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Bitter Leaf

Written by Chioma Okereke

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Bitter Leaf

Chioma Okereke



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VIRAGO

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For my father
(and his imaginary friend Bill)

O gifted men, vainglorious for first place,
how short a time the laurel crown stays green.
Dante

One

Many things distinguish a place, its rolling hills or turquoise waters. There are civilisations that wear plates in their ears and others that wear hoops of gold. There are even cultures that kill their old before they become burdens on those that remain. Rituals are carried out all over the world at any given moment; some that everyone can relate to and some as foreign as a fire-walk in lands surrounded by snow. But many things unite people universally: births and deaths, gains and losses, departures and arrivals.

If there was one thing Mannobans knew about, it was leaving, and they hadn't arrived at this way of thinking simply. Once upon a time, hundreds of years earlier, there had been much wailing and gnashing of teeth at the exodus of a loved one. Plenty eye-water had spilled into their red clay, contributing to its fertility and binding the people closer to the earth. Gradually, they learned that leaving wasn't always such a bad thing. Leaving engendered possibility, and allowed the growth of another emotion: hope. Hope and faith would always bring about return.

When people left the village these days there was, of course, a spirit of sadness in the family of the departing one, and naturally that melancholy permeated neighbours and friends, but the tearing of clothes and extraction of hair was merely a custom that had been passed down from elders long gone. This extraordinary behaviour actually helped: the pain of shed follicles distracted people from the immediate loss, from the figure retreating in front of their eyes, blending into a blurry horizon and out of sight. But tears dried quickly once a person was gone, the realities of life far more demanding than wilfully issuing salt water from ducts so rarely used.

Returns were celebrated with pounding feet. A villager carried news of the approaching arrival to their neighbour, and the information spread like an outbreak of typhoid. This was quickly followed up with heightened voices, calling up to gods or anybody that could hear, and then Mannobans displayed their palms to the sky in happiness. Arrivals were always welcomed, but returns were *heartfelt*.

If arrivals triggered people's hospitality, returns offered no such politeness. Once the traveller was knocked to the ground by the force of a parent's embrace, their dirt was removed with the tears and saliva of all well-wishers. Immediate sustenance would have to wait, as fresh animals were killed, cleaned and cooked in a feast that would draw even those unconnected to the returnee to the compound with watering mouths. The party would carry on well into the days to come, with more and more food being cooked and consumed. People dropped in to witness a reunited family's joy and the returnee would regale all those present with stories from their journey, embellishing achievements or making light of troubles that had befallen them. Mannobans needed little excuse for a celebration and when one of their own came back home after a spell away,

the villagers rejoiced as if they had uncovered the secret to life.

But this kind of spectacle didn't suit everyone, even if they had been born and raised on Mannobe soil. For some, to return under such scrutiny was akin to coming back to the village naked. They preferred the cover of nightfall, returning as shadows. They would creep up on unsuspecting family members, hoping to ambush them into a tight embrace before any sound could spring from their lips. Even though news of their arrival would inevitably trickle through the night to be announced in the morning, at least they would be spared the mass hysteria.

It wasn't only those who had shameful secrets they didn't want to see dispersed as casually as farmers' grain: some people simply preferred a quieter life, free of the local hullabaloo if they could help it. They were the most surprised when their return caused a stirring among the people, especially those whose presence had been largely overlooked when they were residents. In their focus on trying to enter the village in darkness, unnoticed, they always failed to see the one thing, or the one person, standing in front of their eyes: Mama Abandela.

Jericho swore as her grip on the bag handle slipped again and let the bag fall to the floor with a heavy *thunk*. Sitting on top of it, she sighed gratefully at the brief respite, although if she rested too long she'd lose the strength required to make it the full way home.

She peered into the darkness, waiting for shadows to identify themselves. She was tired, anxious but also happy at being back – not that she'd seen much of the village with her nighttime arrival. The smell had been the first thing to hit her, akin to the shock of a toe-dip in the river during Springtemps. There weren't enough preparations in the world for that dare.

The fragrances as she'd journeyed homeward had been the first greetings of family, minus the frenetic outbursts. It was the first thing she'd forgotten in the city – the potent odour of earth that struck, before making way for subtler essences to penetrate; trees and plants, the richness of the Belago, animal life along with the varying smells of community.

People came to mind as her thoughts rested on the village, familiar faces taking shape like the nature around her, and she was grateful for her decision to return at a late hour. As soon as her mother knew, it would begin – the rejoicing, the endless questions and, of course, the expectations. She would officially be home, back from La Ciudad d'Angel.

She got off her bag and opened it carefully. She removed her medical certificate from the wrapper she'd bound it in to protect it. She couldn't read it in the dark and didn't want to light her lantern yet, but its very existence was a tangible weight in her hand. Smoothing away imaginary wrinkles, she wrapped it up again, anticipating her mother's pride.

She returned the wrapper to the bag but before closing it she extracted a handkerchief, brought it to her nose and inhaled deeply. It smelt of her, but she pretended it was still rich with the long-lost, citrusy scent of its owner as her fingers traced the raised black thread where his initials stood in the corner.

Jericho tucked it inside her clothing, quiet laughter burning her chest alongside her secret. She allowed it to join the sounds of nature, laughing harder when an animal she couldn't see mimicked her sound somewhere in the nearby trees.

She'd brought a piece of the city with her. That would have to suffice until it came for her.

Mama Abandela had been walking at nightfall for as long as she could remember. She preferred the softness of the air

at that time, and her stiffening limbs preferred it too; it allowed her body to relax after the day's toil before she waited for sleep to pass over her house. She'd begun to take to the road after cleaning her last cooking pot and helping her eldest son to bed when he returned from the workshop. Mannobe was different in the darkness; the earth underfoot fragile, as failing eyesight rendered the dips in its surface alien.

Sometimes, she had to stand still to catch her breath and would be surprised, wondering where the holes were on her body that it had trickled out from when she wasn't looking. Her mother had always said old age was something you had to shake off, like a gecko that tried to land on your head. It didn't belong there, so you couldn't settle for it. The moment you did you were done for, because it would swiftly call the rest of its family to join it.

Mama knew that at some point she must have lost her concentration and it was at that precise moment that a family of geckos had sneaked into her hips. It was their presence that were causing her joints to misalign. She'd tried fervently to shake them ever since, but they were there for good.

She kneaded the flesh on her side and managed to dislodge a reptile temporarily, allowing her to continue her walk. Ah, the things she'd seen on her nocturnal trails! Enough to make the blood boil. Still, she managed to keep most of them to herself, poring over them in bed when sleep failed to visit her. Only the things that were too juicy slipped from her mouth on to others, for that's exactly what they were: *slippery*. Not that Mama ever blamed herself. The geckos burrowing into her midriff were trouble enough without worrying about her lips as well.

It was not the first time he'd had to hold on to a tree to right himself. His grip tightened as bubbles of booze rode

up his bloodstream and popped, causing flickers of light behind his eyelids. Babylon laughed conspiratorially with the tree trunk, waiting until the wave of nausea passed over him. He breathed deeply and when he felt able to balance without the aid of a weighty prop, he began to zigzag home.

The scratchings of night along with the graze of trees added an element of danger to his trip that he enjoyed. Excitement pierced his belly. It was a game he liked to thrill himself with as he tried to imagine the sensations of the dark. When his foot ran over a jagged rock he said out loud, 'That was softer than the arch of Tete's foot.' When his body brushed past a burr bush, he thought, 'That is what the touch of Magdalena Codón's hair must be like.' Every nocturnal scent percolated through his nostrils and triggered a memory of a woman; each memory of a woman ignited a spark inside him that illuminated his way home in the darkness.

Babylon was so enveloped in his thoughts that he didn't see the aged Mama making her way around a corner until he collided with her soft, wide frame. His apology was overtaken by a vinegary burp and once Mama Abandela had finished slapping him off her waist, her mouth ran off a million words as if she'd stored up her life's worth of insults for this very occasion. Sensing he was unable to placate the old woman in his current state, he began to back away slowly until he noticed her attention had left him and had moved on to something else. Following her gaze, he picked up noises in the distance.

It took Babylon a few seconds to realise that the light he saw wasn't a figment of his intoxicated mind. He watched the prism of amber floating through the dark, bringing trees into view before they disappeared again, and made the connection that someone was walking in the night with a lamp. Ordinarily, that wouldn't have interested him, but he was intrigued by the intensity of the older woman's

curiosity. He didn't know about the geckos in her side that made her moving off after their collision difficult; he was simply content to take in the occurrences of the darkness with someone else.

Babylon hummed gently, a tune that had been working its way through him all day, and realised that his humming helped regulate his coordination. It was strange how music could unhinge and right a person at the same time. He was pondering this when the light cutting through the darkness flashed. Sounds came from the opposite direction and he noticed another lamp.

Even before the two lights were united he heard it. A good friend had said that musicians are conduits of love, and as a musician, he knew first hand the power of a note. He'd seen grown men rendered catatonic at a piano's trill, and even the most hardened players fainting at the moan of a lyre.

An exclamation cut through him like an erroneous chord and Babylon watched as the lamps formed a large halo on the dark road. He saw the profile of a stranger's face, the soft features, that wide mouth, and his stomach dipped dangerously. The two women hugged each other tightly, and when they pulled apart he followed their separating voices to find the one that had stirred him. She turned in his direction, almost as if she'd sensed his unspoken need to see her face, and Babylon felt his throat go dry.

'*Who*?'

'Pardon?'

He turned to the old woman at his side, as if seeing her for the first time and startled by her proximity. Her voice had erupted from her chest as acrid as cricket-song.

'Who's that?' He pointed.

Mama Abandela squinted in the way all old people seem to do, even though she was quite accustomed to seeing clearly in the half-light.

'Penny Aze—'

'The other one,' he interrupted rudely.

'Mcchhheeww,' Mama kissed her teeth at him. 'Edith Lwembe's girl. Who went to the city. Jericho.'

'Jericho?' he repeated slowly.

'Yes. Are you drunk *and* deaf?' she spat out.

Watching the lights dance through the dark, he caught Mama Abandela's heavy step as she moved off. He'd wanted to offer to escort her home, it was the least he could do after frightening her, but he knew he wouldn't remember his lack of chivalry in the morning. Babylon let her shuffle off at her turtle's pace and then stared into the pitch black. The woman had disappeared, but he could still see her face.

He took a careful step in the dark and resumed his game, muttering her name all the while as if it was the only word he knew.

Two

Jericho sidestepped as the woman in front of her spat on the ground before repositioning the chewing stick at the side of her mouth. The market was a heaving mass that only an expert could navigate effectively, as people shoved each other away to secure the best bargains and the freshest produce. It took years of practice to be able to interpret the hideous choir of shouting vendors who coaxed prospective customers with endearments like 'Auntie' and 'Sister', trying to outdo their competitors as well as the musicians who performed then opened their palms wide for payment.

She coughed as she walked past the dilapidated stall of an old woman smoking fish. The trader looked like she'd blackened herself alongside her wares from many years in front of the dangerous outside oven, and Jericho observed the skilful way she fanned herself along with the fish she hoped to sell. It was called Manuel's Meat Market, but it offered everything from beans to clothing. Its layout made absolutely no sense, except to the vendors who saved space for other traders near to them; they thought nothing of selling clothing next to roast chicken or mountains of

spices next to fuel. Just as it made perfect sense that directly after buying pawpaws and three cupfuls of rice, someone would turn their body ninety degrees and argue over the price of a pair of slippers made from old tyres. But to a foreigner it was a labyrinth of stalls; intricately assembled goods to dazzle the eye and detract from the putrid ammonia smell emanating from the muddy streets and pockets of refuse. A circus where sacks of wheat and semolina were piled so vertiginously high that they resembled cutting-edge architectural installations. Young women balanced wooden planks laden with stock on their heads and ran through the stalls, and sleights of hand confused customers into taking the substandard goods vendors wanted to offload.

The city's market had been equally populated but there had been a sense of order. To Jericho, everything in the village seemed more exhausting. Her work away had felt different, more rewarding. Since she'd come back, the simplest chore felt like an inconvenience. When her mother placed the broom in her hands the very next day, it had been weightier than a tree trunk. When she sent her to the market for their food, the journey appeared longer than the one her best friend's brother used to have to do every day to collect water for their family. But all her protestations had fallen on unsympathetic ears.

'What, you think you're a Dorique?'

Her mother had laughed richly at the statement the villagers used to chide each other with whenever they felt someone had developed ideas above their station, and Jericho had quickly bit back the words on her tongue.

She'd taken her time getting to the market owing to some locals who had stopped to talk to her following her return and the young men whose eyes shone like torches upon seeing her, so that she'd whiled away time at Cook's Monument before heading back. The sundial in the square

was as breathtaking as she remembered. The moment it came into view she recalled the story they'd passed around as children, the story told to them by their elders, and she imagined Mr Dorique's face, overcome with emotion, as he rooted the dial into Mannobe earth.

Although the sun obscured much of her vision, Jericho played her game in silence, chewing on her bottom lip nervously. She willed a piece of shade to come and slice the dial in two: if the shade appeared, then the man in her heart would be the one she carried for ever. Her excitement grew as she felt the gentle breeze pick up around her. It was only a matter of seconds before a dark cloud would appear, she was convinced, but then a group of people blocked her view of the sundial. Jericho shrugged at her game's premature ending. There would always be another chance to play.

She stopped for a packet of boiled nuts and popped a handful into her mouth greedily. They tasted as familiar on her tongue as her mother's soup. She knew it was more than the nuts themselves; it was the paper they were wrapped in, the cone-like shapes they manipulated the paper into so they could be eaten on the go, the warmed ink leaking into the kernels and the smoke from everything that was being cooked on site adding to their flavour. She smiled to herself as she crunched through them until her fingers came up empty. Just when you thought you'd had enough of the village it had a way of creeping up on you and piquing your appetite, leaving you hungry for more.

There were more people by the dial on her return journey than she expected, but then she heard music. It actually sounded good; lots of local musicians had perfected one song and played it endlessly before opening their hands, wanting something. She was convinced people only paid them so that their hands were occupied with

money – which they would blow on millet brew – and the villagers would be momentarily spared their playing.

Something about the music was familiar yet strange at the same time, and she found herself straining to hear over the audience's approving shouts. Jericho wished she hadn't been so quick to finish her snack. She could have listened to him while eating; each activity would have been improved by the other.

When the song came to a stop, the crowd split as people moved off while others joined to view the performance and she caught a brief glimpse of the attraction. He'd placed his guitar on the ground and stood up to shake the locks from his eyes before scooping them up into a pony-tail. She took in the definition of his legs from the tight trousers he wore. His face was striking, and she wasn't one to give compliments easily. She supposed he would be considered attractive if she liked that sort of thing, which she didn't, she confirmed, sneaking another generous glance. His features looked as though they'd been carved out of Cooroo Mountain.

Jericho believed that science held many truths the human mind was incapable of fathoming, for example the curious pink moon that caused the women of Mannobe's feet to prickle with pins and needles. So when she walked past as the music resumed, she thought nothing of the fact that her breath quickened at the quiet trill of the Spanish guitar. When her breasts swelled suddenly so that they fought with the constraints of her top, she simply waited for the moment to pass.

As the musician moved his body out of profile, she felt her heart spasm in her chest. She thought she'd accidentally locked eyes with him and her body flooded with unexpected warmth. It was difficult to tell – from the distance he could have been looking at anyone. Then the moment was gone and as the richness of his voice floated

around the square she knew she'd imagined it. The fists in her chest relaxed when the music man's grainy voice was out of earshot.

Jericho touched the handkerchief resting underneath her clothing before picking up her sack of groceries and heading home.

Mannobe had been a laid-back, fruit-off-the-vine place for as long as people could remember. Even when the trappings of burgeoning civilisation successfully seduced the neighbouring villages, Mannobans held on resolutely to their traditions like barnacles to a ship: they would have been lost without them. However, only a fool would dismiss Mannobans as mere provincials. Locals declared that although they might indeed reside in a village, it was a village with town aspirations.

The straight, planned roads from nearby towns either dwindled or came to a complete halt once they met the copper-coloured earth of Mannobe, but every local knew where they were going. Once upon a time, directions were given by a series of orders: follow the bumpy road until you see the bush with yellow flowers – not the red, spiky ones, that's right – then turn left and walk as far as the three gigantic potholes in a row, take a left after the burnt tree stump, and the Harbens' compound is to the east . . . But civilisation has a way of corrupting even the most basic of existences, and if street names were good enough for nearby towns that actually *had* streets, then despite its lack of them, their names, certainly, were most welcome in Mannobe. Many people had already claimed rivers and hills by giving them their names, along with whatever stretches of pathway their conscience would allow them to declare a road, and nobody ever really complained. Besides, there was more than enough land in the village for everybody's name to hold some *importance*.

Mannobe's latest triviality brought a smile to Allegory's face. He didn't see the problem with Anis Point, the stretch of land newly inherited by Hamid after his uncle's death. It was only natural the man wanted to honour the deceased's memory in some way, but the land's new name had caused much talk amongst the villagers, for they knew how their lazy accents could sully the most innocent of things.

One of the things Allegory had grown to cherish about the village was its predictability. One could never second-guess life, but there were certain things that could be counted on as anchors in an otherwise capricious existence. For example, you could guarantee that water from the Belago was as pure as a child's smile and that the Azevo dog would have left his waste in the square despite all attempts to encourage him to make him go elsewhere. Finally, you could bet that Le Papillon would have a generous number of customers, and that on Roast Sundays the line of roast pork pleasure seekers could almost reach the edge of his dwelling.

Every two months or so, the Codón sisters let meat marinate in large buckets almost to the point of spoiling before throwing the delightful slabs on grills blackened by recurrent use. That aroma, pungent, spicy, sweet, was siren song to any red-blooded male in the village and most women, who understood that no Sunday meal they had intended to make would match the smell wafting through Mannobe. Although Allegory had trained himself to ignore the luscious scents that drifted from the café to his abode, he accepted that Roast Sunday was his undoing, just like many others. He scratched at his scalp through the jumble of salt and pepper dreadlocks matted into a single gnarled knot atop his head. Ignoring his greying string vest, he adjusted his royal blue neckerchief and headed for his place in the queue.

By the time Allegory made it to the front of the line his

stomach was proclaiming his hunger heavily. M'elle Codón caught sight of him and waved, but before he could make it over to her, her sister directed him to an empty seat on a nearby bench with a commanding point. He sat willingly, anxious to quench his hunger as quickly as possible. Hamid entered and positioned himself at a table in front of him. It was the closest one to the door so he could keep watch over the tyres he'd deposited outside. Magdalena Codón wiped his table from the previous customer and put a glass of water in front of him. Allegory watched Mabel move over to greet Hamid with a squeeze of the shoulder. He took in their conversation as he braced himself for the chicken thigh on his plate.

'*Eh*, beauty runs in your family, Mabel. Your daughter looks more like you every time I come in.'

'*Tanka*, Hamid. What of your Somaya? So much like her mother, give thanks. Her husband will be coming, I'm sure . . .'

Hamid's dramatic exhale was synchronised with that of Allegory as he moved the spicy chicken from one side of his mouth to the other.

'I know, Mabel.' Hamid patted at the muscles underneath his shirt. 'Then what will I do? Who will feed me?'

'You won't have to worry about that, I'm sure,' she laughed. '*Pues*, for now we can help you.' She took the plate her daughter brought from the kitchen and placed it in front of him. 'Here you are. Eat. Breast is still your favourite, *non*?'

Allegory took his time with the remainder of his semolina pudding, watching the changing clientele as if they were animals at a watering hole. The creamy dessert was a refreshing salve for the pepper-rich main course but the ginger was a tingly throwback on his tongue.

He listened to a group a few tables away. The occupants