

By [Lesley Nneka Arimah](#) on February 27, 2015 in [THE BUTTER](#)

Second Chances: A Short Story

12



Like



Tweet



Ignore for a moment that two years out of grad school I'm old enough to buy my own bed and shouldn't ask my father to chip in on a mattress so that he shows up with my mother, who looks like she's stepped out of a photograph, and she tries to charm the salesman, something she was never good at, but it somehow works this time and

he takes off 20 percent. Ignore for a moment that she is wearing an outfit I haven't seen in eighteen years, not since Nigeria, when she was pregnant with my younger sister, not yet showing, and had fallen down the concrete steps to our house, ripping the dress from hem to thigh. Ignore that she flits from bed to bed bouncing on each one like she hasn't sat on a mattress in a while and the salesman follows her around like he'd like to crawl in with her. Ignore all this because my mother has been dead for eight years.

My father avoids the look I give him and I'm glad there are beds around because I stagger into one, unable to stand. When I grab my father's wrist—I cannot at this juncture imagine touching *her*—he twists away from me. I follow him, but he refuses to be cornered, so I walk up to my mother and ask “What the hell are you doing here?”

The salesman looks at me like I kicked her and she looks pained, like I might as well have. But shock leaves very little room for guilt.

“Your daddy and I are buying you a bed, didn’t you say you wanted a bed?”

The gentle chiding is one I’d never thought to hear again and my knees almost buckle but something about the casual way she’s correcting me, like she’s got any right, angers me.

“Why are you here? You’re supposed to be—”

My father interrupts this.

“Do you want the bed or not?”

I’m surrounded and both of them stare at me expectantly. I want to press the issue, but I also really, really need the bed. I nod and the salesman hesitates like he doesn’t want to give the discount if it’s for me, but walks away to ring it up. My mother is digging through her purse and I know it’s not to pay because she never does when my dad is around. But maybe she’s different now. Then she sighs and says “Ike, darling, have you seen my sunglasses?”

The photo my mother has stepped out of is one taken in 1982. She wore a green ankara print caftan belted at the waist and it bellowed becomingly. There is a red patina on the photo that has developed over time. As she stands in the kitchen now, humming as she checks the cupboards, I see that the red tint is still on her, starker against the white of the cabinets than at the store. The edges of her face are soft, as though she’s kept the slight blur of the photo as well. Slung over her shoulder is the tan raffia purse. All that’s missing are the red sunglasses that have always been a part of that picture, tucked into the vee at her neck, awaiting the Enugu sun. My father putters around her and he is greyer, paunchier, slower than he’d been the last time I’d seen them together, but they move the same way, a tender, familiar dance. Every time I take a breath to say something, to crack through the insanity of my mother being here, my father glances at me and his delight shuts me up. When they bend their heads and begin to whisper I slip away from the counter and into my father’s room. I have to find the photo.

It’s missing from the dressing table that, even after all this time, still holds my mother’s jewelry and perfumes, glittering bottles that range from Avon to Armani. The jewelry is just as varied, but most of them are costume, loud, baubly pieces crusted with bling. My mother wore no jewelry in the photo, not even a ring as she and my father weren’t wed at the time, but brave, young lovers with, as my mother used to say, nothing to prove. There are other pictures of her here, one when she was a child, stiff between her parents, long dead. There are pictures of her at my high school graduation, on my dad’s 50th birthday, and my favorite, the one where she’s fluffing my baby sister’s frilly

white pantaloons for the photo and my dad snaps just when Udoma kisses the top of Mom's head. Udoma. I hear the front door open and she calls out in that Lucy-I'm-Home way of hers and I rush to warn her before it's too late.

When Udoma walks in she pauses for a stunned moment and my father holds his arms out like tada! and she does what I should have done when I first saw my mother: she runs up to Mom and holds her so tight about the waist it's a wonder she can breathe and her sobs shake them both.

There's no way I'm going back to my apartment. I call into work and leave a message punctuated by unconvincing coughs. It's my thirteenth strike, but I don't care. Udoma is practically in Mom's lap telling her every stupid thing she's ever wanted to tell her and then some. Like my dad, she has simply accepted my mother's presence like it's nothing. I sit off to the side while the three of them are pressed close. Udoma stops and stares at Mom's face and I wait for her to say something about it, but she just moves to the floor and snuggles her head into Mom's stomach. She was 10 when our mother died and just off the plane from Lagos for summer vacation. She filled Mom in on that trip and then on every trip after that, eight years of miles. My dad occasionally interrupts to update my mother on who was where now and it is the first time he's acknowledged that she's been gone.

"And what about you, nne, what have you been doing?"

They wait to see if I'll play along.

"I've been getting over you. You know, because you're dead."

My mother puts her hand to her chest, where the sunglasses should be, like I cursed, and my father shakes his head.

As the silence grows, I leave.

I was a child prone to hysterics. Every cut was a deep wound that would surely keloid and scar me for life, every playground slight an unforgivable infraction that invited a meltdown. I had also taken to stealing, a habit that saw me disinvited from much of my schoolmates' homes so that I spent most of my free time playing in the salon/furniture shop my mother ran. I often wonder if I turned out the way I did from all those hours of inhaling turpentine and hair spray. When things were slow my mother and her assistant, Obiageli, would curl my hair into elaborate dos. There exists a picture of me grinning as though showing off all my teeth would save the world, hair curled and fanned around my head like gele. Obiageli has persuaded my mother to powder my face and my accompanying tantrum has worn her reluctance. I resemble a Texas debutant turned trophy wife flanked by my exhausted-looking mother because above all

else, I was exhausting. My father was posted in Algiers by the oil company he worked for, so many times, until Udoma, it was just my mother and me. My childhood hysterics eventually congealed into an off-putting self-centeredness that was the topic of my mother's and my last conversation, eight years ago.

After my mother died, I spent a few months in a place where they spooned food and medication into me. My father and I have never spoken of the state he found me in, Alabama, to which I had run away, home to The Ex I'd promised to never see again. Nor have we spoken of the state he found me in, catatonic after a handful of pills, curled in a moon of vomit. But when I came to, I was in a hospital and he was there and I just knew things had to get better. I was 22.

It had taken me a year and a half to get my shit together and then five years to complete a masters in technical communications that should have taken two and I lived at home until a year ago. But after years of feeling like an exposed nerve, I'd finally myelinated. I still had trouble holding a job and worked the parts table at a pipe supply a few days of the week. Sometimes, even those few days would be too much and I'd disappear. Those absences became less frequent as things did indeed get better and I began to be a person again. And now she just shows up, ladeedah ho-hum, like it's not a big fucking deal.

I resume my search for the photograph. I avoid my old room, still the cyclone of a mess I'd left it in. If it's in there, it will never be found. I head to Udoma's. It's neat as a catalogue and I start with the closest chest of drawers. It is as uncluttered as the room, every sock and panty folded into a tidy square. It's easy to see that the picture isn't in here. I reach my hand in and scatter it anyway. I'm moving on to the next drawer when Udoma sighs in the doorway. I ignore her and continue digging through her things. I can feel it coming upon me, the unfurling of myself so all that remains is a raw center. I have to find the picture. I have to.

Udoma stills me with a hand on my shoulder. She hugs me from behind and I am once again taken by her intuition. It had been like that growing up, too, starting after we'd moved to Houston when she was only five and I, seventeen. She'd always been able to sense my mood and what it needed and contort herself to fit that need. Now she whispers:

"Why can't you let me have this? Please let me have this."

But I can't.

"She's supposed to be *dead*." Udoma flinches at the word. "Don't you have questions?"

"I don't care. You shouldn't care either. You were so unhappy when she...left, how can you be upset that she's back?"

I face her. She is dressed in the uniform required of the Christian high school she attends. I've never asked her if she really believes, wary of introducing yet another complication to my story— adding unbeliever! and sinner! to psycho!— but she's always seemed so sure about everything, so accommodating of fate in a way that eludes me. I envy her that surety. I envy her the uncomplicated relationship with our mother, where Mom was just Mom and not yet a woman with whom she disagreed. I retreat to avoid answering and run into my mother in the doorway.

“Have you girls seen my sunglasses?”

My answer to Udoma's question has sucked the moisture from my throat and I move past her unable to speak. Udoma murmurs something and my mother murmurs a reply and they no doubt begin a touching convo I will never be a part of.

Downstairs, my father has fallen asleep on the couch, a glass of wine and his cellphone on the table in front of him. I wonder what my mother said when he poured it as he'd been a teetotaler since before I was born. He looks larger than I've ever seen him as though inflated with glee and he snores loudly, the soundtrack of my youth. I notice it then, a grimy white corner peeking out of his phone case from a slot meant to house credit cards. I lift the case and run to the small guest bathroom, locking myself inside. I grip the white corner and slide it out.

The photo has been folded, then folded again so that it accordions open to reveal a red-tinged couch and the edge of a large speaker that served as an end table. My mother, who should be standing in front of the couch, is missing. In the corner, so small I almost miss it, are the sunglasses she searches for, almost off frame.

A sob gurgles in my throat. I sit to steady myself and my right leg bounces a nervous jig. I remember our last conversation.

I was in the living room, waiting till it was time to pick Udoma up from the airport. She'd spent two summer months with my aunt whom I disliked for her utter disinterest in putting up with my bullshit. It was close to time for me to leave and I just kept flipping through the channels till I fell asleep. I woke to my mother's yells.

“You mean you are still here? I get a call from the airport police because they think your sister is abandoned and you are here? I thought something happened to you!”

Her urgency chased away the grogginess and I was suddenly alert and apologetic. A quick glance showed that I was almost four hours late and panic flowered in my stomach. I knew my mother was beyond common fury because she tossed her Bible on the couch like it was a dime-store novel. She shoved her phone in my face, the one she turns silent every Wednesday night so that

she doesn't get distracted at bible study, and there are almost 30 messages. I have violated her cardinal immigrant rule: live quietly and above the law.

"Every time, Uche, every time I ask you to do a simple thing you cannot do it."

"I'm sorry."

"You're sorry, you're sorry. Always sorry. No—" she cut my response off at the knees. "What you are is disappointing. You are so disappointing. You are disappointing."

And the last time was said not with calcifying anger, but an abrupt sadness that belies the truth of it. That timbre cradled my every fuckup. Every tantrum I'd pulled, every item I'd stolen, every time she must have cringed to introduce me as her girl rested in that tone.

I ran out to the patio and slammed the door so hard it cracked and the sound of splintering glass took the edge off my hurt. My mother started up again, shouting as she grabbed her keys and went to pick up Udoma.

I never told my father this, nor Udoma. Not even the therapist at that place who dug and dug because he knew I kept something from him. The secret of it settled a cloak of guilt on me I will wear for the rest of my life.

Now, when no frantic knocks sound, I begin to feel the sheepishness of a child who has hidden that no one cares to find. I emerge to see my father where I felt him, oblivious to the missing photograph. Someone has put a blanket on him. The clang of kissing pots comes from the kitchen and I know who is there. She glances up at me when I enter, but returns to the task at hand, a bouquet of ingredients to turn into soup.

"Why won't you let yourself enjoy this?" my mother says, and it echoes Udoma's *why won't you let me have this* so closely I suspect a conspiracy. When I say nothing, she turns to me, naked hen in hand, and asks a question whose answer has thorned my side.

"Nne, what do you want from me?"

I want you to boil the chicken with onions and salt. I want you to melt the palm oil on medium heat and sizzle ogbono till it dissolves. I want you to cough when the pepper tickles your throat. I want you to sprinkle in crayfish so tiny, I believed, at age four, they'd been harvested half-formed from their mother's womb. I want you to watch the ogbono thicken the water and add the stockfish and the okra and the spinach and the boiled meat and the salt you never put enough of and call us when it's ready and say grace and be gracious and forgive me.

The answer I give:

The lop-sided shrug I manage when I can't find words.

She turns back to chopping and I leave when the onion gets to her eyes. When I enter my room, I try to conjure happier memories, but all that comes to mind is five minutes ago and the last time we spoke. I crawl into my old bed, still half-covered in items I promised to sort, and hug a skein of yarn to my chest, hoping for the temporary erasure of sleep.

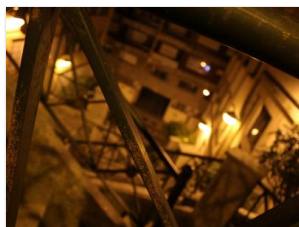
She is gone in the morning. The kitchen holds her remains, a turned over pot drying on the rack and the scent of okra. I find my father on the couch, showered, dressed, and awake. His eyes are red and swollen, but he is smiling. Udoma sleeps on the settee close by. They must have spent the night talking.

My father checks the slot on his phone case and sighs, like he never expected the picture to still be there. The picture. It should be in the pocket I frantically pat then turn inside out. I run to my room and check the bed where I slept, tossing aside wool and books and purses long out of style. When I can't find it, I tear the sheets off, sending everything to the floor. Then I see the photograph, almost unrecognizable for the crumpled state it's in. I try to smooth it out, but it's almost torn in two, her face split open in a paper imitation of the accident's aftermath. I unravel to those many years ago, to Alabama, and only now can I utter the words that have haunted me.

"I'm sorry. I love you. Please forgive me."

Tags: fiction lesley nneka arimah short stories

PREVIOUSLY IN **THE BUTTER**



Run Rabbit Run: A Poem



A Letter to Rora



**This Writer's On Fire:
Kima Jones**

**Liner Notes: Grand
Opening, Grand Closing**

*Lesley Nneka Arimah moved from Nigeria to the US in her early teens and now resides in Minnesota where she spends the winters in hiding. You can find her year-round on **Twitter**.*



Comments (11)

Sort by: [Date](#) [Rating](#) [Last Activity](#)



ramina · 421 weeks ago

+24



Oh my god, wow. This was incredible and chilling and powerful. I loved it.



Honoria_G · 421 weeks ago

+20

This is so good. My heart hurts.



StillT · 421 weeks ago

+22

Wow. This was so powerful, and so beautifully written and full of lovely detail. Thank you for sharing it.



Shevvi · 421 weeks ago

+15

Great read!



Lindsay · 421 weeks ago

+14

Achingly haunting and moving. Thank you for this piece.



logicbutton · 421 weeks ago

+14

Holy crap. This is amazing.



OliviaPJones · 421 weeks ago

+17

I have shivers up and down by body and I think my heart is broken.



prune · 421 weeks ago

+14

Ugh this was so beautiful and heartbreaking. That turn of phrase about a myelinated nerve was so good it hurt. (Also, first time commenting on the toast! I love this enough to delurk!)

[1 reply](#) · active 421 weeks ago



laurenipsum · 421 weeks ago

+6

Agreed, this was all gorgeous but that one really got to me.



saffiedarling · 421 weeks ago

+4

Ouch. Ouch ouch ouch ouch.



thedarknotes · 407 weeks ago

+4

Oh Lawd! This thrilled me to the bones. I should put this up on thedarknotes.com !!

Comments by



Hey Ladies: We Wrote a Book!

Questions I Have Asked During The Only Episode Of *Doctor Who* I Have Ever Seen Until My Friend Said “Okay, Mallory, Why Don’t You Write Your Questions Down And Ask Them All After We’re Done Watching?”

Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market,” As I Understand It

Lord Byron’s “Fare Thee Well,” or “I Just Think It’s Funny How”



Movie Yelling With Nicole and Mallory: *The Hunt for Red October*

Joan Didion and Anna Wintour: Best Friends Forever

Harvard Magazine Personal Advertisements’ Many Synonyms For “Rich” or “Thin”

Go On, Get Out Of Here

A note on The Toast

[ABOUT](#)

[CONTACT](#)

[LEGAL](#)

[DO NOT SELL MY PERSONAL INFORMATION](#)