

## The Depth of Pain

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### Short story

#### The Depth of Pain

"Throw the ball now, what are you doing?" "Don't be hoarding the ball, Azu." "This boy, are you mad, is your head not correct?" His friends were all speaking at the same time. Oge, the one questioning his sanity, is the oldest and tallest of them all. Though still fourteen, he had already begun showing signs of puberty; the growth spurt, unusual interest in girls, and an inexplicable desire to show off. The latter pissed his friends off the most. Oge had never been one to show off, but recently, his friends could no longer keep track of his list of 'firsts'. He was either bragging about being the first to have hairs down 'there', or he was bragging about being the first to own a business – said business was renting out his newly acquired leather ball at the rate of 10 naira per day to his peers. His friends were all tired of who he was becoming, but they were also wary of calling him out because they needed him, and wanted to always be in his good graces. Oge is the only son of a very generous Akara-seller mother, whose well-off transporter husband was about to leave for another wife when God, magnanimously, blessed them with a male child. He was the 7<sup>th</sup> child but the first

and only son. At birth, the mother promptly named him Ogechikanma, God's time is the best. How else could one explain the blessing of a much sought-after male child, in the nick of time? His parents spoil him silly, his older sisters pet and pamper him while his friends all love him.

Until recently.

Before now, he let them play with his numerous toys and willingly shared his snacks with them. He took after his mother in generosity and this had endeared him further, to all and sundry. He had never boasted about his collection of toys, about the fact that he does no chores at home, or even about his parents doing all his bidding, until recently, right at the beginning of the long vacation. Now, Oge never misses any opportunity to show off. Just this afternoon, before they started their game of soccer, he had bragged about traveling to the United Kingdom before them all. He told them that that morning before his father drove off, he had promised to send him abroad when he finishes secondary school. Chike, the smartest and smallest of the boys, had asked if he'd be schooling in Oxford or Cambridge but Oge had said it did not matter which, That him

going to the USA before them was all that mattered. At the mention of the USA, several of them were taken aback, even Azu noted the mix-up immediately, but after passing a look of exasperation amongst themselves, they deemed it wiser to let sleeping dogs lie, than risk losing the exclusive privilege only they enjoyed in the village – playing Oge’s ball anytime they wanted without having to pay the 10 naira renting fee.

And now, to have his sanity questioned by a 14 - year old who did not know the difference between the UK and the USA was too much of a bitter pill for Azu to swallow. He could not hold in his anger anymore. Oge needed to be put in his place.

“Don’t you ever ask me if my head is correct, Oge. Because of ordinary ball.”

“I will ask you and anyone whatever I feel like.”

“Azu, Oge, you guys should calm down make we play ball now.”

“But you were all here when he said I was mad.”

“You are mad, I have said it again, what can you do?”

“Oge, shebi you know he has so many brothers,”

“And so, what? What has having a family full of brothers done for him? They could not even make their mother and father to stay together, useless sons and bro...”

Azu flung a handful of sand at him even before Oge could finish his last insult and a fight ensued between the two boys. At barely 13, Azu was no match for Oge, but he was determined to put an end to the misery he and his friends had had to endure in Oge’s hands all through the holidays. He made for his opponent’s legs, to try and topple him to the ground, and his opponent seized the opportunity to land blows on his bare back. Chike was yelling their names, begging them to stop, while Agoziem was clearing the playground of all stones and sticks any of them might use to inflict injuries on the

other. Some boys had already sped off to call one or two of Azu’s numerous brothers while the rest were watching the fight with rapt attention, to be able to retell it later, in vivid details, to any future audience of interest.

Azu fought with all his might. Though he had never fought Oge before, he knew he was no match for the older boy. Oge, at first was merely slapping Azu’s hands away and trying not to be floored by his younger detractor, but when several minutes had gone by and it did not appear as if Azu’s strength was letting up, Oge was beginning to panic. He did not want to lose a fight to any of his friends, least of all Azu. Azu was also getting tired too but somehow, he knew this was a fight he had to win. It was a fight he must win. He was no longer fighting for his friends, he was now fighting for his family. Somehow, his family’s honor was on the line and is only redeemable if he is victorious in the end.

This was not the first time some will be making a mockery of his coming from a broken home. Actually, his parents’ failed marriage had been talked about so many times in his young life that he had already lost count. In school, even his teachers write off his usual dirty appearance based on the fact that his mother does not live with them, not minding that other boys his age, whose parents lived together, did their own laundry themselves, that is except Oge. Other times when he failed to turn in an assignment, the subject teacher usually looked at him in pity and moved on to other boys. He had come to terms with their pity and condescending looks, at least, he was exempted from punishment several times as a result. They unanimously agreed that a boy whose mother abandoned his father and brothers at the tender age of four should not be expected to behave on par with others whose mothers were around to nurture. But today, he was realizing on the spot that even his friends held the same view about him, about his

brothers and his parents' failed marriage. If Oge could just fling it at him in the heat of an argument then it had, at one time or the other, been the topic of discussion among his friends in his absence. Oge was generous but not intelligent. He could hardly boast of a singular original thought. He was either repeating what his family had discussed or what he and his friends, who are incidentally Azu's friends, had discussed some time ago.

But just now.

Someone was pulling at his left arm, the person's grip was strong and firm. He looked up to see the face of his third brother grinning down at him. Azu screamed in anger and frustration. This was a fight he wanted to win, Oge screamed too. Azu's fourth brother was there as well, pulling the other boy away. They had returned with the two boys that went to summon them at the onset of the battle. The boys were separated, the fight ending with no victor, no vanquished, but Azu was now in tears. He was not crying because he was in any form of physical pain, he was crying for the opportunity he had lost and that could never be regained. He was crying for all the pent-up anger that he could not fully expel. He was crying for how promptly his brothers came to separate the fight without knowing why he was even fighting in the first place. He was crying for all the years he had had to silently bear people's mockery on the issue of his parents' failed marriage.

But most importantly, he was crying for another reason no one knew, a reason no one could guess.

Even now.

It was his personal feelings of guilt and inadequacy; guilt because, deep down, he has always felt like one son too many. His mother had had a daughter a year after him but she died immediately at birth. He was the youngest of eight sons and his brothers

always regaled him with tales of how their mother, hoped against hope that he, at least, would have been a girl; how his name, Azurunaku, raised-in-the-midst-of-wealth, came about. Their mother had hoped he would be a girl, to be loved and pampered by her seven older brothers. She had renewed hope after Mama Oge, the akara-seller, was blessed with a male child. They said their mother's favorite sentence all through pregnancy had been 'If God did something good for your neighbor, it meant God was in the neighborhood.' She had assumed that from Mama Oge's house, the angel in charge of sending the desired baby gender would be knocking on her own door, ready with a daughter to gift her. Both she and her children had been utterly disappointed when Azu was born, they said she cried bitterly afterward. Ever since he became old enough to understand the implications of the circumstances that surrounded his birth, he had always felt guilty for being born a boy-child. He, subconsciously, has always felt that somehow, if he had been the girl his mother so dearly coveted, his parents' marriage would have been saved.

And today, when Oge made a mockery of his family's too many sons, Azu's feeling of inadequacy had been stirred. His brothers dragged him home, scolding him for not being man enough and shedding tears during a public fight. They erroneously assumed he was crying because of physical pain. He did not bother to explain his tears to them, they could believe whatever they wanted. He was not about to divulge his deepest shame to them, seeing how they felt about his tears. Today, he would go to bed once again wondering why his parents' marriage had not been saved by a male child.

Tonight, he would go to bed in the room he shared with three of his seven brothers, feeling less than adequate, again, wondering if maybe, like Oge's parents' marriage, his

own parents' marriage could have been saved and salvaged, just probably, if he had been born a girl-child.

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