded one arm over my chest. Reaching out a hand, he pulled the offending arm away and continued his intimate assessment of my body. After he had had his fill, his eyes returned to mine. It seemed as though he were looking into me, like he could see inside of me.

“You are extremely beautiful; every part of you,” he said reverently, in a way that left no doubt that he meant what he was saying, and the insecurities that had plagued me all day disappeared immediately, replaced

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by a wanton confidence I had never felt. It felt empowering and rooted out every trace of shyness in me.

Soon he was nudging me onto the three-seater sofa and I did not resist, though I knew I should. Before the years of moral training I had received could kick in fully, he reached for his phone and switched it off, effectively shutting out the rest of the world and the voice of reason. There, held in his arms and sheltered from the heavy rain hammering against my window, I lost my innocence to him and he lost his to me.

We moved as one. It was like a dance, but nothing the world knew of. It was our dance, created by us and fitting for our bodies alone. I was not sure if the spark of light that flashed behind my closed lids was from the lightning or from within, but I was not scared. I felt secure while he held me like he would never let go.

As passion heightened, the world outside darkened until it appeared to be night rather than day. I had a vague feeling that it meant the forces of nature were protesting against our actions, but I was past caring. I was with the boy I loved and nothing could ever go wrong. So I thought.