I Do Not Come To You By Chance

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MASOBE

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To my parents . . .
Chief Chukwuma Hope Nwaubani
(Ahanyiefule 1 of Omaegwu, Oke Orji Abia)
Chief Mrs Patricia Uberife Nwaubani
(Nwanyiejiagamba 1 of Omaegwu)
. . . for giving me the very best of their best.

Prologue

People in the villages seemed to know everything. They knew whose great-grandmother had been a prostitute; they knew which families were once slaves of which; they knew who and who were *osu* outcasts whose ancestors had been consecrated to the pagan shrines of generations ago. It was, therefore, not surprising that they knew exactly what had happened in the hospital on that day.

From what Augustina had been told, as soon as she came into the world and the midwife smacked her buttocks so that she could cry and force air into her lungs, her mother took in a deep breath and died. The dead woman was the most recent of five wives, the youngest, and the most beloved. But because she had died a bad death, a death that was considered as much an abomination as a suicide, she was buried immediately, quietly, without official mourning.

When Augustina's father took her home, everybody complained that the child cried too much, as if it knew that it had killed its mother. So her grandmother came and took her away. At age seven, when it was confirmed that her right hand could reach across her head and touch her left ear, Augustina

moved back to her father's house and started attending primary school. Being long and skinny had worked to her advantage.

Six years later, the same village experts said it was foolish for her father to consider sending a female child to secondary school. It was a waste of time; women did not need to know too much 'book'. Reverend Sister Xavier was outraged and came all the way to talk it out with Augustina's father.

'Good afternoon, Mr Mbamalu,' she began.

'Welcome,' he said, and offered her a seat.

The white woman sat and stared right into his eyes.

'I hear you're not allowing Ozoemena to attend secondary school.'

Ugorji, Augustina's elder brother, who had been assigned as interpreter for the day, repeated the woman's words in Igbo. It was not as if their father did not understand English, but when he received word that the headmistress was coming, he had panicked, fearing that his feeble grasp of the foreign language would not withstand the turbulence of the white woman's nasal accent and fast talking.

'I want her to learn how to cook and take care of a home,' Augustina's father replied. 'She has gone to primary school. She can read and write. That is enough.'

The white woman smiled and shook her head.

'I'm sorry to disagree with you, but I don't think it's enough.

Ozoemena is such a smart girl. She can go a very long way.' Ugorji did his thing. The white woman sped on.

'I've been living in Africa since the thirties. In all my over twenty years of missionary work here, I've come across very few young women as smart as your daughter.'

Sister Xavier sat upright, hands clasped as if she was in a constant state of preparedness for prayer.

'All over the world,' she continued, 'women are achieving great things. Some are doctors who treat all types of diseases, others have big positions with the government. You might be surprised to hear this, but in some countries, the person who rules over them is a woman.'

From her position behind the door, Augustina noticed that her brother did not give the correct interpretation for the word 'rules'. It was little things like this that made her the smart one.

'Mr Mbamalu, I would like you to reconsider your stand on this matter,' Sister Xavier concluded.

To date, nobody is sure if it was the sister's words, or the rapid way she fired her sentences, or simply the shock of a woman telling him what to do, but Augustina's father consented. She would attend secondary school with her brothers. Another five years of the white man's wisdom.

Augustina was thrilled.

In the end, though, it did not matter that she had made the highest scores in her class during the final-year exams, or that she spoke English almost with the same speed as the reverend sisters themselves. After secondary school, the topic of formal education was officially closed and Augustina was sent as an apprentice to her father's sister who was a successful tailor. Her aunty was married to a highly esteemed teacher. So highly esteemed, in fact, that everybody called him Teacher. That was how she left Isiukwuato and moved to Umuahia.

Augustina had been living with Teacher and Aunty for some months when news reached them that one of Teacher's friends

was coming to visit. The friend had studied Engineering in the United Kingdom, was now working with the government in Enugu, and was returning to Umuahia for his annual leave. As soon as his letter arrived, Aunty went about broadcasting the news to all the neighbours. Most of them knew the expected guest from reputation. They said he was good-looking. They said he always wore shoes, even when he was just sitting inside the house reading. They said he behaved like a white man, that he spoke English through his nose and ate with a fork. Some even swore that they had never known him to fart.

When Engineer turned up in his white Peugeot 403, Augustina, Aunty, Teacher, and the five children were dolled up in their Sunday best and waiting on the veranda. As soon as Augustina caught that first glimpse of him, she decided that even if Engineer's steps had not been leading to their courtyard, she would have crawled over broken glass, swum across seven oceans, and climbed seven mountains to see him that day. He was as handsome as paint. His back was straight, his hands stayed deep inside his pockets, and his steps were short and quick as if he had an urgent appointment at the end of the world. Anybody passing him on the way to the stream could have mistaken him for an emissary from the spirit world on special assignment to the land of mere mortals.

After lunch, they all sat in the living room. Engineer crossed his right leg over his left knee and reeled out tales of the white man's land.

'There are times when the sun doesn't shine,' he said. 'The weather is so cold that even the plants are afraid to come out of the ground. That's why their skin is so white. Our own skin is much darker because the sun has smiled too long on us.'

They opened their mouths and opened their eyes, and looked at themselves from one to the other.

'During those times, the clothes they wear are even thicker than the hairs on a sheep. And if they don't dress that way, the cold can even kill.'

They opened their mouths and opened their eyes, and looked at themselves from one to the other.

'The way their streets are, you can be walking about for miles and miles and you won't even see one speck of sand. In fact, you can even wear the same clothes for more than one week and they won't get dirty.'

They opened their eyes and opened their mouths, and looked at themselves from one to the other. If anybody else had narrated these stories, they would have known immediately that he had spent far too much time in the palm wine tapper's company.

'That's why education is so important,' Engineer concluded. 'These people have learnt how to change their world to suit them. They know how to make it cold when the weather is too hot and they know how to make it hot when the weather is too cold.'

He paused and leaned back in his chair. Then he beamed the starlight on someone else.

'So how have the children been doing in school?' he asked.

Teacher shifted in his seat to adjust the extra weight that pride had suddenly attached to him.

'Oh, very, very well,' he replied. 'All of them made very high scores in Arithmetic.' Engineer smiled.

'Go on . . . bring your exercise books. Show him,' Teacher said.

The children trooped out like a battalion of soldier ants, the eldest leading the way. They returned in the same order, each holding an orange exercise book. Engineer perused each book page by page and smiled like an apostle whose new converts were reciting the creed. Finally, he got to the last child, who was about four years old. As soon as he held out his exercise book, his mother leaned over and landed a stout knock on the little boy's head.

'How many times have I told you to stop giving your elders things with your left hand?' she glared. 'Next time, I'm going to use a knife to cut it off.'

Engineer jumped in.

'Teacher,' he said, 'it's not really the boy's fault if he uses his left hand sometimes.'

'Children are born foolish,' Teacher replied sorrowfully. 'If one doesn't teach them properly from an early age, they grow up and continue that way. He'll soon learn.'

'No, no, no . . . What I'm saying is that the way his brain is arranged, he uses his left hand to do things that other people normally do with their right hands.' Teacher laughed.

'I'm very serious,' Engineer said. 'It's the white people who found that out.'

'Engineer, it doesn't matter what the white people have found out. The white people may not mind what hand they use to eat and do other things, but in our culture, it's disrespectful for a child to give something to his elders with his left hand. You know that.'

'I know. But what I'm saying is that, no matter what culture says, it's not the fault of any child who does this.'

'Engineer, I think you're taking things too far. You need

to be careful that the ways of the white man don't make you mad. The way it is, people are already saying that you're no longer an African man.'

'How can they say I'm not African?' Engineer chuckled. 'My skin is dark, my nostrils are wide, my hair is thick and curly. What other evidence do they need? Or do I have to wear a grass skirt and start dancing around like a chimpanzee?' Teacher looked wounded.

'Don't forget I've also gone to school,' he said. 'But that doesn't make me believe I have to drop everything about my culture in favour of another man's own.'

Yes, both men had been classmates in secondary school, but only one of them had gone on to university – to university in the white man's land.

'My learned friend,' Engineer replied, 'we are the ones who should know better. Any part of our culture that is backwards should be dumped! When I was in London, there was a time I was having my bath and my landlord's son came to peep at me because he wanted to see if I had a tail. Do you think it's his fault? I don't blame the people who are saying that monkeys are our ancestors. It's customs like this that give rise to that conclusion.'

At that point Augustina lost control of her mouth and broke all protocol by speaking.

'Monkeys? Do they say that men and women are the children of monkeys?'

Both Teacher and Wife turned and looked at her as if she had broken the eleventh commandment. The children looked at her as if she had no right to interrupt their day's entertainment. Engineer looked at her curiously, as if he

were peering through his microscope at a specimen in the laboratory. This girl was trespassing – a conversation between men.

'What is your name, again?' Engineer asked.

By that time, Augustina had repented of her sin. She cast her gaze to the floor.

'Young woman, what is your name?' he repeated.

'My name is Ozoemena,' she replied solemnly.

'Go and bring in the clothes,' Aunty said, as if she wished she were near enough to fling Augustina against the wall.

Regretting all the exotic tales she was going to miss, Augustina went outside and gathered the dry clothes from the cherry fruit hedges. Afterwards she felt awkward about rejoining the group and remained inside the bedroom until Aunty called her to carry out the sack of yams and plantains they had prepared as a gift for Engineer. Engineer saw her heading outside, excused himself, and followed.

He opened the car boot and helped her place the items inside.

'You have very beautiful hair,' he said.

She knew that was probably all that he could say. As a child, Augustina's family had jokingly called her *Nna ga-alu*, 'father will marry', because she had been so ugly that the experts had said her father would be the one who ended up marrying her. But Nature had compensated her adequately. She had a full head of hair that went all the way to the nape of her neck when plaited into narrow stems with black thread.

'Thank you,' she replied with head bent and a smile on one side of her face.

'Why did they call you Ozoemena?' he asked. 'What happened when you were born?'

She was not surprised at the question. Ozoemena means 'let another one not happen'. The only shocker was that he had actually cared to ask.

'My mother died when she was giving birth to me,' Augustina replied.

'Do you have a Christian name?' She nodded.

'Augustina.'

She was born on the twenty-seventh of May, on St Augustine's Day. It was the nurse at the missionary hospital who had written the name on her birth certificate.

Engineer bent and peeped into her face. Then, he smiled. 'I think a child should be named for his destiny so that whenever he hears his name, he has an idea of the sort of future that is expected of him. Not according to the circumstances of his birth. The past is constraining but the future has no limits.' He smiled again. 'I shall call you Augustina.'

Augustina meditated on his words as she walked back inside. One of her cousins was named Onwubiko, 'death please', because his mother had lost seven children before he was born. She had another relative called Ahamefule, 'my name should not get lost', because he was the first son after six girls. And then her classmate in secondary school was called Nkemakolam, 'my own should not lack from me', because she was the first child after several years of childlessness. This method of choosing names was quite common but this Engineer man was a wonder. He said things and thought things like no other person she had ever met.

A few days later, Engineer returned for lunch. Afterwards,

he asked Teacher if it was OK to sit and chat with Augustina in the garden. Teacher and Wife looked at themselves and back at Engineer. He repeated his request.

Augustina completed her tasks and went to meet him outside. He was sitting on a pile of firewood by the back fence and had pulled a smaller pile close to his side. As she approached, he looked her over from top to toe, like a glutton beholding a spread of fried foods.

'What of your slippers?' he asked softly.

Augustina looked at her feet.

'Why not go and wear your slippers,' he said.

She was used to walking around barefoot. But the way he spoke made her rush back in and fetch the slippers she usually wore to the market on Nkwo Day.

'Augustina, you shouldn't go around with your bare feet,' he said, after she had sat down on the smaller pile of wood.

Augustina kept quiet and stared ahead at a large family of fowls advancing towards them. A bold member of the brood stretched its neck and pecked at some invisible snack by Engineer's feet. A more audacious member marched towards her toe area and attempted to feed. Augustina jerked her leg quickly. The abrupt motion sent the fowls sprinting towards the other side of the compound in a tsunami of fright.

'You know,' he continued, 'when the white man first came, a lot of people thought he didn't have any toes. They thought that his shoes were his actual feet.'

He laughed in a jolly, drowsy way that made her smile a drowsy, jolly smile. She also had heard all sorts of amusing stories about when the white man first turned up. Her grandmother had told her that the very first time she saw a