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The Prodigal Soldier

A month after Ogaga returned from the Liberian civil war, he abandoned Bunmi, his wife of fifteen years. He packed his clothes and shoes, put them into a suitcase, and made for the door of their sitting room. Bunmi grabbed his shirt, begging him not to go, saying he should consider their children – Imade and Tunde. Ogaga yelled at her, called her a dirty woman, said she stank and was as fat as a pig, and pushed her away. His children ran after him and held his trousers, but he pushed them away, and said he did not want them anymore.

Ogaga told a few friends days earlier he was tired of Bunmi. She nagged him all day long and he now felt uncomfortable at home. She had grown fat since Ogaga went to Liberia, unlike Liberian women who were beautiful and caring. Bunmi's soup was no longer sweet. She fed Ogaga with bonga fish and cooked soup with ogbono, an ingredient used by poor people.

The air above Iyobosa Street in Benin City quivered with righteous indignation. Some said the sins Ogaga committed in Monrovia were pursuing him. Others said the marijuana he smoked during the war had finally crossed the wires in his brain. Someone suggested a native doctor in Liberia cast a spell for him to abandon his family and come right back to the whores he left behind in Monrovia.

Some said it was not his fault. Everybody who went to the Liberia war came back different. If they were not wounded by Charles Taylor's men, they were brutalized by gun-totting rebels. If the rebels did not attack them, freelance gun men stabbed them when they walked the streets of Monrovia. Some drank too much and became drunks. Women of easy virtue corrupted the rest. They lost their senses when they came back to Nigeria. It was the war.

But one man, Boniface alias four thirty, said it was best to convince Ogaga not to leave his wife. He stopped Ogaga on the street and asked him why he wanted, like a mad man, to abandon his family. Ogaga pushed him away, but Boniface did not allow him go.

He said Ogaga had been a model husband before he left for the war in Liberia as part of the Nigerian contingent to the ECOWAS peace keeping force. Boniface said Ogaga was not like Orobosa, the neighborhood idler and perennial womanizer, who made a vocation of troubling women – both married and unmarried. Ogaga was better than Okezie, the laughing stock of Iyobosa Street, who came back from India with one jacket and the ability to recite the names of all Indian movie stars. He was not like Idemudia, who lost his fortune when con men convinced him they could give him a multi-million naira contract? They collected his money and handed a contract form to him, telling him to present it at the issuing company, only for Idemudia to discover the company did not exist. These people did not leave their wives and children because of their problems, why should Ogaga do something like that?

Before Boniface could say more, Ogaga interrupted him and said his mind was made up about his wife.

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"Were you not eating bonga fish and ogbono before you left for Liberia?" Boniface asked.

"I was, but since I've gone to Liberia I've seen the light."

"So where are you going to now?" Boniface asked.

Ogaga said he wanted to find a woman like the Liberian ones he met during the war. He would stay with a fellow Liberian returnee. His name was Nnamdi. He was a guy's guy and a chick's guy, the kind of man who could drink a carton of beer at one sitting, smoke a packet of Rothmans, and still feel as strong as an ox.

Boniface sighed.

"I think your problem is you've lost the ability to endure your wife," he said. "But you're now back in Nigeria. If you go the way you want to, you may not survive. Besides, remember your family wherever you go. You'll be in serious trouble if you finish the money you brought from Liberia."

Ogaga said he could not finish spending his money. He had so much he did not know how to spend it. The money was like a sea that could never go dry. The longest pole in the world could not get to its bottom. After saying this, he gripped his suitcase, marched to the street, and boarded a taxi taking him to his friend's house.

As the taxi sped toward Nnamdi's home, Ogaga received a text message from his wife. His son Tunde had stopped eating, saying he would continue to refuse food until his dad came back to the house. His daughter Imade had been crying, asking for her father, saying she would no longer go to school. The landlord visited the flat, threatening to eject the family if the breadwinner did not return. Reading all these, Ogaga felt an ache develop at the back of his head, and he smelled his wife's ogbono soup and his mouth tasted of her bonga fish.

Confused, he stood at the middle of the street after he dropped from the chartered taxi. A car screeched to a halt in front of him and the driver pushed his head out the window and shouted: "If you want to die, why don't you go and jump inside the Atlantic Ocean?" Another driver said the marijuana Ogaga smoked had finally made him mad. As the world around him went mad, one question troubled Ogaga's mind: was it his fault? If Bunmi had not chosen to swell up like a woman straight from the fattening room, why would Ogaga want to leave her for Liberian women? Shrugging, he moved down the road.

Nnamdi's house was a large white bungalow surrounded by a crumbling wall. Shacks built of wood and palm fronds stood behind it. Young men who smoked cigarette and marijuana walked in front of the shacks, holding bottles or sachets of local gin. All around music boomed, and half-naked girls danced in front of the shacks. The smell of cigarette, marijuana, and beer filled the air.

Ogaga met Nnamdi at home and told him he wanted to stay with him for a few weeks while he looked for a new woman to replace his wife. After listening to Ogaga's complaints, Nnamdi told him about the most sensational woman in Benin City. Her name was Mama Do Good. Unlike

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other fat women, Mama Do Good was smart. She took one look at a man and knew the girl that would fit him. People said she got her powers from a spirit woman at a cemetery near the Ikpoba River. She quickly set up a business because Benin City was full of men like Ogaga coming to her and looking for nubile 'sweet sixteens'. Some of such had visited witch doctors in search of good women and not succeeded in getting the right one. Madam Do Good took one look at them, chanted incantations, and got them a perfect woman. One man had been sixty, grown white hair under his nose, but could not marry. Now he had two wives and eight children after he visited Madam Do Good.

"Do you want to meet Madam Do Good?" Nnamdi asked Ogaga.

"I want to meet her," Ogaga answered. "I don't want to eat Bunmi's bonga fish again. I'm looking for a good woman." But he was surprised he could get a good woman so fast after leaving home.

Nnamdi lit a stick of cigarette, took a drag, and blew out thin smoke. After a moment, he excused himself and went out.

When Nnamdi returned, Ogaga quizzed him more about Madam Do Good. "Will she get you a woman as thin as broomstick?" Nnamdi asked rhetorically. "Yes, she has women of all shapes and sizes. She has the connection to get you any woman you want."

"Connection?" Ogaga asked. If that was the case he was most certainly lucky.

Nnamdi watched him, stood up, then addressed him. "Madam Do Good can give you a woman as thin as bonga fish," he said. "If you want a woman straight from the fattening room, she will give you. After all, she runs one of them. Is it a woman as thin as a broomstick, or one as plump as tomatoes? She has them. Is it a born-again prostitute, or even a second-new wife? Madonna, Celine Dion, Beyonce? She has all of them."

"So why have you not got one from her? Don't you need a woman?"

Nnamdi had a ready answer.

"My teacher in primary school did say it's good for one to regulate speed," he said. "I'm currently regulating speed. When I'm ready, I'll contact Madam Do Good."

Ogaga nodded in approval. He got up, adjusted his shirt, and said in a wheedling voice, "I think you can help me in this. I don't think I can do it all alone." Nnamdi nodded. He felt it was better that way so his friend did not end up with a girl with a breath reeking of alcohol and cigarettes, or one who was a thief and a drug addict.

While people outside drank and fell inside the nearby gutters, Ogaga and Nnamdi planned about how they would visit Madam Do Good. Ogaga liked jotting ideas into his notebook. It saved him a number of times in the Liberian jungle when Charles Taylor's thugs or the rebels closed in on the Nigerian contingent and Ogaga needed to get the location of a nearby safe village for refuge. He grabbed his suitcase, opened it, brought out a battered notebook, and began to write into it. After writing down the facts, he and Nnamdi went out. He crashed to the bed in Nnamdi's guest room

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hours later, drunk and reeking of alcohol. Thunder pounded Benin City and lightning illuminated Ogaga's new room.

When Ogaga woke up at dawn, he received another text message from his wife. Tunde had fallen ill because he did not eat and was now admitted at the Get Well Specialist Hospital. Bunmi did not have the money to pay for the treatment. Did Ogaga want her to become a prostitute so she could defray the expenses? Imade had not stopped crying, and Bunmi suspected she was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Despite this, Ogaga had no wish to return home, and he deleted the message, fell asleep, and woke up at seven.

By ten, he and Nnamdi arrived at Madam Do Good's office at Ugbague Street. As they stepped out of the bus on the June morning, they saw a lot of women with faces bleached into the color of tomato sitting in a restaurant leading to the office. Ogaga noticed the women drank bottles of beer like fish and blew out smoke from sticks of cigarette like chimneys. They spread out their legs so any visitor saw their dirty pants, while their flimsy brassieres barely held their breasts.

But Ogaga was not shocked because he had mingled with worse women when he was in Liberia.

"What are you looking for, handsome man?" asked one of them. She had lips that were as red as ripe mango and spoke as though she stepped down from a plane arriving from Switzerland.

"Madam Do Good," said Nnamdi.

"My name is Queen," said the girl. "If Madam Do Good asks you your choice, tell her the girl as beautiful as 'mamiwater'."

"Don't mind her," said another girl. "How do you want it? Dog style or horse style? Any style you want I'll give it to you. Satisfaction guaranteed and no questions asked. In fact, I'll give you a refund if you're not satisfied, both beer and cigarette money included."

Nnamdi and Ogaga tried to pass by the girl but she stood up, blocking them.

"Is it Liberian style you want, I'll give it to you," she said, jiggling her waist. "Or Spanish style, Malian style; I have everything."

After a few moments spent trying to persuade her to let them pass, Nnamdi and Ogaga pushed their way through, walked along a corridor, emerged at a courtyard, and stopped. A few men sat on the chairs placed around it. One of them was a white-haired man wearing a coat with massive lapels, checked pattern, red on tan, a coat popular about forty years ago. Ogaga concluded the man was a debt collector because he did not look like a man who came to look for women. Another man sat next to him, his eyes swimming behind his thick coke-bottle glasses, reading through a notebook. Sitting close to him was a young man in his thirties, drinking from a bottle of Star beer. His eyes looked bleary and he spoke to himself. One man stood in front of the door beside the young man. He wore a red T-shirt that said 'Chief Executive Thug' and held a softball bat. Ogaga concluded he must be Madam Do Good's thug. Nnamdi and Ogaga sat on a vacant chair.

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Ogaga fell into a light sleep but woke up when he heard people shouting at the top of their voice. He opened his eyes and saw the men arguing about who was to go into the office. They tried to go into it at the same time. The thug shouted and pushed them back, but the men surged forward. A woman shouted in the office. The waiting men swore and tried to push the thug from the front of the door. The thug threatened to kill someone if they did not leave the door.

But the waiting men refused to listen to the cries and pleas of the thug, still shouting at the top of their voice. With a roar, the thug pushed them back, punched and swore. The white-haired man and his companion fell to the courtyard. The beer bottle of the young man exploded as it crashed to the floor. Furious, the young man grabbed the thug and dragged him from the door. Nnamdi gripped Ogaga by the hand and pulled him to the office door. As Ogaga followed him, he heard a shout, then something hard hit him by the side of the head, and he fell.

Back in the flat, Nnamdi consoled him.

"Those men are like mad dogs," he said. "I had to bring you back so you can get quick treatment. Don't worry, we'll go back again."

The next morning, they boarded a bus and headed for Madam Do Good's office. But this time they were lucky. No one sat waiting for Madam Do Good in the courtyard. The thug sat on one of the chairs, drinking from a bottle of beer and smoking a stick of cigarette. He ushered Nnamdi and Ogaga into the office. Both men pushed the door open and entered. Madam Do Good, as fat as a toad, sat behind a battered desk.

"Sorry about your friend," she said to Nnamdi then looked at Ogaga. "But don't worry, I've found a woman who will make you happy. The kind of woman you'll be proud of. A woman as slim as broomstick and as beautiful as anything. Come, let me show her to you."

Madam Do Good raised her bulk from the chair, went round the desk, and moved to the door, followed by Nnamdi and Ogaga. They crossed the courtyard and headed toward a door. Ogaga smelled boiling beef, cigarette, beer, and rice. Madam Do Good pushed the door open, entered, and the men followed her. As they came into a room, Ogaga heard girls laughing. They stopped when they saw Madam Do Good.

"These are very beautiful and well-behaved girls," Madam Do Good told Ogaga, pointing at the girls. "Look closely and tell me the one you like."

Ogaga stared at the four girls and did not know the one to choose. They were all slim and dark complexioned, the kind of girls he liked. Finally, he pointed to one with a smile like Bunmi's when she was a young woman.

"That's Mobolanle," Madam Do Good announced. "Her name means 'she's brings wealth to the home'."

Madam Do Good said Mobolanle came from a good background. Her mother sent her to Madam Do Good so she could learn modern training and how to be a good wife. Mobolanle was not greedy and she always smiled. She brought good luck to the men going out with her and she did

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not fight them. She was not the kind of woman men spent all their lives working to please.

"Come to my office so we can finish all arrangements concerning her," Madam Do Good concluded. Ogaga beamed at Mobolanle and followed Madam Do Good to her office. An hour later, after Ogaga paid the required fees, he wanted to go.

"So when do Mobolanle and I get to know each other?" he asked.

"Within the next few days," Madam Do Good promised. "I'll give a call."

The first night Mobolanle stayed with him, Ogaga heard someone knock at the door of the flat. Since Nnamdi traveled to Lagos, Ogaga got out of bed, went to the living room, and opened the front door. Two men who wore masks stood in the doorway. Before Ogaga could shut the door against them, one of the men kicked him on the leg while the other brought out a gun, riding Ogaga back into the room.

"If you shout you're a dead man," snarled the man with the gun.

"Where's the other person with you?" said the other man. "Quick! Or we'll blow off someone's head."

Shaken, Ogaga led them to his bedroom. One of the men kicked the door open and entered. As Mobolanle opened her mouth to scream, the man crossed the room and slapped her. Mobolanle fell to the bed while the man with the gun brought out a handkerchief, grabbed her hand, and gagged her mouth. When he finished he glared at Ogaga.

"Bring out everything you have," he said. "Where's your handset? Bring it out!"

They took Ogaga's handset, his cash, and handkerchief. When Ogaga protested as they tried to take his shoes, they called him a selfish bastard who could not spare an ordinary pair of shoes! One of the robbers punched his face and swore at him. As Ogaga shouted and held his teeth, the other man slammed the butt of the gun against his head. Ogaga slumped. As he lay on the ground, the robbers kicked his head, hands, legs, and stomach as though they wanted to inflict serious injury on him. After they were satisfied, the robbers left him, shutting the door behind them. When Nnamdi returned from his trip to Lagos and saw his ransacked house, he did not believe Ogaga did not plan the incident. "I trusted you as a friend!" he shouted, "But you betrayed me. You organized with people to rob my house. I won't report you to the police for old time sake. But get out of my house!" He threw Ogaga's property to the street, and Ogaga had to quickly rent an apartment where he could keep body and soul together.

The second time Mobolanle came to visit him, about a month after the robbery incident, she told Ogaga about a deal where he could double his money. All Ogaga had to do was provide the cash for money doublers to buy mercury, a metal turning neatly cut blank papers into dollar bills. After the process was completed, twelve million dollars would be left to be shared by those in the deal. Ogaga would get six million dollars for his efforts while the other members of the syndicate would share the rest.

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Ogaga reasoned he would save half his share and use the rest to build a house. The con men collected his money and handed a wooden box to him, telling him when he opened it the following day he would find his six million dollars. On opening the box as instructed, he saw rotten fish in it. He was so astonished he almost fell into the box and may have contacted cholera or dysentery or other terrible diseases if he did not have the presence of mind to steady himself.

After kicking the wooden box to a side of his room, he took a cab and went to meet Mobolanle, whom he suspected of colluding with the money doublers. Before she could deny the accusation, Ogaga slapped her. As she held her face, he kicked and pushed her to the bed of the room. Scrambling to get to her feet, Mobolanle yelled: "I'll deal with you for this!", and shouted to attract her friends. Her colleagues rushed into the room. Without asking the reason for the quarrel, they pounced on Ogaga like a pack of jackals, rained blows on him, tore his shirt and trousers, and pushed him to the street. As he tried to gather his wit together, Mobolanle screamed at him: "Hopeless man! I'll still deal with you!"

Would all these have happened to him if he endured Bunmi? Ogaga asked as he staggered to his rented apartment. Never! He thought. Though Bunmi spoke with the speed of a master of ceremony at a party, she was not a crook and liar. She never associated herself with armed robbers and money doublers as Ogaga suspected Mobolanle did. She was also fiercely loyal to Ogaga, once pouring hot beans on a money lender who harassed Ogaga over a debt of one hundred naira just before he left for Liberia.

Would he survive Benin City if he did not endure Bunmi, Ogaga asked himself again. As he thought about this, the ache at the back of his head and the taste of bonga fish, sensations that increased since the robbery incident, came back with force. As they did, he imagined he heard the voices of his children telling him to come back home, that no one drove him away, and that they were dying of hunger since he abandoned them. But the strange spirit he developed during the Liberian civil war came over him and he pushed the idea to the back of his mind.

Instead, he thought of Agatha Weah, one of the women he met in Liberia. Her gymnastically performed sessions on bed left him panting and wanting more. Sure, she had a boil on her forehead that made her look ugly, but she made up with her desire to please her man and the inviting smile on her face.

Then there was Mabel. Ogaga forgot her surname because he felt it was unpronounceable. She wore no lip-stick and rolled up and down the bed, delighting Ogaga with her excited screams while romping between the bed sheet. When Ogaga thought of these and other women, he hardened his heart and decided not to go back home.

In the morning, he stared out his window and saw Mobolanle coming toward his rented apartment. He remembered she said she would still deal with him, and he regretted having anything to do with her. Her toothpaste had left his teeth dirty and his breath sour. Quickly, he rushed to the front door and turned the key in the lock.

It was a few minutes later he heard the buzzing sound in his apart-

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ment. It was low and insistent, but it reminded Ogaga of the sound he heard in a TV program called 'The Life and Times of Dangerous Bees'. Had Mobolanle somehow introduced bees inside his apartment? he thought, standing in the middle of the room.

When the first bee stung him, he cried, flailing his hands in the air. As he stumbled about the room, he felt he was back in the jungles of Liberia, dodging the bullets fired by Charles Taylor's thugs or the rebels. He fell to the floor and then the second bee stung him. He jumped to his feet as though someone poured hot water on him and ran to the door, turning the key in the lock. The thought came out of nowhere he would not survive Benin City, like Boniface told him a few weeks ago, if he continued with the way he lived.

As he stepped out the room, two bees stung him on the neck and he howled, beginning to run down the street. As he ran, he decided to abandon his properties in the apartment and look for the next available taxi. If there was no taxi, he would board the nearest okada motor cycle, even though it would be expensive, and return to his wife and children. As another bee buzzed around him, Ogaga ran; he ran toward his family.