SHORT STORY

How to Be a Man

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"Echoes of Renewal in Rust" by April Lannigan

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The banner for the Enyimba F.C. vs. Osun United match swayed with the wind as Obiora and Ekene approached the Thomas Balogun Stadium. Young boys sold the blue and yellow jerseys of both teams. Puff-puff, buns and bofrot sellers carried their showcase glass piled high with variations of fried dough. Obiora was distracted by the meat pie and eggroll sellers closely accompanied by those hawking cold drinks. A cold Fanta would do wonders right now. He turned around to call for Ekene, but that boy was staring at a circle formed at a corner of the stadium. Obiora knew Lagos enough to avoid crowds like that, but he approached Ekene to see what the fuss was about.

A colossal man clad in Isiagu, cow tail, and a blue Enyimba jersey raised a war chant turned football cry. Other men joined him, they held each other passionately and swayed in a circle, bellowing chants whilst side-eyeing anyone in an Osun jersey.

Nzogbu, Nzogbu

Enyimba Enyi

Nzogbu, Nzogbu

Enyimba Enyi

The crowd grew as more men joined in the chant. People pressed into each other, especially those waiting in line for tickets. There were bodies everywhere. Obiora tried to move away from the ruckus, but Ekene pressed into it. He looked at everything in awe and tried to take souvenirs to send to his family back home. The boy had no common sense except a knack for trading.

Obiora turned and could no longer find Ekene. The teeming crowd swelled and blocked him. He touched his pocket for his phone and remembered that Ekene did not have a phone. They brought him straight from the village to serve at Oga's car parts business for the next seven years. A sentence Obiora was only months from completing.

Since Obiora was older than Ekene in trade, Oga placed the boy under Obiora's care and sent both to manage his new store. Seven years into his service for Oga, Obiora was finally trusted to handle a store by himself. Obiora relished the feeling of having someone wait on him. It tickled him to see Ekene running around all day telling customers that they had the best car parts in the country. Ekene was so good at o?so? ahi?a?; he sighted customers from *Electronics* in Aisle 1 and convinced them to follow him to *Car Parts* in Aisle 57.

Earlier that morning, Obiora opened his Oga's shop for his fourth day working with Ekene. The boy talked off Obiora's ears about some football match happening later. He babbled nonstop about the Enyimba F.C.

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“Madu sabi play ball!!! That man na beast.” Ekene went on to extol the qualities of the lead striker. Obiora knew little about the current state of the Nigerian Professional Football League.

“Who be Osun Strikers when my man Madu dey field.” Ekene rambled on. “This man go scatter field sote people go comot field with stretcher.”

“Ekene, I get headache. Abeg, close your mouth,” Obiora retorted.

“Oga Obiora!!! Shake body small. Na every time you go sit down dey behave like person wey don tire for life?” Ekene asked.

“See, if you recruit plenty of customers today and we pass target wey Oga set for us, I go carry you go this match,” Obiora replied expecting the threat to buy him some peace, but Ekene jumped up and down in excitement, hugged Obiora and ran out to find more customers.

Obiora had never seen Ekene more motivated. What love for football cannot do eh it does not exist. Ekene kept his manic pace the entire afternoon, and they passed their sales target an hour before closing.

Their first customer was an Instagram baddie the likes of whom should be propped behind a camera and not loitering the market with red pointed heels. Her sponsor was probably a senator eating more than his fair share of the national cake so Obiora had no qualms about exploiting her. They charged her for an old AC compressor, and she bought it without haggling.

“Baby girl! I will sell you the best car parts in this country. Ask those boys. I am Ekene, one of Umuofia. Son of the soil! Imported from the east to meet your car needs.” Ekene wrangled his face towel and smacked his lips at her. The girl swooned under his gaze and paid what they charged. Nobody could call Obiora a bad salesman with Ekene around to do the talking. Obiora closed the shop early to keep his promise and was happy to get away from Market Square for a change. Ekene hopped around like a child who received his first game controller.

Obiora used to watch football every night with his father before he died. The euphoria of being swept up in a match lost its shine after Papa came home drunk every night from the football bar. A good Igbo man is a good salesman. When Obiora was in his teens, Papa owned the biggest electronics complex in Awka, four warehouse stores housed in a massive structure. Several of his apprentice boys, nwa boyi, ran around in circles all day at his father’s command doing o?so? ahi?a? and bringing sales from every corner of the market.

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At the end of his seven-year service tenure, Papa got a huge settlement from his master. He was so good at sales that customers came from Cotonu and Mali to buy from him. His master feared that Papa would poach all the customers he recruited during his service and bankrupt the business. The competition and tension was so stiff that Papa moved away from Idumota and settled east in Awka. He used his settlement money to build the biggest electronics store in the entire city. Papa amassed so much wealth; he became the richest electronics seller in Awka. His shopping complex with four warehouse stores was always packed to the top with every electrical appliance in circulation. On any given day, there was a crowd outside the store shopping and loitering. Papa was unanimously voted the chairman of the Eke Awka Electronics Traders Association for 25 years undefeated.

Obiora's father was away overseeing the transport of a new shipment held up at the police station when NEPA brought light for the fourth time that day creating a sudden surge of electricity from one of the transformers supplying power to the shops. An electric stove plugged into the wall for demonstration burst into flames. Everything in the shop caught fire including the other shops in the complex. Two apprentices and a customer were severely injured. Papa's oldest apprentice passed away at the hospital from severe burns. Everyone blamed it on the jealous colleagues.

Obiora's father lost his mind and everything he owned that day. The remainder of his wealth was spent paying lenders, hospital bills, burial expenses and compensations. His new occupation was drinking himself into a stupor and blacking out in every gutter in Awka. His wife sent a search party every morning to find her husband's body covered in vomit, only for him to repeat the circle the next day instead of going to his shops.

The man smelled like excrement and antiseptic before he died. His bedridden body was identical to his blacked-out state. Both swollen and foul smelling ever in perpetual sleep. His bedpan was changed infrequently. The man refused to let anyone but his wife touch him during the final days of his illness. Hundreds of visitors, suppliers, benefactors, and former customers thronged the house to pay untimely condolences to the man Papa used to be before the shop tragedy. His wife was too busy a host to be an attentive nurse.

Obiora and Ekene locked the shop and reached the bus stop at the top of rush hour. Women hawking water with their infants tied firmly to their backs ran after customers shouting, "Buy Your Pure Water. Cold Pure Water."

Bus conductors called out their destinations with dangerous fervor and alcohol-shot eyes, "Bode Thomas!! Bode Thomas!! 50 Naira Bode Thomas!" Obiora maneuvered the ground like an expert. He instinctively leaned away from the crowd of people thronging towards the buses. He found the furthest and emptiest bus at the park and raced towards it. The crowd

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saw his agenda and pursued him. Obiora pushed away two market women with baskets full of white chickens and secured a seat at the entrance of the bus. He was stuck in a mass of sweaty bodies. The intense heat and smoke from the exhaust pipes choked him and he started coughing. The fumes from the smoking cars were the same ones that consumed Papa's shops. They followed him everywhere. The bus was about to move, and Ekene was still politely letting others through. "My friend! Collect my hand." Obiora stretched his hand and pulled Ekene into the bus. Ekene banged his head on the metal railing of the bus but could not shout when he saw the scowl on Obiora's face.

"You think this is your village where you will be saying please and thank you? You have to shine your eye to survive in this city." Obiora pinched his ear. The bump on Ekene's head swelled. Obiora should have clocked Ekene's stupidity and sent him home immediately. They sat next to the two women holding baskets of feisty, noisy broiler hens. The chickens shoved their butts in Obiora's face, and he swallowed the stench of poop and ass.

They arrived at the stadium drenched in sweat. The area reeked of petrified armpits and alomo bitters. The fans of both teams hugged the ticket lines. There was only one person selling tickets. Obiora tried to move, afraid to be stuck between Osun United fans.

"Omo Igbo! Where you dey go? Abeg sit down for here. Shebi you be Enyimba fan?" They teased. The last thing Obiora wanted was an argument about football so he left and went to the back of the line. The crowd at the back was thicker and Obiora was pressed in on every side. Players in both Enyimba and Osun jerseys placed bets in the corner and argued over the odds of the game.

"Worse worse, na 2-1 they go play," a fan said. The betting agents stood around in their branded T-shirts looking like they had no stakes in the game.

Obiora noticed a numbness tingling over his fingers and prayed they were still attached to his body. People screamed and shouted for the line to move so that they could breathe or get into the stadium. Ekene was still nowhere to be found; the village boy just disappeared. The crowd blocked Obiora's vision, and he began to sway a little to the left and the right. His feet could no longer touch the ground. He hung in the air sandwiched between bodies. He felt his shoes slipping away and his consciousness along with it. His blood oxygen was quickly depleting and he gasped for air. He made poor attempts to breathe through his mouth. Obiora felt his ribcage cave in for what seemed like hours before his feet touched the ground. By the time he successfully entered the stadium, he was faint and could barely stand.

Thomas Balogun Stadium held over 80,000 people at capacity, and yet Obiora could not find a seat. It is a dizzying feeling to be lost in a sea of blue and yellow jerseys. A wave of nausea

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hit him as he climbed the never-ending steps scanning each aisle for an empty seat. His ticket said north wing, and a bald man with a walking stick placed his shoes on the only empty seat Obiora could find in the north wing.

“Hello, sir! Please can I sit here? I am in this section,” Obiora said.

The man looked away holding tightly to the empty seat. Respect for elders made Obiora hold his tongue. The old fool deserved a good tongue whipping. He hoped to find two seats so that he could at least save one for Ekene. Maybe Ekene had already found his seat. Obiora could not remember if he saw the boy get in the ticket line. The crowd of people waiting to get into the stadium was still huge. Ekene might be out there. He steadied his trembling hands as he climbed up the stairs to find room. The only thing Obiora could find was a half-butt space at the top of the stadium left over by someone occupying one and a half seats. Obiora’s seating condition was less than ideal for many reasons especially because his butt would be clamped in between seats for the two-hour match.

He squeezed into the seat and tried to find Ekene’s small frame and mohawk hairstyle. It was a football match with 99% aspirational footballers. They all had small frames and mohawks. The uniformity of their blue and yellow jerseys made them worse than clones. Fans of both teams sat haphazardly across the stadium in small clusters. Ekene could be in any one of them. The boy was a first son, and Obiora could not fathom how he would explain to his Oga that the boy he left in his care got lost at a football game he was not authorized to attend.

“The boy is a man.” Obiora held his temple to stop the dizziness. “He will be fine.”

The players were still lining up thirty minutes after start time. Field hands kept the crowd from mobbing the players, but hooligans came up to the pitch berating field hands and spitting at them to start the match. The way Nigerians love football, somebody will think they created the thing. The crowd expressed ownership of the game, jumping on their seats and creating a mini earthquake that Obiora felt up his spine. He tried to lean on his neighbor for support.

Minutes later, the march had still not started. The crowd outside doubled in size surging towards the stadium barricade threatening to pull it down. Some boys scaled the fence and jumped into the stadium. The fence was having a heart attack, and its vibrations could be felt in the stands.

Thomas Balogun Stadium was built 70 years ago right after the country discovered oil and could invest in elephant projects. Recent economic recession and inept leadership made maintenance of the facilities unsustainable. The stadium had not undergone any major renovations despite the revenue the Football League was generating by capitalizing on state

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rivalry.

Some crude cameraman pointed the hero cam on the chaos behind the barricade. The sea of heads looked indistinguishable and otherworldly on the JumboTron. *Ekene better not be behind that fence.* Obiora convinced himself that the boy was mature enough to handle his own. Security tried to disperse the crowd. The star players were whisked back into the tunnel for safety.

The stadium's metal fence did not fall with a bang. Not in the dramatic way that Jericho's walls came down but in the unassuming way an exhausted hawker collapses from exhaustion in the market. The metal railing bent to the will of hundreds of sweaty bodies pressing into each other to see men throw balls in the air. Blue and yellow jerseys scaled the fence climbing over others lost in the shuffle. Exposed prongs hung innocently from the sides ready to impale any unfortunate person. The new crowd surged into the stadium doubling the numbers, and the substitute players ignored them to run their warm-up laps on the field. This could be their only chance to get playing minutes and land stardom.

Obiora's father would be at this game if he was alive. Nothing gave him more joy than seeing Enyimba's former lead striker, Ezeoji, score a winning goal. One championship march, Enyimba was behind by a goal with five minutes to spare. Ezeoji had the ball in possession and Papa held his breath as Ezeoji expertly maneuvered and dribbled the ball from one end of the pitch into the back of the net. Papa was so overjoyed by the goal he leapt for joy. He forgot the low-hanging fan circling over him and the blades clipped his hair and skin. Papa did not react to his bleeding head but sat down and continued watching the match. Younger Obiora watched football to bond with Papa, but, how can you bond with a man who is bound by things?

"Start the march!! Start the march!! Start the march!!!" Everyone stood to chant. Obiora reluctantly stood up because the men next to him covered his view with their butts. He closed his eyes to steady himself. The crowd got angry and threatened mayhem.

The star players reappeared and everyone cheered. The sounds bounced off the stadium bowl and re-echoed. Obiora tried to sit down. His vision became blurry. He closed his eyes to refocus it. He was so pressed into the neighbor; he inhaled the sweat off his neck. Something pushed him. No, someone pushed him.

The force landed his body on the next row, and he tried to lift himself. An elbow knocked him away afraid he could take their butt space. He rolled over plastic, concrete and bodies. As he stumbled down the stadium chairs, he was pushed further down the row. He could taste blood now dripping from his head. It was harder to pull himself up with each shove.

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The spine was not designed to hit plastic chairs that hold human bodies. A solo shoe without a body, that would be him soon, atop a rubble of concrete and iron rods. The crowd pushed him away and bodysurfed him to the next row. He fell like a pack of cards from the top of the stadium to the foot of the pitch, neck awry and limbs askew. He couldn't die there. His mother would never see his body.

Death has a smell. Seven years ago, when Papa died, his room smelled of ude aki and vapo rub. They covered him in layers and layers of wrappers, but his fever worsened. This rock of a man now shivered like the tail of a gecko. Obiora saw the life force of an entire community, the breadwinner of his family, collapse and decay without fanfare. A lifeless body crumpled beneath the weight of several wrappers and blankets. Papa shivered till the very end.

There were many things Obiora wanted to tell his father as he was pushed from stadium chair to chair fighting for his life. He did not kill Mama with his stubbornness. No woman could claim they had his child. His Oga never caught him stealing. He was mentoring his first apprentice. He saw Enyimba on the field today; Ezeoji was no longer the lead striker. He was a few months from his settlement, and he would open his own shop in Awka like they talked about.

Obiora wanted his father to hold his ear and whisper, *Well done! Well done, my son. You're a man now. You're now a man. Stand. Stand on your own two feet.* Obiora's cheeks kissed the metal concrete of the floor, and the crowd cheered above him as he breathed in darkness.

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