Small by Small

This memoir reflects the author's recollections of events that occurred over twenty to thirty years ago. Some names and characteristics have been changed to protect identity and confidentiality and dialogue has been rendered as best remembered from the time in question.

Small by Small:

Becoming a Doctor in 1990s Nigeria

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MASOBE

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For my beloved parents, Anya and Inyang
Still setting the bar high.

In gratitude for their unwavering love and support
in the high places and the low.

Nwayọ nwayọ ka eji aracha ofe di ọkụ - Igbo proverb

Nigerian Pidgin: *Na small by small dem dey take chop soup wey hot*

English literal: *Little by little is the way to tackle (a bowl of) hot soup*

Abiriba si ni wo: *A digh'e fee tururu gaa buru amaadi*

Abiriba people tok say: *You no fit just fly tururu come become oga or madam*

Our Abiriba people say: *One does not suddenly fly up, wings flapping tururu, to become a person of note (overnight)*

2nd MB: Through the Whirlwind

The sky is dull and grey when I wake up. A weak light filters through the rusted mosquito nets – gaping in places – covering the windows of the hostel room. Traces of last night's thunderstorm linger in the rich rained-on earth. Its scent fills the room. It blunts, but does not quite overpower the stale sweaty smell of a room that's home to more male students than it was designed for. I roll off the mattress, blinking as I adjust to the light. I wonder vaguely where China has gone, then I see his bent back. He is kneeling by the open wardrobe into which his head has disappeared. Dressed in his favourite blue shorts, upper body bare, he rummages through the papers stacked in the wardrobe with increasing urgency. I gaze at the distinct bones of his spine emphasised in his arched position and begin instinctively, to name them, defining which muscles are involved in maintaining his posture, then stop abruptly when I remember our current predicament. China's room-mates are nowhere to be seen – they have probably rushed off to morning lectures graciously leaving us both asleep, drained by the restless anxiety of the night before.

'Any news?' I croak, voice sleep-thickened, causing China to startle, then turn to me, a broad smile breaking over his bespectacled face.

'Ah. You don wake? No news o! They say they are still in the examiners' meeting at Anatomy, that they started meeting again this morning. I was just checking for the notes I made from that last anatomy tutorial. I'm sure I failed that last question in the viva.'

China is one of the brightest in our class, often achieving the

best grades among our friends, but his deep self-doubt, endearing because it is unfeigned, persists. Normally, I teasingly reassure him, but today, I too am preoccupied.

'Anatomy again? I thought they said they would continue the meeting in Physio this morning?'

He shrugs, resigned. His face is a worried frown behind the black-framed glasses without which he can barely see.

It is 1991 and we are third-year medical students at the University of Nigeria. Yesterday, the last of our classmates, those whose surnames begin with letters from U to Z, staggered out from the viva rooms, our 2nd MB exams officially over.

2nd MB is a gruelling ritual, sitting solidly in the middle of our six-year journey to becoming doctors, a thin bridge over a gaping chasm. Like lead characters in an action film, we must cross it successfully to continue the journey to our prize – the lofty title and status of doctor. After three years of studying the pre-clinical basic sciences of anatomy, physiology and biochemistry, it's necessary for us to pass 2nd MB to be allowed to continue with the final three years of clinical study before the award of our medical degrees. The stakes are high: just half of our class of three hundred will pass. Of those who fail, half will have to join the class below, enduring a repeat year of arduous study before a final second attempt at 2nd MB. A second failure will mean leaving medical school to start afresh, studying for a completely new degree. Yet having to endure the harrowing year again is a reprieve, still better off than the unfortunate seventy whose first attempts will be judged so poor, they are asked to leave medical school immediately. If they find another university department willing to accept them, they start undergraduate studies afresh, the three preceding years of medicine wasted. A lifetime of coming top of the class will shudder to a halt and the exhilaration of securing a highly prized place in medical school will evaporate as the dream of becoming a doctor dies.

The prospect feels worse because most of us have never failed

an examination. Cushioned by a lifetime of coming top, we are petrified at the prospect of a first confrontation with life-altering failure. So, with the exams done, we wait nail- and lip-bitingly anxious for these results.

Yesterday, as soon as the last vivas were done, our lecturers began huddling in conference with the external examiners collating the results, making final decisions.

China interrupts my feverish mental review as I wonder which group I will fall into by the end of today.

'You, know, let's go and get something to eat, I can't continue chasing these lecturers around. Whenever they are ready, they will release the results.'

All day the previous day, as part of an anxious crowd of classmates, we trailed the lecturers from office to office, like chicks after a mother hen. Some unable to bear the agony, or convinced of failure, have given up, retreating to their rooms, or leaving campus completely. Most, undeterred by the ever-longer wait, have kept vigil, waiting and watching, even as the daylight fades and darkness descends abruptly. As the fluorescent tubes flicker on in the rooms, outlining the heads of the examiners, clustered in conference, we continue to wait. We are coiled spring-like for that moment the meeting breaks up, a lecturer emerging, sheaf of papers and stapler in hand, to tack the results to a departmental noticeboard. Waiting, we talk listlessly in whispers, although we are at a distance, forbidden from coming any closer:

'I hear one year, they met late into the night, till nearly midnight, and only the few students that stayed up were there when they put up the results.'

'Midnight? Ah, no, they can't stay that long. They too must be tired now. Haven't they been conducting exams and marking papers for the past how many days? I'm sure they will soon break and continue tomorrow.'

There are rumours that some lecturers and professors, parents of classmates, have been discreetly approaching the examiners, to

see how their children have fared, and if needed, to put in a mitigating word.

Each time the main door swings open, our hopeful eyes turn to it. We leap in anticipation from the gnarled roots of the mango tree where we are perched, like vultures at the aftermath of a feast. Time and again, we sink down again, false alarm following false alarm. By 8pm, the only light in this part of the campus comes from the offices where the examiners are meeting, and from the Catholic chapel, imposingly lit up in the distance. Our lecturers and examiners finally emerge from the wooden prefabricated building of the Biochemistry Department and head for their cars, chatting as they walk, occasionally breaking into laughter. They largely ignore our hopeful calls asking when the results might be released. The fierce-looking bald physiology lecturer turns to shout: 'Why won't you people go and rest? Go and sleep, the results will be out in Anatomy tomorrow!'

With that, singly and in pairs, they enter their cars and drive off. We slink away into the night, returning to our rooms, morose and silent. China and I lean over the rusting balustrades outside his room, under the thickening grey clouds presaging a storm, repeatedly running through our prospects, till exhausted, we finally turn in, falling into a space on the mattresses already full of his room-mates' bodies.

This morning, unrefreshed by fitful sleep, I am conscious of a growing hunger. Waiting and trailing the examiners yesterday meant we ate very little. With eagerness, I take up China's suggestion.

'Make we go Madam Drive In!' I declare with bravado.

Madam Drive In's canteen is not cheap, and our visits there are carefully measured out, but we deserve a treat, I reason, and our pockets are still flush with infusions of cash from parents and family members keen to see nothing impairs our exam preparations.

China happily agrees. 'I no go mind that her smoked fish now, man!'

We stroll out to the big tree opposite Adelabu Hall. The campus seems eerily quiet, the untarred earth paths criss-crossing it empty, except for a few students. The majority are probably at their first morning lectures, as we would usually have been. We join a small knot of stragglers, who presumably are playing truant, to wait for a kabukabu. These informal taxis ferry students from the campus centre to the main gate. From the gate, it is a short walk to the shops and restaurants, and the bus stops where taxis and buses to more distant destinations are found.

As we wait, passing friends and classmates ask, earnest with concern:

'Any news?'

We shake our heads in silent reply.

All the students, even those in other faculties, seem caught up in the air of expectation hanging over the campus, as if the university is holding its collective breath. Most have room-mates and friends whose fevered, taxing exam preparations they have watched over the last eighteen months, our fear and anxiety transmitted to them.

A car pulls up. It is Paapa, one of the more cantankerous of the kabukabu drivers. He constantly berates students for infractions like slamming the door of his ancient Peugeot 504 with excessive force, or settling into the worn seats with what he judges a surfeit of vigour. The kabukabu drivers are unique, more polished than the average Enugu taxi driver. Most are retired civil servants or former university workers who need to make ends meet in a harsh economic climate, worsened by the gap left by irregularly paid government pensions. Falling back on their only assets, the cars bought in better times, they make a living ferrying students from the campus to the gate and back, for a small fare. I am usually touched by the slightly frayed, shabby dignity they project, as if struggling to retain some shred of their previous

elevated status. This afternoon, I am too immersed in results anxiety to care. I cram into the single front passenger seat with China, settling my frame into the narrow space, taking care not to touch the protruding gearstick, to avoid provoking a reaction from Paapa. Four more students squeeze into the back, and with a clunky shudder, the car heads off. As we pull away, Paapa asks, his formal diction like many of his generation, reminiscent of a BBC announcer: 'Have the results been released yet?' We say that they have not, and surprising us with a 'Don't worry, it will all be fine', he pulls in by the main gates to let us out.

We walk to the car mechanic compound, a short distance from the gates, waving along the way to a couple of friends, business students heading in the opposite direction. They walk with the slow sated gait of the freshly fed, toothpicks dangling from their mouths.

Entering the compound, an open space by the roadside, its earth black and shiny with oil from the hundreds of broken-down cars that have passed through it, we see cars and trucks in various stages of disrepair. The air resounds with a cacophony of metal on metal as apprentices hammer away at cars, supervised by their master. In one corner of the yard there is a small shed, four wooden posts set in a concrete floor, holding up a roof of corrugated metal sheets. It is delicately shaded off from its industrial surroundings by an incongruous lacy white curtain, billowing in the late morning breeze. This is Madam Drive In. We part the curtain and squeeze onto one of the low benches on either side of the tables lining the shack's edges. In a corner, behind a quartet of giant pots, Madam Drive In sits, buxom, ivory teeth revealed by a lipstick-framed smile, her face freshly powdered. She wears the clean lace blouse and Dutch wax double wrapper of the respectably married Igbo woman. With a broad welcoming smile, she asks what we want to eat.

'*Nna, welcome, nu, kedu I he unu ga eri*?'

She does not run through the menu: as regulars, we know what

she has, the same as most bukas. I ask for white rice and beans with stew and beef. Recklessly, I ask for smoked fish in addition to the beef. The tender flavourful fish, home-smoked by Madam herself, is a speciality here. I justify my extravagance as necessary to calm my nerves. China orders garri with egusi soup, also indulging in a double order of beef and smoked fish. We watch, with an earnestness matching that which we display in anatomy dissection sessions, as she deftly fills four aluminium plates, wielding the large serving spoons sticking out of each pot. Our vigilance makes clear we will not be short-changed of a single grain of rice or drop of stew or soup.

'*Madam, tinye kwu o nu ofe.*' China pleads for more soup, and Madam skims the spoon over the top of the pot of egusi soup, depositing a few more drops on to his plate, muttering about the rising cost of soup ingredients. A young girl assistant carries the food on a tray to us, depositing the plates on the blue plastic-topped table.

Forgetting for a moment the looming exam results, we tuck in. With a light aluminium spoon, I scoop up moist soft grains of white rice, turning them in the oily stew, rich with tomato and pepper. I work in some of the dry flaky brown beans and transport this luscious spoonful to my mouth. China moulds his garri into balls, his fingers swirling them around in the spinach-green and palm oil yellow soup before they disappear in quick succession into his mouth.

Minutes pass, and engrossed in eating, barely exchanging grunts, we miss two new arrivals at Madam Drive In. I look up from my plate to see students who live on the same floor in our hostel. I think they are studying accountancy but as we are not close, only exchanging nods in the hostel corridors, I am not sure.

'Are you not 2nd MB students?' one of them asks.

We raise our heads slowly, unwilling to rise to the bait. Over the past day many have exploited our distressed waiting, playing

practical jokes then roaring with laughter as we stampede towards a false claim that the results are out. Fresh from these bitter experiences, we ignore them and return to our food.

'You are here eating, and the results are out,' the other student says. There is a note of seriousness in his voice, a ring of truth.

I look at China. He looks back at me, then turning to the accountancy students, implores, 'Be serious, man, we just left campus a few minutes ago and the examiners' meeting was still going on. The results can't be out already?'

'I swear the results don commot, we just pass Physiology Department now, all una classmates dey there, dem dey shout, dey celebrate. Some too dey cry . . .'

I look again at their faces and decide this is the real thing, no jokes.

Leaping up, I push my half-eaten rice and beans aside. China is already rapidly washing his garri-encrusted hands in the plastic bowl of soapy water on one side of the table. A barely touched mound of garri sits reproachfully on his plate, beside the half-consumed soup. We quickly pay Madam Drive In, ignoring her bemusement at perpetually hungry students abandoning food they have paid for, even her prized smoked fish untouched.

Leaving the accountancy students to explain to Madam, we stride rapidly towards the university gates. Then, exchanging a glance, in wordless agreement, we break into a run. A small group of students wait at the gates, but pleading our special 2nd MB status, we are allowed to jump the queue and take seats in the first kabukabu to arrive. Their easy acquiescence adds weight to the assertion that the results are definitely out.

The car seems to move more slowly than normal, taking an unconscionably long time to get to Physiology. Once the dark brown wooden walls of the building heave into view, we shout at the driver to stop. He barely brakes before we tear the door open, flinging the fare in his direction. As I run full pelt towards the crowd gathered around the notice boards, I recognise a few