

PLEASE LISTEN, IT'S FOR MICHAEL.

Martha Obasi

Have you ever approached someone for help and before you even utter two words they walk away? Or worse they ask you:

“Do you think I am a charity organization child? People work for their money, they don’t beg!”

Well I have and not once or twice but severally.

I vividly recall standing on the streets after yet another disappointment; the sun searingly hot against my forehead. Sweat, now dripping down my face mingled with the stream of tears that found its way down my cheeks as I watched yet another respected member of society walk away. I recall that sickening feeling in my stomach; that feeling that maybe, just maybe if they spared their time to listen to me they would understand .They would understand that I wasn't begging for money for myself but for a greater purpose. I wanted so badly to turn and walk away but a something was holding me back. My mind wandered back to a time in my past.

“Nikuendeshe na ndege yangu?” (Do you need a ride in my plane) he asked so softly it could pass for a whisper. I noticed the drawl in his words as he spoke and could see the pain in his eyes with each word he pronounced yet he continued to speak. On closer inspection I noticed that the sores on his lips extended to the inside of his mouth. He was decked in faded blue jeans that were torn at the knees and a wrinkled old red t shirt that clung to his body portraying the picture that it was a size too small. Yet he continued playing seemingly unaware of his condition.

They called him Michael, just Michael. He was HIV positive as was his mother who had left him for dead at a dumpster in Mathare, a slum in Nairobi, Kenya. A passerby took him to the Nyumbani children's home and he had found a home there ever since. He was only seven and wasn't expected to live to his eighth birthday.

We were there visiting as members of the Pontifical Missionary Society. A society set up by children to help other children by availing to them food, clothing and occasionally visiting them to make them feel as if they belonged to greater family.

“Sawa, utanipeleka wapi?” (Okay where will you take me?) I asked as I settled on the edge of the bed. “Nyumbani” (home) he answered as he went on to tell me of his grand dreams: he dreamt that he would finish his education and become a pilot; he dreamt that he would own so many mansions and take his friends to live there; he dreamt of a world without any pain or suffering, where his weak friends (he showed me a couple of them lying in bed) could play all they wanted.

Abruptly he turned and looked at me straight in the eye. The look piercing through to my very soul and for a moment I felt shiver. Then he smiled and for the first time his features softened and I saw him for whom he was. Past the sores and the blemishes of healed wounds that tainted his beautiful skin, past the slur of his words, past the drab garments he wore, I saw him and I don't think I have ever seen a prettier child than he was. He must have noticed my stare for he finally added “You can come over if you want to.”

“I would love to” I answered and he smiled again.

Michael passed away September of the following year and though I only saw him once he changed my life. I hope he found the lovely mansions he so fondly spoke about and that his friends who followed in his escape from this world are also playing without pain or suffering.

But I still kept wondering what happens to all the other Michaels. Do they find good children to help them or are they simply forgotten like Michael's mother did to him? Do I stand and listen to that child on the street who is trying to make case for Michael? Or do I turn and walk away pretending I did not hear and in so doing condemning Michael to a life of solitude? Why do I say that he changed my life if I do not try and change his life too? Why didn't I give him a chance to have his dreams come true?

Well I changed. Despite the many phonies out on the streets to con people by begging I always found one who did actually need help. I have met many Michaels and I believe every one of them has changed me; they have given me a greater self awareness of myself and of humanity in general. But above all they have taught me to listen to others so I may also be listened to.

With a knot in my throat every time I was shunned away I now really understood why I kept walking on to the next stranger: I would look back to my past and I would meet Michael all over again. I would remember the reason I was in the sun; for Michael and in that moment I knew I could face the hardest oftentimes just to see the smile on his face again. And so with that conviction I walked on to the next stranger

"Excuse me....."