

O B I O H A O T I

**TOO
LATE FOR
ANYTHING**

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*This novel is dedicated to my beloved mother, Mrs. Bernadette Oti,
the best mother in the whole wide world.*

*Take time to choose your friends
Or you'll choose a Judas
Take care when you are with him
Or he'll betray you
Remember,
Betrayal by a trusted friend
Goes far more
Than a thousand arrow wounds
In the heart
Inflicted by a foe*

-OBIOHA.

PROLOGUE

The door gradually opened and the warder, Mr. Akpan came in. Akpan is a small middle-aged man that has been assigned to my cell that very day. I looked up and saw that he was carrying my food – small crumbs of dry bread, which I have been continually served ever since I was locked up in this dark cell. I never complained about it, after all, I was just a mere prisoner already condemned and awaiting death by firing squad.

At the time he walked in, I was still handcuffed. He kept the bread and a cup of water on the floor as he loosened my handcuffs. I was the only prisoner in the cell and right from the first day I was put in there, Mr. Akpan often treated me in a very hospitable way. He was different from his co-warders who only regarded me just as the presiding judge had put it “a hardened and dangerous criminal”. I wished there was a way I could pay him back for how good he had treated me.

He stooped low and faced me. The cell was partially illuminated for me to have a clear view of him and the food he was carrying.

“David”, he began, “I’ve been exactly thirty-two years old

in this job, and in my thirty-two years of service, I have seen so many kinds of prisoners. I have seen hardened killers, drug pushers, ritual murderers, habitual rapists, political activists, cult members, and of course very innocent people all locked up and branded different kinds of names by judges. But I can't remember coming across anyone whose circumstances puzzles me like yours. Ever since you were brought here, I found it difficult to match all the charges leveled against you, and the sentence passed on you. It has always been a puzzle I try to solve each time I set eyes on you. Please would you mind telling me the real story behind your plight? I promise that you can very well confide in me".

Tears welled up in my eyes, and despite being hungry since last night, I lost my appetite to eat. I was deep in thought. How do I begin to tell him that I was the only son of a well-known clergyman? How do I begin to tell him that two months ago, I was offered admission to the Bible School to train as a pastor? How do I make him believe that not more than ten months ago I was a very vibrant Christian with the fire of God burning in my bones? Above all, how do I make him believe all the circumstances that happened in this my tale of woe? To think that all these happened in less than one year is simply incredible.

He seemed to sense my thoughts and patted me gently on the shoulder. "David", he said, "I know what you may be thinking, but never mind. Be brave and open up your mind to an elderly man". I thought for sometime and peered into his face.

"Will you promise me something?" I asked.

"What is it?"

"Sir", I began "It's not as if I am denying ALL the charges leveled against me. I'm suffering all of these things just as a result of my own mistakes; deceptions and betrayal from people I came to love

and respect. But it's too late now to start regretting them. I can no longer turn back the hands of the clock. I have no other choice than to remain here and take what is coming to me – death by firing squad. You see, sir, I would not want anyone who has started well to just end up as badly as I have ended.

“What do you want me to promise, son?”

“Promise me that you will write down my experiences in a book and publish it so that many will read and learn from my mistakes. There are still many people out there in the world treading the same paths that landed me here. I also want you to publish it so that my relatives, friends, and church members will know that I am NOT a “hardened criminal” as the judge branded me, but an unfortunate victim of circumstances; circumstances that I had little knowledge and experiences to control.

He thought briefly and said, “Well, personally, I cannot boast of being a writer but I know of someone who can write your story in a good way. I met him in one of our universities and I know he has the talent to write your story in an interesting way. But it all depends on how interesting your story is, David”.

“My story is interesting enough,” I said.

“Then you can go ahead, David. I promise that I will do everything I can to see that it is written in a book and published for the world to read”.

I cleared my throat. He waved at the food, but I nodded in the negative.

“I think I have to begin from how it all started, Mr. Akpan. But before then, I will briefly tell you what happened in this room between Madam and I. I know you are anxious to hear that because you told me that you were puzzled to see her rush out of the waiting room where I met her that fateful day with a

murderous glint in her eyes. I guess you were even more puzzled to see me sobbing painfully when you came to take over from Mr. Komo after she departed”.

Mr. Akpan put his hand on his chin and inclined his ear. I knew he was listening attentively. I cleared my throat for the second time, then I began my story.

ONE

Four days ago, Madam came here during the early hours of the morning. When she arrived, I was lying on the cold floor, stripped of all my clothes except a pair of panties. The prison authorities were yet to replace my prison uniforms which were torn into shreds during the fight that broke out in my former cell and my hands were still tightly tied with handcuffs. The December harmattan cold permeated through every single pore on my body. The cell was dark and dry, and I was just lying there, having myriad thoughts.

I thought of nothing in particular. My mind kept on wandering. To think that in a few days I would be standing in front of some four or more armed soldiers in a firing squad made it even harder to think. I cringed at the thought.

The entrance of Mr. Komo the warder broke into my thoughts. He was standing right before me with his wooden baton in his hand.

“You have a visitor”, he said.

“Who?”

“She’s waiting for you in the private waiting room”, he said. “Come, let’s go see her”.

She? Who could she be? My mother? Sister Hannah? Who could this female visitor be? I wondered as I followed the warder out of the cell. My handcuffs were still in place. Then, I was led to the secret waiting room where visitors of very hardened criminals like me were allowed to visit them. There was nobody in the room when I entered.

“Maybe she went to ease herself”, Mr. Komo said and went away.

I saw her as she entered the room. She walked towards me and stopped a few metres away from me. I scrambled up and sat on the floor and began moping at her. Initially, I could not really observe how she was dressed due to the dark nature of the room. She was the last person I expected to visit me after what happened in court. I was convicted as the murderer of Benson, her husband, and Sandra, her husband’s personal secretary. But here was she, standing before me, here in this room. I wondered if my brain was playing one of its tricks on me as it has always been the case since I was put in this prison.

Then, she spoke. It then dawned on me that She was REALLY here.

She said, “David, I have just come to let you know some important things you ought to know before you eventually rot in hell. It will please me so much if you perish with those thoughts”.

Gradually, my brain began to function. I could not blame her for being this harsh and hard on me. After all, what else did I expect from a woman who sees me as her husband’s murderer? I think nothing better than that. Then, I felt an urgent need to say something.

“Madam, please I want you to believe me. I swear, I didn’t kill him. God knows that I am telling the truth. I am sorry madam but I didn’t”

“Shut up your mouth!” she snapped, “Shut up and listen. Who said you killed him anyway? I never said that. I never will either. Do you think that I am as stupid as all those hopeless judge and jury who could not prove anything? Or the useless bun you call the Nigerian police who keep on chasing shadows and missing out the substance? No! God forbid! The lady standing before you is a first-class brain and a great and successful planner”.

I could see that her eyes sparkled as she spoke. They shone like those of a wild cat in the darkroom.

“I know you never killed them, my boy”, I heard her continue. “That is why I am here to tell you who did it and why”.

I was visibly surprised. Here she was telling me that I, David Kalu Udensi, the man condemned for her husband’s death by the Lagos High Court was no longer responsible and that she knew the REAL murderer. What was coming next? Perhaps, this lady’s visit was to me a ray of hope at the end of a very long tunnel.

I heard myself ask “Then who did it and why ...?”

“Shut up your silly mouth!” she snapped back. “I hope I’ve already warned you never to say anything but to keep quiet and listen. Talk again and you wouldn’t know what will hit your dirty face!”

I kept mute and listened.

“As I already said, you didn’t kill my husband. I did. I killed him with my own hands!” she hissed. Her words hit my eardrums and I became flabbergasted. Was I hearing right or were my ears deceiving me?

“He was just a hopeless little rat”, she said. “I never loved him

for one day. He was just a money-making lump of meat to me. Nothing more, nothing less. For a long time now, I've been hoping and praying for his death, so that I can inherit all his wealth. Mind you, as far as I am concerned, a month is too long enough. But as he continued to live as an immortal being without even a trace of headache, I decided that I needed to do something better than praying and hoping!"

Her eyes shone as she walked randomly in the room. I kept listening, unable to digest the information I have already heard.

"I planned and planned, schemed and schemed and each time I always come up against a blank wall. The man seemed completely invincible and incredibly well secured. Don't think that I couldn't have walked up to him and shot him in the heart, or stabbed him with a kitchen knife or even poisoned his food. I could have done any of these but I happen to be an intelligent woman, and I'm far more intelligent than your mind can ever imagine". She stopped and sneered at me.

"My father used to tell me that if you have a very big problem that have bothered you for a long time without a solution, just try to forget it and consider other minor problems. It may surprise you that a simple solution to the big problem will come from the solution of the minor ones. This was my father's magic philosophy. Don't think that my husband never suspected what I was bent on doing. He was well aware of my intentions but he was blinded by what some fools call 'love' these days. So, he was genuinely surprised and excited some six months ago when I relaxed and pretended to have changed suddenly and started loving him in return. He knew very well that I only married him for his money. But you know how stupid and vulnerable a man can be in the hands of a very beautiful woman, especially a

beautiful woman like me. You can always smother him with love. He foolishly thought that I have at last grown to love him, but he hadn't the slightest idea that I was merely toeing the line of my father's magic philosophy – relaxing on the bigger problem and concentrating on the smaller so that they will eventually sort themselves out”.

I was listening and somehow confused. What she was saying seemed to be irrelevant to the issue at hand. The glitter in her eyes made me begin to think if her husband's death had made her demented. I was tempted to talk but later decided to keep quiet as she had previously warned me to.

“Perhaps, it will help your understanding if I explained to you who my father was,” she continued.

“My father! Oh, that good and intelligent old man. You knew him. You only need a little explanation for you to remember everything about him. He was a clergyman. He was the most Rev. James Akachukwu Ikedi of blessed memory. He was the district superintendent of Nkumeukwu province of the Christ Kingdom Church in the year 1987. Your father worked under him as the assistant provincial superintendent”. I paused to think, as the information stroke a note in my brain and I could remember. Yes, I could remember clearly now. That was almost eleven years ago. At the time, I was just eighteen. My father was the assistant provincial superintendent. Rev. James Akachukwu had one fat wife with a hoarse voice and they had only one daughter, Ifeoma. I knew her very well then because we were attending the same secondary school. I was in class four and she was in class five. I could remember that in the same year, there were some dirty scandals about the church provincial superintendent siphoning and embezzling the church treasury for the building of his personal

house in his village. The church national council intervened and Rev. Akachukwu was dismissed from the church. My father then took over as the next provincial superintendent. I remembered that the Rev. James, especially his wife never forgave my father for what happened. During the time, they were to leave the parsonage; his wife even took a big bamboo stick to break my mother's head. Yes, I remember very well now.

I felt somebody shaking my head. I looked up momentarily, alarmed.

"Hey, are you dozing off or something?" She shouted.

"No, I am just trying to remember", I said calmly.

"And have you remembered?" she queried

"Yes. So, you are Ifeoma?"

"You have a good memory".

"Oh, Ifeoma", I said in amazement. How did you end up marrying such a great man!"

"Shut up and keep listening!" she snapped at me. "I hope you also remembered how your father used poison to inflict stroke on my father, which resulted to my father's abrupt retirement from the ministry and your father's promotion to the position of provincial superintendent?"

"That was not how it happened" I interrupted. "Your father was caught stealing money from the church's purse and he was fired for it. As for the stroke, I am sure he must have suffered a heart attack as a result of the shame, which then resulted to the stroke".

She slapped me hard on the face.

"Shut up and stop bandying words with me or I will make you regret the day you were born", she hissed.

Anger welled up inside me. Why would she dare to slap me

like this? I tried to stand on my feet but I fell. Anyway, she was lucky I was tied the way I am or else I would have shown her something.....

“Look, boy, your lying father misinformed you. Your dad and your evil mother with the support of some crooked church members conspired to remove my father from the ministry, and consequently killed him and rendered my mother useless until she died two years later. I was shattered and became completely hopeless. How I suffered! How I hated those who contributed to make me suffer! All my childhood dreams were dashed to pieces before my very eyes! She lowered her voice and spoke slowly and distinctly, “But you and your parents were not so lucky. My mother made me swear to revenge against her enemies before she finally joined my father in death. Yes, I swore to make your father, your mother, and you as well regret everything your family did to my parents.

“I swore to make sure your father’s name was wiped out forever on earth. I swore to ensure that he gets no seed to bear his useless family name. I swore that he and your stupid mother were going to suffer worse heartbreaks than my parents suffered!”

I could see that she was very hysterical now. She gave vent to a blood-chilling, eerie animal cry.

“So many years passed by and it appeared as if I have forgotten the promise to my dear mother. Her ghost often haunted me in my dreams to remind me the promise I made to her. I assured her that I have not forgotten, that I was waiting for the perfect opportunity to move in for the kill.

“I wasted a lot of time trying to kill you and your parents through spiritual means. I consulted several oracles, *babalawos*, and witch doctors, but none could help. Each time I came as a witch to destroy your father or mother, I would see a fence of

fire around the whole compound. The same was the case when I also launched an attack on you. One fateful day, I dared the fire and penetrated into your room, but I was nearly burnt to death. I only managed to come out of it alive by sheer luck. My God! I almost gave up, but my mother's ghost wouldn't allow me. She nearly drove me crazy. I became a restless woman haunted both day and night. Then, I picked up the courage to try harder.

"I went back to the witch doctor and he told me that the fire I usually see around you and your parents were the heat of prayers by you and your parents. I was marveled at his words. If that was what you could do with prayers, I must say that you were really a prayer warrior!" she laughed derisively "I mean then, not now. Because right now, you are a mere vegetable waiting to be thrown into the fire!"

"Time will fail me if I begin to recount what those goddam prayers did to me, but I am glad I surmounted them all and now I have won." She moved back and came forward again. "My father's spirit inspired me to win. My father, the great wise man. He appeared in my dream one night and asked me why I was wasting my time seeking help where there was none. I told him that I didn't understand what he meant, then he said to me, 'Ifeoma have you forgotten my magic philosophies I used to teach you? Tackle spiritual problems spiritually and physical problems physically. If one is spiritually stronger than you, then you must be carnally stronger than him. When fighting him, don't fight him spiritually or he will continue to win. Rather fight him carnally and you are sure to win him several times. This is because you are fighting him away from his comfort zone. Remember not to kill only one bird if you can use one stone and kill two. When you are confounded with a major problem, just drop it and look for

a minor one. The solution to the minor one will naturally proffer an opening to approach the major one and he disappeared.”

“At first, I could not decipher any meaning from any of these sayings. But deep down my heart, I felt that the solution to my problems lies therein. I slept with those words day and night. Just around this time last year, the solution became very clear to me. I cried Eureka! And I became overjoyed. I had a perfect theoretical background to solve all my seemingly insurmountable problems; the most interesting part of it all is that the whole problems boiled down to a common solution. I used one stone to kill several birds! That brings us back to my father’s magical philosophies I referred to at first.”

“I put all these theoretical philosophies into practice and it yielded amazing results. It landed my useless husband in the mortuary and made me the heir to a very big fortune. It landed your mother in her grave last week and gave your father a heart attack. I believe he will soon make his way to the grave too. Above all, it has landed you here and will eventually land you into hell fire!”

She gave vent to a rancorous flood of laughter. “And the sweetest part of it is that you will never understand how it all began or how it will all end. It will forever remain a mystery to you, even when you are rubbing neck with your father the devil in hell!” she rasped.

She spat me in the face and slapped me on the eyes. I started shouting in protest and she slapped me again. I saw several sparkling stars and fell down face flat. When I came to my senses, she was already gone. After a few minutes, the warder escorted me back to my prison cell.

That morning, I cried like a child that was beaten mercilessly. She was both right and wrong. She was right in most of the things

she said but was wrong about the whole events being a mystery forever. They were mysteries to me as at the time she said it but just two days after that, the explanation to the whole mysteries came tumbling in. But it came when I could no longer do anything about it but regret.

Hence, I am unfolding all these mysteries before you so that you will not make the same mistake that I have made and probably end up the same way I have ended – in regrets.

TWO

Thinking back over the events of the past months, I now realize that my life would have continued calmly and peacefully as it had been over the years, had it not been for that particular Sunday that Hannah Nwosu attended our Sunday school.

Our Sunday school was divided into several classes and I was in charge of the English class. I vividly remember the topic for that particular Sunday as “Too late for anything but regrets”. The lesson was all about the doom of sinners on the Day of Judgment, and all emphasis was that when the sinners would eventually be cast into hell after judgment, they would have no other option than to weep and gnash their teeth, causing them to regret in hell forever.

I did my very best to convey the lesson to my students. I told them about the terrifying nature of hell fire and the fact that they had to accept our Lord Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Saviour, otherwise, they would find themselves in hell fire where they would eventually gnash their teeth in regrets. As I taught, I saw that the lesson had a tremendous impact on my students, particularly Hannah. Most of them shed tears as I taught.