

Ezuga (Short Story)

KASIMMA

October the eleventh. That was the day I became a figure for the public. The day I joined the league of men and women whose lives are like nude statues behind a glass case, in the middle of the city, aired out like clothes on a line. Those people who no longer have secrets: who can no longer cough or choke in peace without it being news. Those people who cannot laugh, cry, dance — hell, even walk—, without seeing their pictures splotched on newspapers. October the eleventh was the day Twitter made me a public figure.

I sat up on my couch, stretched, rubbed my eyes, and yawned. My breath gave me a strong message. I fanned it off. I unclicked the airplane mode on my phone before heading to the bathroom. My mouth was foaming in fluoride when my phone rang. After brushing, I shut down my laptop and tossed it in its bag. I took my purple mug to the sink and filled it with water. Though used, the mug looked neat and very dry. That's why I prefer dark-coloured mugs to bright-coloured ones. The coffee would have smeared a white mug with irritation. My phone rang again. I rushed to it.

‘Ada, sup?’ I asked.

‘I barely survived the night, Ezuga. Please come.’

Whatever would make Adaolisa whisper must be serious. So I rang off and dashed to the bathroom. I did not want to visit a sick friend smelling like a skunk. Adaolisa was like an American: always excited. Her voice was always high-pitched and alive. I wore no makeup, not as if I cared. I grabbed my laptop bag, my phone, my wallet, and I was out. Imagine my unpleasant surprise when I arrived at Adaolisa's and found her sorting out mugs from the cupboard. A kettle fumed on the stove. I snapped the stove off. The plates on the sink were covered in lather. Adaolisa grinned at me mischievously.

‘Adaolisa...’

'Take a seat, Ezuga,' she said, closing the cupboard, and returning to the sink, holding a black mug and a white one. 'I know you've not had breakfast.'

'How will I have breakfast when you called me and lied that you barely survived the night.'

'Relax. This is the morning, not night.'

I sat on the white plastic chair leaning on the wall and lowered my bag on the sparkling yellow tiles. I rested my hand on the white plastic table moping at me. I'd always found it interesting and beautiful that Adaolisa would use yellow tiles for her kitchen floor and the partition of the wall between her sink and the base of her cabinet. I never asked why because I liked the idea of imagining it and thinking about it. The aroma of frying eggs filled my nostrils. The tigers in my stomach chuffed as pleasantries to the expectant meal. Adaolisa must have heard my stomach's grumble because she looked at me and smiled.

The table was set sooner than I thought. I dived into the scrambled eggs and bread, forgetting to wet my mouth with water or coffee as usual. Thankfully, I had finished the first bed of bread when I noticed Adaolisa looking at me, a slice of smile as thin as a sheer cloth stamped on her lips; her meal just one bite down.

'What?' I asked.

'You are not even aware of what is going on, are you?'

'What's going on?'

She smiled lopsidedly. 'How many followers have you got on Twitter?'

'Maybe a thousand, I don't know.'

'Wrong. Thirty-five dot five k friends.'

The bread dropped from my grip.

'You are trending on Twitter. You are a celeb o!'

She chuckled and took a second bite of her bread. What did she mean? Trending for what? It did not occur to me to check my phone. I hardly ever comment on anything on Twitter or post anything except my story publications. I deactivated my comments and messages. I do not even have my picture on my status. So what would make me trend? A bright light flashed into my eyes. Adaolisa was pushing her phone to my face.

My name was number one on the trending list. A certain huge Hollywood actress had retweeted my story and captioned it:

Please does anyone know how I can reach this writer? Her 'fiction' story, 'On the Beyond' is my true story.

It was a trend. So I permitted Twitter to show this trend. She had

uploaded a picture. When I saw the picture of a long exercise book, tied up in a green ribbon, I felt dizzy. The thread read,

I have avoided going into my father's room since he died six months ago. I stumbled upon 'On the Beyond,' while surfing the net. I felt instantly cold as I read because the happening around the death of the protagonist, a ghost, was exactly as it happened when my father died. I saw myself in the story, literally. Out of curiosity, I went to his wardrobe, checked inside his blue travelling box, and I found this notebook, just as described in the story! It's an unfinished manuscript that my father started. And in 'On the Beyond,' the ghost tells the necromancer to ask his daughter to finish up the story and publish it in his name and hers. I am so blown away. I have not slept in my house for days. Is this coincidence? Or did my father's ghost actually appear to this Nigerian writer? Please I need to reach her; I need to ask her.

I looked at Adaolisa. She smiled at me and slurped her coffee. I continued scanning the Trend Feed. One American middle-aged lady said the ghost in my story, *Don't*, fit, perfectly, the description of her mother who died of cancer. And that she found a note on a red paper, under her mother's bed, where her mother managed to pen her thoughts about how much she would miss her daughter when she died. A Scottish judge, confirmed that the ghost in my story, *If Only*, was his daughter's. She was fifteen when she killed herself. He had blamed his divorce and himself and his ex-wife. But in my story, she tells him that she killed herself because she was raped by some boys in her class. She mentioned their names. He has since filed a report against them because those names exist and they were her classmates in real life.

My hands trembled like leaves in the wind. I remembered those stories clearly; I wrote them. I started a blog to publish my own stories when the rejections from literary journals got too much. Those ghosts spoke Igbo in the stories. How then was it that they were real stories of people from America, Scotland, Morocco, Spain? I wondered, like the commentators, if my stories, the ones I sat up at night writing on my laptop, were fiction or nonfiction. Fear descended on me. Had I been entertaining ghosts without knowing?

'So, Ezuga, what is going on?' Adaolisa asked.

My mouth became instantly filled, not with words though. I made it to the toilet bowl before I emptied the contents of my stomach.

Noise: too much noise. Six weeks was all it took, since that damned tweet, for my life to make a thunderous 360° turn like an owl's neck. I thought that if I kept mute, the noise on Twitter would die down, or

other news would make me redundant. I would later accept that that decision was as futile as sweeping the beach clean of sand. Adaolisa was right: my silence fuelled the noise.

After one restless night at Adaolisa's, I took a walk at dawn, my eyes covered with dark sunshades, my nose and lips hidden behind my black facemask. I needed to quieten my head. I walked past joggers, strollers, workers, and I wondered which of them was a ghost. Those stories were fiction. I'm not even a writer. I'm a banker: was. I'd since lost my job. After my photos were splashed on every phone screen, people started asking me to take pictures with them whenever they entered the banking hall. Some came to the banking hall just to see me. The banking hall was always crowded and it was difficult to tell the customers from the fans. Our service rating started to drop because customers threw tantrums about the excessive queues in the bank. I was taken off operations to the marketing department. That was when I understood what 'from frying pan to fire' meant. Prospective customers opened accounts because of me, but most times, they would ask to hang out. Sometimes, I arrived at their offices to find them waiting with their friends. And they always wanted pictures, always. I always declined, always. One day, Adaolisa showed me a photo of a customer and me that surfaced on the internet. I remembered that dusty office and its hirsute owner. No wonder he wanted us to sit facing the window. I threatened to resign from the bank. They promoted me and increased my salary. I still resigned.

As it became brighter, during my morning walk, a woman—dressed in an orange fitted dress and a dark green jacket—walked towards me. I stared at her, wondering what inspired this senior citizen to dress up looking like a mango. She returned my stares. Even though my eyes were covered with shades, she still looked right at me. I wondered if she knew me, recognised me, or if she was a ghost. The last became an option only six weeks ago. I shivered as I walked past her. She reminded me of the first story I wrote. I met the woman—who, I'm now certain, was a ghost—on my way home after work. I could not find a cab that day so I decided to walk. This was a few weeks after I left Tobi. Tobi was my dream man. I loved the way his arms enveloped me when he hugged me. Our sex life was amazing, yet, Tobi cheated. I remember vomiting after he confessed to me. I asked questions whose answers I was not ready for. I asked for details. He told me everything, just to pacify me. He described the sexual intercourse: the oral, the doggy, the missionary, the believers and unbelievers. So I've sucked a penis that entered another vagina, kissed lips that have

drunk another's vagina juice. It seemed to me as though I had gone to a messy public toilet, raised the toilet seat, and licked the toilet bowl clean. That was when I puked. I vomited the hurt, the irritation, and the marriage. And when everyone else, family and friends inclusive, said, 'Men will always be men, Ezuga. He cheated just once, just once, and he is sorry,' I called them *ndi iberibe* and walked away. I walked home, that day, thinking of Tobi, when I noticed this woman looking at me. Her honey-coloured skin was a slate of wrinkles, yet she walked agilely. My thoughts wrapped around how she managed to look so dry, old, and frail, yet behave so strong. She smiled at me. I smiled back and nodded. Then she froze. She stopped walking, her mouth and eyes shaped like O. I looked at myself, wondering if something was wrong with my black suit pants or blue shirt: nothing. I walked past her, looked back, and still found her status quo. I hastened my steps. I thought she was crazy: as in she was still in the kindergarten class of madness. I dreamed of her that night. I dreamed that she died in a hospital while her daughter rubbed her arm. In my dream, her daughter would not stop crying. She was an unmarried only child of a single mother who was now dead. Next thing, the girl was in her mother's room, going through her mother's things, when she found a note written on a red, thick paper, under her mother's bed. It was like in the movies when someone is reading silently, but the viewers can hear the person's voice. That was how it was to me standing in her room, watching her read the note. Tears rolled down her eyes as she read the letter her mother wrote to her—when she was told that the malignant growth in her lungs had become cancerous—reminiscing about their life together. She smiled when her mother said she would be her mother again in the next world. She chuckled when her mother said she would still buy the same sperm she bought in this world because she wanted to have her the way she was. The recipient lady cried even more after reading the love letter. I woke up and reproduced the dream as a fictional short story.

The actors in my dream were Igbos; the characters in my stories, Igbos. How then was it that an American woman would read my story, that I published in my blog for my own consumption, and claim that that was her life story? Her mother died of cancer in the hospital while she rubbed her arm, not leg, arm, just as in the story. So, according to her, she thought she just might see a note if she checked. As fate would continue playing chess with her life, she found a note in her mother's travel bag, written on a red, thick, paper; and the contents exactly the same as that in my story. I imagined her trembling like quaking

earth when she found the note. Maybe she even peed on her body. Everything else in the story played out. How did this American even come across my blog in the first place?

Why me, I wondered. How did these ghosts find me? Then why hadn't I seen my parents? Surely if dead Americans and Spanish and co reached out to me, then I must be somewhat popular in the spirit world. Did it mean that my parents had not heard of me or that they did not know it's me? My aunty, the woman who raised me, would blame the devil for everything. So was the devil responsible for my dead parents' silence? I giggled remembering her response when I called her to inform her of my new, unwanted fame. I imagined her spitting and circling her hand round her head and snapping her fingers as she exclaimed, 'Tufiakwa! Ezuga, nwam, resist the devil and he will flee. This is a gift from the devil.'

'How did the devil find me, Aunty?'

'How will I know? But, shaa, we will defeat him. He cannot use you. Nothing good comes from the devil. He gives with one hand and takes with another hand.'

'But he gives, Aunty, doesn't he?'

I passed by a beautiful man who walked like a model on the catwalk. I wondered if he had a hip problem or if that was how he walked. I took care not to give him a second look in case he too was a ghost, *maka adighi amama*.

The second ghost story was a figment of my imagination: other stories were all dreams. This one, I was in a supermarket. I picked up a pack of cornflakes. The faded brownish colour of the pack filled me with nostalgia. I stood there, the pack of cornflakes in my hand, staring at the brown pack, but seeing myself at a strange house. The ground was sandy and the house was decorated with white and purple linens. People were crying. Somewhere close to the wall, the earth was being dug. I went to one of the crying women, whom I did not know, and squeezed her hand. So that night, I developed that imagery into a story. I wrote the story from the ghost's point of view. I added that he manipulated his daughter's mind to his room where he showed her his unfinished manuscript with the instructions he left. This was the story that happened to be the story of the American actress that started all these talks. After her tweet, my blog entertained a myriad of visitors. And that was when the other four persons came out to say that they found themselves in my story. I had written only five works of fiction and all five belonged to actual human beings. I now had requests from others begging me to locate their late loved ones and ask this and that.

I now had a queue of literary agents asking to represent my collection of short stories. I had no prior idea of who a literary agent was neither had I collected any stories. Journalists from different parts of the world emailed me, inviting me to their countries for an interview.

It was noise, too much noise. I just wanted to rest. I wanted to sleep peacefully without being afraid that some ghosts were lurking around, waiting for me to write their stories. I wanted so badly to vacate Adaolisa's bed and move back into my house. I desperately wanted the fear to leave me. But they wouldn't stop talking; my name wouldn't stop trending, and the noise wouldn't cease. I decided it was about time I said something. If my silence was noise, maybe my voice would bring silence. Adaolisa thought that I should engage the public. She advised me to grant an interview and explain myself so that the requests would cease. My aunty felt otherwise. She said that as soon as I showed myself in public, the rest of the ghosts in the world would notice me, then I will know what spiritual disturbance means.

My phone vibrated. Talk about the angel. I answered the call. I had not even greeted when my aunty said,

'Ezuga, please come home for lunch today. See you.'

My foster parents and I sat around a circle-shaped dining table. Scratches of half-eaten food scattered on our plates. It was a Saturday so they had been at home all day, yet I was surprised when they showed up to eat food looking all dressed up. My uncle wore brown shorts and a red T-shirt while my aunty wore a loose floral gown. Her hair was neatly packed and oiled. I, the visitor, felt underdressed for lunch. They discussed other mundane things that flew off my head almost as soon as they entered. I knew why they had called me. That was what I wanted to hear. My eardrums beat in glee when, after the plates had been cleared by the maid, and we remained at the table, sipping wine, my uncle said.

'Ezuga, I know you know that we did not invite you here just to eat.'

I nodded.

'I have had this discussion with my wife. Though she disagrees, I will still tell you.'

I nodded again. My aunty sipped her wine. Her face was bereft of emotions.

'We have kept this from you, at your aunty's request, but you are old enough to know now. And with all these things happening, it's best you know.'

It's best you know what? Why was he driving around the roundabout?

'Your late mother was childless for a long time. So, in desperation, she made a pact with Ezekoro. She promised to give you up in the service of the deity when you were old enough. That was the word she insisted that she had used, 'old enough.' Well, she realised she was pregnant three weeks after that visit. She could no longer remember if she had intercourse with your father before or after the meeting with Ezekoro. So that when Ezekoro's mouthpiece, Ezemmuo, sent a messenger to remind your mother of her promise, your mother became greedy. She said you were so small: indeed, you were. You were about four years. Ezemmuo would have none of that. So your mother 'denied' that Ezemmuo gave her any charms that helped get her pregnant. Ezemmuo later died mysteriously. He was the last Ezemmuo of Achina. So when your mother had that ghastly accident that took your father and her, I believe your father was unfortunate to be in the car with her when Ezekoro came with a clay pot to fetch her blood. We took you to a church where the pastor prayed and declared you free. Now, here we are again.'

All the while my uncle spoke, I was transported. If a fly or a mosquito sang in my ear, I did not hear. I imagined Ezekoro there, at the scene of my parents' accident, scooping blood with a hollow pot. I imagined its stomach becoming bulgier as he drank and his hairy face, redder. I wondered what my parents' corpses looked like. Flat? Did their corpses resemble a fabric of flesh?

'Uncle, you mean I am possessed?'

My aunty circled her hand round her head and snapped her fingers. 'You are not possessed, God forbid.'

'You are not possessed. But I think that that deity is responsible for your seeing spirits.'

'She does not see spirits,' my aunty said. 'Ezuga, gbo, do you see spirits?'

I shook my head.

My uncle snapped, 'Wait let me finish before you say your own.'

My aunty crossed her arms across her chest, looked away, and scrunched up her nose. My uncle sighed and looked at me.

'We don't give names for the necessity of it in Igbo land. Names come with meaning. Ever wondered why your name is Chiezugamozi? I am beginning to think that this is that errand Chukwu has brought you to the world to do. In fact, I have told your story to a friend who is well-grounded in our Igbo cosmological beliefs. He said he suspects that your gift is from Ezekoro. Ezekoro wants to use you as an informant to pass messages between the living and the dead.'

My aunty snorted, shaking her legs as though impatient to speak. I broke out in a sweat.

My uncle looked at her and shook his head. 'Ngwa, talk, since your body is scratching you.'

'Christiana.' My aunty drew closer to the edge of her seat. 'Don't mind your uncle. You are not possessed. You. Are. A. Child. Of. God,' she said, striking the table with her index, one word per strike. 'Light and darkness have no business. The dead are dead and gone. Which one is 'passing message between the living and the dead'?'

'So how do you explain what she is experiencing now?' my uncle asked.

'Okwa when you were talking you asked me not to talk?' my aunty asked, eyes on the ground. 'Please it is my turn. Just rest, let me talk my own.'

My throat was dry. I sipped my wine.

'Christiana, you are a Christian. Christ bought you at a high price. Don't listen to fetish talks. What happened with your stories is purely coincidental. Your parents' death was an accident. So is he saying that were you in the car, the deity would have killed you too? What then would happen to this so-called gift?'

'That's why the deity took them when she was not in the car,' my uncle said.

'Okay, why did Ezekoro take Okechukwu? Okechukwu had no hand in the pact. Why did not it take only Amaka?'

'It's unfortunate that he was in the car with his wife.'

'Unfortunate, okwia? Well, it is also unfortunate that those deities are powerless. They can neither give nor take life. They cannot even possess my child. She is free in Jesus name.'

My uncle hissed. 'Let her explore both angles. It is the same God we...'

'How is it the same God? God is merciful. He does not kill his children as if they are rats.'

'He does not? What happened in Sodom and Gomorrah? What of in...'

'How can you use Sodom and Gomorrah as an example? Don't you know what they did?'

I stopped listening. That argument was not to end anytime soon. They were always like that. My aunty was a staunch Christian and her husband was a staunch believer in Igbo ontology. I don't know how they had managed to stay married for four decades.

The rest of the week saw me thinking of what my uncle said. It

made some sense. How come my Nigerian characters were real people and ghosts and occurrences in another corner of the earth? I browsed the internet about death and what death meant. Some scholars believe that death is just the process of returning the body we borrowed from dust and reverting to our default spirit mood. Others said death is the key that unlocks the door to heaven. Ezuga: was that what I was on earth to do, to be a medium between the living and the dead?

For the first time since that day six weeks ago, I went on Twitter and read what people said about me. I watched the news the five beneficiaries of my stories granted. All of them were in tears as they narrated the joy in their hearts when they found the messages their loved ones left them. One man even said he went to dig out his wife's photo from the basement where he hid it and reinstalled it on his bedside stool. But suppose my aunty was right? Suppose if I put myself out there and the other spirits find me and come to ask for one favour or the other? How would I cope? Would they find me either way?

The least I could do, I figured, was help these former humans who could no longer communicate to communicate. The best I could do for myself was to quieten the noise. Adaolisa was right. The more I stayed silent, the louder the noise around me became.

I replied to one of the lingering emails.

Dear Ms. Amanpour,

I hope this note finds you well.

I apologise for my delayed response.

Yes, I accept your invitation to London. It's about time I spoke up.

Please let me know your plans on how we can proceed.

Accept the assurance of my highest regards.

Jisie ike,

Ezeamama, Ezuga.