

A close-up, high-angle portrait of a soldier's face, looking slightly to the right. The soldier is wearing a green and brown camouflage helmet. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the texture of the skin and the details of the helmet. The overall mood is serious and focused.

CHIAMAKA OJI

THE MARCH

THE BEST OF THE
RACONTEURS COLLECTION
AWARD WINNER 2019

THE MARCH

CHIAMAKA OJI

PRESSED

THIS WORK BEING A PROJECT SUBMITTED BY CHIAMAKA OJI IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF A DIPLOMA AWARD IN CHRISTIAN CREATIVE WRITING TO THE DE-RACONTEUR WRITER'S COLLEGE HAS WON AN AWARD:

THE BEST OF THE RACONTEURS' COLLECTIONS AWARD, 2019.

ENJOY THIS BEAUTIFUL WORK AND MESSAGE

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CHAPTER ONE

“I don’t need a man in my life. I want my life to be run by me, not by a man...” I blurted out. I could see love and ache, lined in his charming eyes as he wondered what was really wrong with me- why I kept pushing him away, turning his marriage proposal down - after everything.

My heart skipped a beat as our eyes met. I really loved the young man, and his love for me was gradually weakening my resolve – the strong walls I had built around my heart. He was everything I wanted in a husband. He inspired and encouraged me to achieve my dreams; a true friend indeed.

But, my past stood naked before my eyes, clouding my mind. I was scared of giving my heart and love away because right from childhood, I had started tasting the sour soup.

"Is that really how a woman's life should be? Her heart shredded in the arms of what she calls love... and womanhood?" I lay in my little bed, my mind trying to analyze the ongoing scene.

I could hear my dad's strong voice,

“I said you should stop that your business, sit here and take care of this house like a woman. That is your only job. When women go out there making plenty money, it gets into their head, and they forget to submit to their husbands.”

“How can you say that?” My mum said, her voice immersed in several emotions. “Other women are out there making cool money and living large, and you want to mold me into a miserable statue in this house? You asked me to resign from my job that I love, and I did. Why do you want to do this to me again? Why do you want me to stop my business now that you see it shining? How can you be so inconsiderate and selfish...” She burst into tears.

“How dare you question my authority? You see what I'm talking about. In fact, I don't want you to leave this house without me, or my permission. And no more word from you again. This matter is closed. Didn't you even hear what was preached in the church yesterday? Wives submit to your own husbands... and yes husbands, love your wife. I am showing you love by allowing you stay back at home so that you won't stress yourself, or fall into temptation with other men. So you must submit to me as well.”

My dad sternly dished out the words, and angrily walked into their bedroom, slamming the door and leaving mum alone in the sitting room bitterly crying. My heart fell, and my throat tightened as I fought back the hot tears that gathered in my eyes. My parents were at it again.

I couldn't bear hearing my mum sob so I quickly ran to the sitting room and threw my arms around her neck.

“Oh mum, please stop crying.”

“Thank you dear, there's nothing else I can do.”

“But why is dad doing this to you? Why?” I asked, as tears rolled down our faces in unison.

“I don't know dear. But well, it appears that's how it should be. I am a woman, so I just have to learn to keep quiet and do what he says. And I love my husband, and love to keep my marriage. So let it be... let it be... Let me just carry my cross.” Her voice broke as she let the words out.

“I don't get it mum. You can't say or do what you love, not that it's anything evil, or it keeps you away from taking care of the home, of course you are trying. Why is he stifling you and strangling life out of you?” “Why will he be suspecting, scrutinizing and subjecting you? Daddy doesn't seem to love you, mum.”

“Adaobi dear, don't say that. He does. I am a woman and he is a man. A woman should do whatever the man says. I was wrong by even questioning him. You know we are Christians...” She was saying but I wouldn't allow her land before I cut in, stamping my feet on the ground.

“Mum! Does this have anything to do with being a Christian? Did God say women shouldn't do nothing but obey and allow themselves to be oppressed?”

“Oh sweet child, come here. You're still a teenager. You won't understand everything now. But I just want you to learn from me. I want you to be a good woman and wife to your husband. Learn to submit to the men...”

“And does that imply being silent and silenced” I asked.

“Yes...” She stuttered, rubbing her temple. “Oh, I don't really understand why my dear. In fact, let's just end this here. We'll talk about it later, okay? It's time to go to bed. Wipe your tears sweetheart. We'll be fine”.

“It is well mum! I love you.”

“I love you too baby. Good night.”

“Good night mum.”

As I lay on my bed that night, I couldn't stop thinking.

“God, this can't be all you've planned for women- to be nothing but a footman and crying doll? I don't want to live this kind of life I watch my mum, and some other women live. I want more to life. Yes I love motherhood - to be

married, have children and take good care of them, just like my sweet mum. Yes, I want to be really loved and to be in love - I feel that in my system Lord.”

“But not the type of love some of these men talk about when they look at me. I know they just want my body, because I am beautiful. I want a man who doesn't just want my body, who wants me to be a part of his life not just his bed.”

“But I also really love to be a doctor. I want to help women birth their children, to teach them how to nurture those babies well. I'm not still happy over the death of my baby brother, Chibuike. Lord, I would have had a younger brother now but they couldn't save him! Those medical personnel couldn't save him. I want to be a doctor. I want to be a strong woman” I lamented, wiping the tears off my face.

I lamented continuously for a while, thinking, sighing and crying till sleep wrapped it's hands around me and took me home!

CHAPTER 2

“Mummy, mummy, mummy...” I screamed excitedly as I entered into our compound through the gate.

“Adaobi, I'm here ooo”

My legs struggled between dancing, kneeling and raising my hands to heaven, and running to where my mum was to break the news to her.

It was like a dream- or rather, a beautiful movie playing out in reality!

What people paid huge money, and sought important dignitaries to get, the Lord got me so easily and excellently! I didn't pay a dime! I didn't consult any man!

“Adaobi, what is the matter?” My mum who was already walking towards me asked.

“Mum, I made it! God did it! My name is on the admission list! Mummy, medicine and surgery! Mum, God has done it. Your Adaobi is going to be a doctor. I told you I will make you proud, that I'll be a great woman. You can perceive it already, right...?” The words kept flowing from my lips as my mum hugged me again and again, pecking my oval face over and over again.

After recovering a while from the celebration, I downed a cup of cold water and my eyes met my mum's smiling face. I smiled too.

“Dad will be so happy. I can't wait to tell him.”

“He'll soon be back my dear.” Mum said and almost immediately, the door opened and dad entered.

“Daddy... welcome sir. Good evening sir.” I said, like a rap song.

“Good evening Ada, how are you doing? This one you and your mum are smiling like people that just won a visa lottery, what is cooking? Are we traveling to Canada?”

“Very soon dad... I have special news for you.” I said hurriedly like there was hot yam in my mouth. “I have been given an admission to study Medicine and surgery in University of Nigeria, Nsukka.”

“Really!” His eyes widened, and then his face straightened all of a sudden.

My mum and I quickly turned and cast glances at each other. I guess the same thought hugged our bewildered heart – There was no congratulations, no excitement. Nothing!

As if he was suddenly pinched back to reality, he looked up at me and muttered a dry “Congratulations”, plastering a weak smile on his face. My heart dropped and heat welled up my face.

“Dad, you don't seem to be happy with the news.”

“Not really, Ada” My dad said quietly. He was fond of calling me ‘Ada’.

I knew my dad loved his family, but his expression of love was something that beat my imagination every time! He would always say that that was the way he was brought up, and that is how it should be.

“We'll discuss about it latter, okay?” He said. I nodded like a child who was flogged and threatened not to cry.

He walked to our little dinning room, slumped heavily into the chair and pounced on his food.

We stood like dumbfounded creatures, watching my dad closely, unable to discern what he had in mind. I quietly took my bucket and dragged my legs to the nearby tap. On getting to the tap, I sat on a nearby stone, and supported my heavy head with my hands, and my aching heart with prayers.

“Oh God, please save me from my dad and help me get to school” was all I could mutter as unplanned tears flowed down my face and seized my voice. Thank God no one came to the tap at that moment. After what seemed like ages, I fetched my water and walked back home.

My ears suddenly rose like antennas. I could hear my parents talking loudly but my mum was screaming at the top of her voice. I sensed twinge in that voice and knew fire was burning. Lifting my bucket off my head with my hands and heart trembling, I dropped it on the floor carefully, and hurried into the house.

“Ada... Adaobi...” My dad called.

“Sir” I ran into the sitting room, and he beckoned me to sit beside him.

I did that without thinking, my heart running wild with anxiety. My mum's head was supported by her hands and I could notice her shoulders rise and fall.

My dad's deep voice cleared the silence. “Ada, I have a good and interesting news for you.” I couldn't immediately get my voice back from the land of anxiety, so I just nodded.

“You know Mr Okafor, right?”

“Of course I do. What about Mr. Okafor, sir?”

“Mr Okafor’s son, Chinedu, who has been in Italy for about twenty five years just returned. He travelled out immediately after secondary school, about your age at the time. He has made so much money and is even now a citizen of Italy.”

“Okay?” I replied anxiously.

He paused and took a deep breath. “Chinedu wants to marry you. That is what I have been talking to your mum about. You are a woman, and there’s no need to go and spend years studying medicine, especially now that you have an enviable suitor around. The certificate will be dumped, as you will end up in a man’s house, unless you don’t want to get married. Men don’t like ambitious, career women... They don’t make good wives.”

“But when you get to your husband’s house, you can then go to school. I even told Mr Okafor and Chinedu about your desire to go to higher institution, and they promised to train you when you people get to Italy”.

The words hit me one after the other like automated bombs, jerking every part of my being. My dreams, my world- they were crumbling before my eyes and my dad, my own dad was the bulldozer! Tears, pain, anger and disappointment gripped my heart, and then crowded my eyes.

I looked at my mum’s direction. Her face was tilted up and I could see the tears in her eyes.

“Mum, are you quiet? Say something. Talk to your husband...” My heart screamed. But my mum just sat, staring at me. I understood it.

“I have been talking and shouting, but he’s not budging. We are women, and he’s a man. We just have to bend. That is how it should be...” I could read those words in her eyes.

I knew I had to speak for myself.

“Dad please... I don't want to get married now. I want to go to school.”

“I just told you what is best for you my dear daughter” he retorted.

“But I don't like the idea, dad.”

“You don't have to like it now. You'll love and understand it later. By the time you start floating in wealth, you'll even forget about going to school” He said, rose up and walked to his room.

My mum came and drew me close to her chest, and we held on to each other and wept. She cupped my face with her loving hands.

“Adaobi, my daughter, all will be well, okay? Let's be strong, it will all work out for good.” After weeping for a while and we had no strength to talk, we simply retired to our different rooms. All through the night, I wept and prayed, asking God why, telling Him to make a way of escape for me.

CHAPTER THREE

I had just finished my house chores when I heard a knock on our door. I opened, and right there stood Mr. Okafor, and a younger man whose face seemed like his copy.

Oh! That should be his son Chinedu.

“Good morning sirs” I said dryly.

“Good morning, Adaobi” They replied in unison, smiling. My heart leaped and I bowed my head. I felt irritated almost immediately when I saw Chinedu devouring my body with his eyes. He was a tall, handsome, heavily-built man. I ushered them into the sitting room.

“Ada, how are you doing” Chinedu asked.

Oh my! See accent!

I felt flutters in my stomach. “I’m doing fine” I replied, hoping my voice didn’t betray my resolve. My dad walked in on hearing their voices.

“Good morning sir” They greeted, rising up to shake hands with him. My mum walked in as well, greeting them.

“This is my dear wife Uchechi, and my daughter Adaobi” My dad said. They smiled at us and thanked him. My mum and I walked away, and left the men to discuss.

After a while, I was called and introduced formally to “my in-laws”. Chinedu and I were excused to familiarize at the balcony of our house. We didn’t discuss- he just talked and talked and I nodded and nodded. He was much older than me; I was 18, he was 43. He seemed to be enamored by my beauty as he grinned from ear to ear. His dad came out after a while, and they went home.

I felt elated by the attention and love he expressed over time.

“I think I should just marry him and forget about schooling” I thought, resigning to fate. Weeks rolled on, and preparations for our marriage started. My visa was being processed as well.

One evening, I sat at our balcony lost in thoughts and didn’t even notice when someone walked close and from behind, covered my eyes with her hands.

Who else could be that mischievous if not my bosom friend, Oluchi. She withdrew her hands and we hugged tightly amidst light screams and broad smiles.

“Where have you been, Ada? I’ve been expecting to see you at UNN for the registration, and it will be ending tomorrow. That’s the reason I travelled down to see you to find out what is happening” Oluchi my friend had also gained admission to study Pharmacy.

“I won’t be coming to UNN, I’m getting married”. I spew out the heavy words.

“You what?” She asked, really shocked.

“Why will you agree with that?” She asked after listening to my explanation.

“We are left without options here. My dad decides what happens.”

“But Ada, I’ve told you to learn to speak up firmly and even fiercely. Borrow some feminist voice from me. That is the way we women will march out of such oppression ooo. Playing feminine meekness will take you nowhere. I speak my mind without thinking or mincing words. Ada dear, please learn” My friend calls herself a “feminist” – she’s brazen and domineering – to men actually. But she’s a sweet soul.

“I don’t know how to do it dear” I replied her. Her eyes bore into mine as if she could transfer her spirit into mine. Knowing she could do nothing, she hugged me and encouraged me to be strong. We chatted about everything, till it was getting late, and she had to go. Saying goodbye was painful, but we had to.

That night, I wept and prayed, begging God to intervene on my behalf. The next day, I watched to know if God will change my dad’s heart as that was the last day of registration, but nothing happened. He was in high spirit, preparing for the marriage of his only daughter. Two marriage rites had already been done. We were preparing for the bigger one.

As I lay on my bed that night, I knew medicine and surgery wasn’t for me again.

“Even if later in life, a miracle happens, this year’s admission is absolutely gone. My dad has killed me – my joy, my dreams.” I moaned.

Strolling to the local market the following morning, I noticed the perusing eyes of a man in a Hummer jeep, while a young man standing by his car pointed my direction. I didn’t care about it, because I was used to such stares. My naturally long black hair, fair skin, and feminine figure caused heads to turn – men and women. Not that I dressed to allure people; my natural beauty was simply charming.

The horn blared, and I heard my name. Turning to that direction, I saw the man in the vehicle moving his hands indicating he wanted me to come. The “always respect people” my mum drummed into my ears made me to go, at least we are on the road.

We exchanged greetings. “I heard you are Adaobi, Mr Amaechi’s daughter.”

“Yes sir!” Congratulations for the excellent result you had in your SSCE. I’m an old boy of the community school, and came home to offer scholarship to the best students in the school. I was just on my way to your house.”

My heart jumped, and then fell. Why didn’t he come earlier? Tears, unknown to me had filled my eyes. His eyes widened when he saw the tears. “What is the problem”? I told him how my dad made me lose my admission. He felt so bad and sorry for me.

Then a thought struck. “But sir, you can still give me the scholarship fund. Let me go to UNN and see if anything can still happen”

“Ok, let’s go and talk to your parents.”

“Please, no sir. It won’t work. My dad’s mind is made up. I just want to quickly run to the school and process the admission then come back, face them, and find my way back to school.” I talked like I had it all planned out, like it was very easy.

He was quiet – probably thinking – for a while, then he told me to get into his car. Fear had flown away. I got in without wondering where we were going to. He said goodbye to the other man who listened all the while, and we drove off. My mind was a strategy center and war zone all through the journey.

“Jesus, please let me go and secure my admission in school first. Then, I will go and meet with Chinedu to plead with him. I love him and he loves me, so he should allow me do what I love. So, we can just postpone the wedding, right? Lord Jesus, please make this plan work”, I prayed silently.

Mr. Joel, my sponsor, unknown to me was an influential man. He quickly made some contacts, and my admission documents were given to me – I became a bonafide student of the great UNN. My joy couldn't be fully expressed. I thanked Mr. Joel so much, and we parted ways after he gave me his complimentary card so I could call him when necessary.

I was directed to Pharmacy department to see Oluchi, and behold, she was just walking out of the building. Her hands flew up in excitement, and she jumped at me. I related the gist to her, and she was so happy.

“Now, when you get back, be very bold. Don't let anything change your mind” She advised me strictly. I nodded, and we said goodbye, hoping to see each other latter.

The dreaded journey back home began.

My parents will be on the search for me.

Chinedu will be so worried. “Oh, Chinedu!” He was the only one that threatened the foundation of my decisions. I may not be able to resist him if he didn't agree with my plan. He had a sweet way of buying me over to his side, making me do what he wants.

The only thing he hadn't succeeded in was taking me to bed, though it had been a big struggle – he said it was a way of expressing our love. But I had vowed to keep myself till my wedding night. My mum said it is a woman's pride. I love such kind of pride – the right pride.

Though my dad wasn't so much the church type, we were always there on Sundays, and kind of believe the Bible as well. So upholding such morality was drummed into my ears by my parents.

I got to my town at dusk, and alighted at the bus stop leading to Chinedu's house. My legs shaking with fear, I knocked at the gate and the security man opened up when he realized it was me. I quickly placed my finger on my

lips, indicating he shouldn't scream. I walked towards the entrance and from the window, I could see Chinedu and his dad standing in their sitting room. I imagined how he would sweep me off my feet into his big arms on sighting me. I relished the thought, and braced up to walk in, but was cut short at the door by their discussion.

"Girls of these days can't be trusted, especially these booky and beautiful ones. Who knows where she went to? That's the reason I said I won't allow her to go to any university. She will just grow wings. I'll make her sit down and take care of her home. Which kain university...?"

"Is that really Chinedu?" I cringed. What Oluchi said her mum always told her made some sense now. "All men are the same - wanting to oppress women. Don't trust them."

I sat on the floor and let the tears flow. My heart was a mess - torn between my love for Chinedu, his betrayal, and medical school.

After moments of weeping, something stirred in my heart. "Adaobi, rise up and fight. Don't be a coward..."

Right there, I built a strong wall around my heart. The men I loved had been my major source of tears. I was going to let no man in anymore. I will face and fight them squarely - as long as they attempt to step on my toes.

I walked straight to my house - a new Adaobi. My dad was raging, mum was worried. With no word or reply to anyone, I went straight to my room and lay down. The surprise on their faces was beyond description.

Where is our gentle and loving Adaobi?

On waking up the following morning, they met me outside, dressed up. I stayed back to give my mum a hug and an assuring smile.

I would miss her so much. But I was fed up of her philosophy.

Their eyes asked more questions than their lips, but I had no time for all that. I quickly hugged my mum and whispered into her ears. She was confused. I told them I was going to school and started walking away immediately not minding my dad's threats- only my mum's sobs pricked my heart.

That was it. With the help of Mr. Joel, my sponsor, I got settled in school.

CHAPTER 4

I still performed excellently in school, beating all the boys down. I was on a brutal march against men- because to me, they were anti-women-progress. My friend, Oluchi was my cheerleader.

Sometimes, I wondered where the sweet and loving Adaobi was buried. I missed myself. The new me was eating me up with cynicism and critical spirit. Any little oversight, I attribute that to - women marginalization.

“Is there no better way to do this?” I thought.

Amara was my course mate, bold, but with another kind of spirit. Peaceful and penetrating. I loved her and wanted to know her secret.

"Hello Ada!"

"Hello Amara" I replied as she hugged me. We had just concluded our final exams.

"I'll love to invite you to a women's conference..." Amara said.

"Ok! Women? I'll love to be there."

The conference was enthralling. We tore through the Bible, digging up truth and treasures. I had been going to Church, but hadn't heard the truth that way.

The last woman, the overall leader, crowned it all. She spoke on the topic "Woman, arise and march". It was a form of MARCH different from what I had been doing.

Using the biblical Esther as case study, this new march involved - praying, and then speaking up with wisdom, love and humility.

It was different from the 'Keep quiet' my mum had always said, and the 'Lash it out' my friend Oluchi, had taught me.

The lovely woman told us the need to 'Let go and let God.'

He gives the grace and wisdom for "the march". She said our real enemies aren't the men, but the devil, because he is the architect of all evil. Hence we should learn to combat him - on our knees.

What she said sounded new, but real. I needed to try out the new method. I walked to the front when it was time for the prayer of surrender. Then, I felt this peace and joy.

We were asked to go home with recorded copies of the message, and encourage other women to join the movement of true women called - "The March".

The initiation phase was a general one week hourly prayer by all women wherever. It was titled "Women, arise and cry out" - presenting your case before God, and asking Him for wisdom to present it to your man.

I asked God for two things:

"Lord, send me a man who will truly love me"

“Tansform my dad's heart towards my mum and I. Let him permit my mum to go back to work, and forgive me.”

“If God should answer this, I'll champion this MARCH, always.” I promised. My mum was willing to join when I told her but Oluchi hesitated.

"Adaobi ooo, the magic is working" My mum screamed into her phone as we spoke one day. It was the fifth day of the prayer.

“What happened mummy?” I asked excitedly.

"I was just discussing with your dad, and I don't even know how my job issue came up. I suddenly felt I should talk to him again about it, explaining how it will help and not destroy the family. He was quiet for a while, then lifted his head and said yes. Is this how it works...?" She started singing.

I couldn't believe my ears.

Whaaat!

"Hello Ada!" The voice was familiar. I turned, and there he stood, Ikenna. We attended the same fellowship while in school, and he was indeed, a sweet friend and great support. He graduated 3 years before me, and proposed to me while he was serving, but I wasn't ready to give my heart away - not to any man.

We sat down and discussed and laughed out like the long time friends we were. I knew he still loved me, and my heart longed for him as well. But, there was no chance.

Two weeks later, someone tapped on my office door, and walked in. My heart started racing. "Ikenna!" I exclaimed. He looked breathtaking. He got on one knee and asked me that question again - "Will you marry me".

God had been working on me, breaking down those walls in my heart because as soon as he said those words, I was covered with goose pimples. I looked into his eyes and shut mine quickly.

Why won't I say yes?

He is a true man, a faithful friend. He was always inspiring me to keep dreaming and soaring.

"Yes... yes... yes..." I said as tears flowed. We both burst into laughter.

I got my parents informed, and they were excited. My dad had forgiven my blunt decision, and was so proud of me. He even asked me to forgive him...

Oluchi got fed up with the feminist march, and joined me in the true women march.

"Since I started this march of yours, Adaobi, I am much happier and I feel so sweet"

Today, I'm married to the loveliest husband in the world, enjoying my profession as a seasoned gynecologist, and as well, encouraging other women to join 'The March'!

Marching as women in God's army is indeed, a blessing!

