

THE FIRE OF SUCCESS BY IKEMEGWALU
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PROLOGUE

Ihuoma has been married into the family of the Chizue's in the village of Nkwocha. Being the only daughter of her family and late mother, the ceremony was designed at its peak and to wish her well. Nduka her husband then took her to the city with him where he lives. Within the first couple years of their marriage, Ihuoma put to bed a healthy baby girl. They named her Chidalu by tradition and baptized her with Mary as they were Christians.

One day Ihuoma's father went to sleep at night and journeyed to eternity. He was given a befitting burial by his three sons and daughter. As time went on, Mary was enrolled for child education. At such tender age, she was brilliant in character, and showed great academic excellence. But there was a dawning hindrance to her future; Nduka's business was going down very fast. He was been owed money by lots of people, and also his trusted acquaintances made use of his illiteracy in education and vanished with his fortune before he understood what was going on. He didn't find the thieves with his fortune and suing his debtors who were in higher offices and positions to court was a lost course. Also he had no certificate to take up an official job. Sadly, he took his family back to his native town, Nkwocha. In frustration, he married another wife Uzoma, because Ihuoma could neither bear him a son nor a second child.

Life became very miserable for both mother and daughter. Fortunately, Mary has taken the entrance examination into secondary school before coming home and was qualified to register into one of the good schools in town. But this did not go down well with her paternal relatives who preferred she should stay at home and get a husband who would lend a hand to the family situation. Ihuoma knew she had to fight tooth and

nail all by herself if her daughter should go to school, and it was a sacrifice she was willing to make, she who knew the values of education and what it had done to her husband and her family was fearlessly ready with a gentle ardor to lit a bright light through her daughter into the family.

CHAPTER ONE

Mary was registered into Notre Dame College. Her first day in school was not exciting as she imagined. There were students everywhere but no one she could talk or relate to. She felt so lonely and missed her dear mother. As she was taking a walk through the school, she spotted a fruit tree, and went to seek shelter under it. There she was for quite not long, a girl of about her age and physique came and gently sat beside her.

“Why do you look so sad?” she asked Mary.

Mary was silent, she didn't know who the girl was, and was in a loss for words.

“It's alright, I felt the same way on my first day, but you will soon get used to the school, the feeling is only but a while” she said.

Still Mary was quite.

“My name is Flora” she said cheerfully.

Finally something Mary can reply to, she thought to herself.

“I am Mary Chizue” she said with a smile.

“What house are you in?” Flora asked.

“Pink house”

“Oh, we are in the same dormitory” Flora said with excitement.

They spent some time together under the tree, then came the sound of the bell and they went their separate classes. After lesson, Flora showed Mary the school refectory and advised her never to be late for a meal, the chapel and also the library. From that day onwards, Mary

and Flora were like sisters. After they had supper, Flora told Mary that they were going for a general call in the school hall. The Rev Mother was there to give them a short orientation on the ground norms of the school and how to observe them. While this was going on, some of the Rev Sisters went round the dormitories to ensure that everyone was present at the gathering. On their way back, they heard some light footsteps by the yellow house dorm, instantly they made haste towards yellow house to discover two girls breaking into a fellow student's cupboard. The sisters caught them red handed and took them to the school Mother as the principal was not around at the time of the incident. She had their names taken down and sent to her office. Then without much ado, she dismissed the students back to their dorms and bunks. On their way back, the students talked about the incident. Mary was bewildered, she had never heard of a girl stealing. She asked Flora why they tried to steal. Flora told her either they want to punish whoever they were stealing from or were not satisfied with what they had. Mary was alarmed "But why punish a fellow student in that way?" Mary asked. Flora told her to forget about that, that as for the girls their punishment would be due by the morning, their cup was just a tip full that night.

"And that would be just one in many things you would be seeing around here".

Their bunks were next to each others, so they both went to bed at the lights out. The house captains and mistresses went round to make sure that every student was on her bed and asleep. Mary never forgot to pray morning and night, so she thanked God and was fast asleep.

In the early morning around 4:30am, the school bell rang, signifying everyone to get out of bed. Mary woke up and prayed. The captains, as usual, went round to make sure nobody is missing or still asleep. Some overslept and had to be woken up by a slap tap from the captain or the mighty cane of the mistress. Once awake, you go about

your assigned morning duties, then rush up to brush and teeth, take your bathe and freshen up for school. By 6:00am they went for prayers, after which they have their breakfast by 6:30am. From there to the school assembly ground and off to classes. The first lesson they had was English, which was Mary's favorite subject. She was active during the lesson and answered many questions. The teacher was taken to her intelligence. She was appointed the class prefect. Some of her classmates were not happy with the excellence of her character and her appointment, and tried to rebuke her and Flora at every little chance. They tried to know what they were doing and saying in order to report if any mischief was noticed. But Mary and Flora knew what they were up to and kept themselves away from any anti-behavior. One day Mary told her classmate Nneka who it was her turn to tidy the chalkboard for an upcoming art class, but she refused abruptly. So Mary had to report her. Their form mistress, questioned Nneka on why she disobeyed the class order, Nneka could not explain herself, and was reprimanded to clean the chalk board till the coming week. For that Nneka disliked Mary, but Mary didn't mind and loved them all anyway. The assignments and class works were coming at an increasing rate from all the subjects; there wasn't much time for games.

CHAPTER TWO

The exams were fast approaching, and while the students are busy trying to leave no stone unturned, some are busy trying to leave no chat on ground. This peer group includes a girl named Lizzy. Her parents were rich, and gave her everything she wanted as an only child. She and her group were very popular in school as the haughty girls. No teacher dares to touch or flog her because of her father's first exhibition of power in the school. Once a teacher had slapped her, for jumping into the class through the window. Her father landed in school the following day and took the teacher to the police station. It was the pleading of the principal that lead to her release. She is well known for sneaking out at night and attending parties with her friends. She was always less concerned in her academic matters. And whether she took the exams or not, she was going to the next class anyway.

After the exams, the principal of the school assembled the students together. She waited for them to maintain absolute serenity, before she began to speak;

“I want to inform you girls that starting from the coming term there will no longer be any outing days in the school, because some of you take it as an advantage to go about irrelevant matters and sorts instead of going home to your parents and guardians”

E-e-e-e-ee-e-ehhh!! The students exclaimed.

“Oh yes” continued the principal. “And you can scream from now till tomorrow and it still won't change a thing. You are to be better and not worse. As for your exams, today is the judgment day, heaven or hell, pass or fail. The names of the best performers will be called out, if you don't hear yours, work harder next term. From the JSS 1. The best performer so far is Chizue Mary Chidalu”

“E-e-e-e-eh!!!” shouted the students mostly with joy.

“She should come up her and collect her prize” said the principal.

“Thank you Ma” Mary said.

“You are most welcome” she replied. And then turned to the students as Mary walked down, “She did it with 98% average. The next is Obika Flora”

As she calls their names, the other students clapped their hands for the victor.

“So that’s the end of it. If you want to be celebrated in this way, then try and work hard next term. Remember to help your parents at home, be obedient and cheerful. Goodbye and happy holidays. Close and lock every hostel. Take all take aways to your homes, then leave the others in a closed cupboard. See you girls next term in good health” she concluded.

As soon as the assembly was rounded up, the students vamoosed in many directions. Flora’s parents came to pick her up. She introduced Mary to them. Her parents liked Mary and gave her some money for her transport fare, which she refused at first, but the look on Flora’s face nudged her to it. She thanked them for being so kind and left for her hometown. Mary found a bus going to Nkwocha. As they left the park, thoughts about home flashed through her mind. He mother, step-mother, father step brothers and sisters. They would be so big now, she thought. She tried to imagine what it would be like to see them all again, after been gone for so long.

CHAPTER THREE

Immediately the white bus arrived at Nkwocha, it pulled down the hill slowly and stopped. Mary jumped out and walked down to the village, everything seemed changed; development was coming to their town. The market place was filled with buyers and sellers. She greeted those whom she recognized. On getting closer to the house, she sighted the little kids playing, and as she moved closer, they all ran to her hugging her legs and tugging at her hands. Once inside the compound she noticed her step-mother by her doorpost and went over to greet her.

“Good afternoon Ma” she said to her.

“Afternoon, how are you?”

“I am fine Ma. I hope you’ve been well?”

“Yes, I was just thinking who the children ran to meet. Didn’t know it was you”

Mary smiled.

“Welcome” Uzoma said finally.

At that point Mary turned and went over to her mother’s hut, but she wasn’t there. As she came outside to ask about her, there she was coming back from the market with a load on her head. She shouted with joy as she saw her daughter. They hugged each other. Meanwhile, the other wife was there looking at them. She wasn’t happy Chidalu was going to school, and though she has confronted their husband over the issue, he reprimanded her with caution, since he played no part in sending Mary to school. Then came the neighbors to meet her and ask about school and the city. Excited children jumped up and down.

Since her father was not home when she came back, she didn’t get to see him until after super. She went over to main hut, and there he was with his pipe and bottle of schnapps beside him.

“I see your feeling better than all and doing most than none” was her opening gambit.

Nduka was delighted to see his daughter. She always had a way of poking fun at him, and always the one to put a smile on his face in his lowest.

“If you’re going to be rude with your grammar this night, please stay at that end of the hut” he replied with a smirk on his face.

She came close regardless and gave her daddy a big hug. They had chit chats about life and school. When it was time for Mary to leave, she thought it better to remind her father about her fees in his jolly mood. He was battled and asked her;

“Did I send you to school?”

“No father, but you have to...”

She barely finished when her father said he no money, and had his second wife and children to carter for. Though Nduka never meant to hurt Ihuoma and his daughter, but he had taken two wives and didn’t know how to please both. The first one gave him a home, peace of mind and one child, the second brought boys and girls and trouble with her. He wanted a son, but sometimes when he looked at Mary, she was worth ten sons, and he won’t see the need of the growing rabble in his household. He placed his pipe hanging loosely in his mouth, Mary knew the talk was over; she gently rose and returned to her mother’s abode.

Due to Uzoma’s belligerent nature, with her eight army of boys and girls, she ran the Chizue household like it was a coup. She didn’t like the fact that Ihuoma and Mary were doing well on their own. What annoys her the most, is their total ignorance of her attitude. At times it seems she didn’t exist in Ihuoma’s eyes. She took the title of oriaku usually meant for the first wives, claiming their husband’s favorite. She depended on Nduka for everything, and when there’s no money, she curses him out, until he goes borrowing. And when Ihuoma tries to lend a hand or feed her children, Uzoma would scream and tell anyone who cares to listen how Ihuoma wants to wipe all her kids because she (Ihuoma) had only one child.

While at home, Mary tried as much as she could to support her mother. She went out to the shop, ran errands and taught her younger siblings,

when Uzoma's head was not seeking who wanted it dead. Her mother is a kind woman and lends a hand to others even in her lowest. She wanted Mary to be educated and told her that she is her only hope and future. She tells her to be kind and to avoid bad company at school. Mary told her stories of some characters which of the students display at school, and her mother became deeply concerned about her daughter. Mary seeing the effect of those stories, slowed down on how much she told her mother so as not to cause her any worries.

On one eventful night, Uzoma went into their husband's hut to request some money from him. and when Nduka said he had none at the time being, she rose and ruined abuses on him at the top of her voice. The neighbors reached out to calm her down but she was blunt and told them that Nduka was fond of giving Ihuoma money without her acknowledgement, and that is why Ihuoma never seemed to lack and had the capacity of sending her daughter to school. But she Uzoma that gave him male and female children eight in number and all to his name, he would leave half past dead with hunger. As she kept talking, Nduka came out of his hut burning with rage to defend his own self, he told the neighbors that Uzoma is a callous woman with a sharp tongue. When he had money and gave her, she would sing his praises in front of him, but when he goes broke as tonight, what they see is what he gets. Some of the neighbors gathered was not really because they cared; they were merely there to watch a good family drama and to have a talk about it later.

Meanwhile, Mary was already preparing to be back at school. Her mother once more advised her to avoid bad company and bad behavior. Mary felt so sad for her mother and wished she could stay with her all through, but she had to go to school. She said goodbye to her father who gave her nothing, her step mother who was glad it was only her against Ihuoma again, her step siblings were not so glad to see her leave, as they all waved goodbye to her as she left the compound.

CHAPTER FOUR

When Mary got back to school, the whole place was still dry, only a few students was seen here and there. She went to her dormitory, unpacked and cleared her cupboard, her bed and everything else. She lay down on her bed and try to keep herself busy with her book.

Later on, she got too distracted by an ongoing conversation of some student's closely.

"You know what, I told my aunt needed some money for my textbooks, she promptly gave them to me, which I gave to my boyfriend" said NJ(Nneji).

"What!" exclaimed Maureen, "I cannot do that one o! if you do that, then what is he doing at all?"

"You guys forget am older than he is" Nneji replied.

"owwwwkay, we forgot you are a sugar mama"

They said in between laughs.

"Anyway" continued Maureen, "I went over to my uncle's place in Lagos, he's hardly at home, and the boys around the hood all thought I was pretty, if you know what I mean" she said in a knowing manner.

"eeeeeeeeeh, bad girl, wetin come happen na" the others nudged her to go on.

"Well I liked one, who like good tidings and had enough cash, took me to all sorts of places, and bought me things I never thought I could have, clothes, shoes, bracelets, infact name them, and"

"Mau de mau", the others hailed her to a stop, most times she spoke without a break for another, and they knew when they have heard the main gist and the miscellaneous, which she was going into. Lizzy spoke next:

"For me, you all know I don't need a lie to go where I want to. I visit my sugar pops and boyfriends when I want to. Hit it big the last time, I got

to visit this one man in Calabar, from there we went to Dubai, spent a week there and came back with a stash of money”.

“So where’s it?” Rose asked.

“Where’s what?”

“The money nau?”

“Sorry, I don’t share”

“Stingy gal”

“Anyway, I spent it all on clothes and shoes”

“But your father is rich and provides enough of those for you”

“A girl can never have enough clothes” Lizzy replied.

“But...” Rose tried to speak again but Lizzy interrupted her.

“Mind your own business, Rose” Lizzy said getting upset, “kettle calling pot black”.

At that point they heard some footsteps coming towards their dormitory.

“It’s the mistress” said Maureen.

They all dispersed to their bunks, and pretended to be either reading or sleeping. The mistress entered and went round to ensure everything was in order, she asked if they needed anything or complaints of any kind, to which they replied no, after that she left. The naughty students burst out laughing.

“Ye ye woman” said Lizzy.

“Why can’t these old ones let us be?” Abigail asked rhetorically.

“Her retirements never reach?” said Rose who pretended to be sleeping.

They all laughed and went outside to continue their discussion.

Mary was dumbfounded. She did nothing else during the holidays but helping her family in ways she could, and was occupied with her Church obligations. She thought what a fun life it is but empty without family and a future, too bad she thought. While she was in her thoughts, someone covered her eyes with the palm from behind; she took her time for a little while, and knew it was none other than Flora with the tiny fingers. They both hugged excitedly, and Flora asked her;

“How did you know it was me?”

“You have the tinniest fingers I know” she teased her.

Flora laughed and said, “It’s good to see you, my friend”

“You too, how was home?”

“Trouble like always, yours?”

“I can’t call it paradise either, but that’s the idea of family”

They both laughed.

“You looked lost when I saw you” Flora said.

“My dear, those girls blew my mind with their holiday escapades.

In fact I was lost in their midst”

“You mean Lizzy and friends?”

“Yes, how did you know?”

“Saw them on my way in, do help me and unpack”

“Of course”

Classes began in earnest the next day. But Mary was restless during classes and couldn’t sleep at night. So, one day while she was in class, she saw a familiar face walk in, and called the teacher aside. After a brief talk, the teacher told Mary to follow the man with the gloomy face. She went with him to the principal’s office where she was told that her father has kicked the bucket. Mary wept on hearing the news. When she was fit enough the principal gave her the permission to go back to the village with the elder.

It was a big loss to the Chizue’s in Nkwocha. Nduka died of food poisoning. Uzoma his second wife had a big quarrel with Ihuoma and was more furious when Nduka tried to intervene, which seemed to her that he took Ihuoma’s side. After that, in anger she went to a native doctor to ask him what to do for their husband to love her more than the other wife. He gave her a concoction and told her to add a little of it to her husband’s food. She went home happily.

That day it was Ihuoma’s turn to cook for Nduka, and knowing that he preferred her food more, Uzoma thought it wise to use Ihuoma’s food as a medium. Once Ihuoma had served their husband’s meal in his hut and went to take her bathe, Uzoma sneaked into his hut, opened the plate of soup and poured the whole substance in,

instead of a little as the man told her. She thought if a little of it could make him love her, than the whole of it, would be marvelous, but how wrong she was. She stirred the soup with a finger and cleaned it against her wrapper, but as she tried to close the lid, it fell from her hands to the floor. Ihuoma shouted asking who it was. Uzoma picked it up instantly and as she dashed out of the hut, Ihuoma came out of the bathroom. She(Uzoma) pretended and said she heard a noise from the kitchen and ran to check only to find out it was a cock. When Ihuoma asked where the cock was, she replied that she had chased it out. Ihuoma went inside her hut and closed the door. Uzoma smiled within herself, gave a slight hiss and then left. Not knowing Ihuoma was watching behind her curtain. So when Nduka was back, Ihuoma served him the meal, not knowing the contents as it was.

During the night, Nduka coughed up blood, when he knew he won't last long, he called Ihuoma and asked her for forgiveness, blessed her and Mary and gave up the ghost. When she realized what she had done, Uzoma wept and wept, she blamed the native man as she wailed and confessed, but then the deed was already done.

Mary cried all day, she couldn't do or eat anything. She had to wait until the funeral was over before going back to school.

Meanwhile, Uzoma was asked to return to her father's house with all her kids, as Nduka's kinsmen told her that there would be no need to raise murderous breeds in their lineage.

CHAPTER FIVE

Mary went back to school only to notice that the students were far ahead of her. So she buckled up in order to meet up. Flora was always there to help her out. Some of the students and teachers came to console her, her strength was renewed and she was grateful to them. Mary knew she had to let go of what had happened and look forward to the future and also her promotion exam was coming up, there was no time for self pity.

One day, one it was time for the students to go eat at the refectory, Mary got there, only to discover that someone had taken her food and left the plate for her. Mary was sad, but Flora comforted her and gave her some tea from her provisions. Because the act was becoming a prevalent one in the school, the event was reported to the school mistress who knew Mary as a good student. During their prep time at night, the principal paid them an unusual visit in the school hall and addressed them thus;

‘Why are you some of you extremely cold blooded?’ she questioned without expecting any reply.

‘Some of you decided not just to be a bully, but starve your fellow students at the same time. Now if you’re among such a group, I would like to let you know that your cups are filled. An investigation has been carried out before now, so if you know you took part in the lunch mischief step forward’.

Everywhere was quite as a graveyard. No one moved.

‘You girls do not want to move with my second motive right now’ the principal warned.

Still everywhere was motionless.

‘Okay then, bring up Miss Nkiru’

Two of the Rev Sisters escorted a young girl to the platform.

The principal continued

‘Some of you may or may not know, but Miss Nkiru is a staff here who works at the school refectory. It’s her job to ensure that every plate is full before the bell goes. Now you all know what that means’.

Turning to Miss Nkiru she said;

‘Tap every single face you saw emptying more than one plate at the ref today’.

The students were seized with consternation, as each one breathes a sigh of relief when Nkiru walks pass them while looking at their faces. And then she stopped, and tapped someone, they students went murmuring. ‘It’s not me’ the girl said moving reluctantly.

“Quiet!” said the principal. ‘and sep forward before I use some drastic measures to bring you out’. She stepped out moving with a stubborn reluctance. At that point Miss Nkiru touched another, who stepped in front with a stubborn boldness. ‘Is that all of them?’ the principal asked her.

‘I am sure of this ones’ she replied.

‘Thank you’ said the principal to Miss Nkiru as she returned to her chambers. And then to all the students she said;

‘This will serve as a warning to all of you up to one misbehavior or the other, soon you will be no different from these two, who would serve as an example to all of you’

Then to the two girls, she said;

‘You both look like hardened criminals with no sign of remorse for what you have done, wait till am done with you, all the evil spirits in you shall flee’

Nneka Mary’s classmate was one of the girls in question; she was asked to name the other ones, at first she was reluctant, but when the mighty cane of the mistress rained down on her, she was quick to mention her accomplice. All three of them were sent on indefinite suspension, with a fine to pay the school for the extra meal they ate and with a letter of apology read aloud to the entire school in the presence of their own parents and the parents of the victims.

When they came back with due pleadings from their parents, the exams were almost at hand, and just in a week to go. And with the exposure of their attitudes and punishment given to them, the girls were humbled to the ground. They knew they needed help, and sort no other than Mary and Flora who were more willing to help them out.

During the literature in English exam, a girl shouted with cry; when the supervisor went over to know what happened only to discover that the girl could no longer spell 'is'. The teacher encouraged her to calm down knowingly that the girl might be nervous which happens to some students during exam. Apart from that, the exam went on peacefully. Some girls who tried exam malpractice were very unlucky. Not only were they caught but did not take the rest of the exam. Mary was sorry for them especially her classmate Ifeoma Uno. Who went in with a textbook.

After it was all over, every student was expected to pack everything home, or locked up in a cupboard. On the last day of the term, the principal called the students together as usual, she addressed them thus;

'As you know' she began, 'this is the last day of the term and also the last session of the academic year, for those who have made it through. You have to be careful not to end up like these chaffs am about to mention now. You remember your friends Lizzy, Maurice, Rose, Abigail and the rest of their gang.

'Yes ma' the students replied with much interest.

'Now I am going to tell you how they ended up. You know none of them took the examination. Lizzy upon all her father's wealth, went on to become the fourth wife of a business tycoon. Her first year was good enough but after sometime her husband left her like the others he's had and married a fifth wife. She's been made to return home to her parents with her kid. Maurice had an accident after attending a night party with her boyfriend who was driving the car dead drunk. Now both of her legs have been cut off, her facial skin had to be stitched up. The boy knowing the severity of what he's done and what awaited him,

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