

MARRIAGE IS A PRIVATE AFFAIR

- Chinua Achebe

'HAVE you written to your dad yet?' asked Nene one afternoon as she sat with Nnaemeka in her room at 16 Kasanga Street, Lagos.

'No, I've been thinking about it. I think it's better to tell him when I get home on leave!'

'But why? Your leave is such a long way off yet—six whole weeks. He should be let into our happiness now.'

Nnaemeka was silent for a while, and then began very slowly as if he groped for his words: 'I wish I were sure it would be happiness to him.'

'Of course it must,' replied Nene, a little surprised. 'Why shouldn't it?'

'You have lived in Lagos all your life, and you know very little about people in remote parts of the country.'

'That's what you always say. But I don't believe anybody will be so unlike other people that they will be unhappy when their sons are engaged to marry.'

'Yes. they are not unhappy if the engagement is not arranged by them. In our case it's worse—you are not even an Ibo'.

This was said so seriously and so bluntly that Nene could not find speech immediately. In the cosmopolitan atmosphere of the city it has always seemed to her something of a joke that a person's tribe could determine whom he married.

At last she said, 'You don't really mean that he will object to your marrying me simply on that account? I had always thought you Ibos were kindly dispensed to other people.'

'So we are. But when it comes to marriage, well, it's not quite so simple. And this,' he added, 'is not peculiar to the Ibos. If your father were alive and lived in the heart of Ibibo-land he would be exactly like my father.'

'I don't know. But anyway, as your father is so fond of you, I'm sure he will forgive you soon enough. Come on then, be a good boy and send him a nice lovely letter'

'It would not be wise to break the news to him by writing. A letter will bring it upon him with a shock. I'm quite sure about that.'

'All right, honey, suit yourself. You know your father.'

As Nnaemeka walked home that evening he turned over in his mind different ways of overcoming his father's opposition, especially now that he had gone and found a girl for him. He had thought of showing his letter to Nene but decided on second thoughts not to, at least for the moment. He read it again when he got home and couldn't help smiling to himself. He remembered Ugoye quite well, an Amazon of a girl who used to beat up all the boys, himself included, on the way to the stream, a complete dunce at school.

I have found a girl who will suit you admirably— Ugoye Nweke, the eldest daughter of our neighbour, Jacob Nweke. She has a proper Christian upbringing. When she stopped schooling some years ago, her father (a man of sound judgment) sent her to live in the house of a pastor where she has received all the training a wife could need. Her Sunday School teacher has told me that she reads her Bible very fluently. I hope we shall begin negotiations when you come home in December.

On the second evening of his return from Lagos Nnaemeka sat with his father under a cassia tree. This was the old man's retreat where he went to read his Bible when the parching December sun had set and a fresh, reviving wind blew on the leaves.

'Father,' began Nnaemeka suddenly, 'I have come to ask for forgiveness.'

'Forgiveness? For what, my son?' he asked in amazement, 'It's about this marriage question.'

'I can't—we must—I mean it is impossible for me to marry Nweke's daughter.'

'Impossible? Why?' asked his father.

'I don't love her.'

'Nobody said you did. Why should you?' he asked.

'Marriage today is different'

'Look here, my son,' interrupted his father, 'nothing is different. What one looks for in a wife are a good character and a Christian background.' Nnaemeka saw there was no hope along the present line of argument.

'Moreover,' he said, 'I am engaged to marry another girl who has all of Ugoye's good qualities, and who ...'

His father did not believe his ears. 'What did you say?' he asked slowly and disconcertingly.

'She is a good Christian,' his son went on, 'and a teacher in a Girls' School in Lagos.'

'Teacher, did you say? If you consider that a qualification for a good wife I should like to point out to you. Nnaemeka, that no Christian women should teach. St. Paul in his letter to the Corinthians says that women should keep silence.' He rose slowly from his seat and paced forwards and backwards. This was his pet subject, and he condemned vehemently those church leaders who encouraged women to teach in their schools. After he had spent his emotion on a long homily he at last came back to his son's engagement, in a seemingly milder tone.

'Whose daughter is she, anyway?'

'She is Nene Atang.'

'What!' All the mildness was gone again. 'Did you say Nene Atang, what does that mean?'

'Nene Atang from Calabar. She is the only girl I can marry.' This was a very rash reply and Nnaemeka expected the storm to burst. But it did not. His father merely walked away into his room. This was most unexpected and perplexed Nnaemeka. His father's silence was infinitely more menacing than a flood of threatening speech. That night the old man did not eat.

When he sent for Nnaemeka a day later he applied all possible ways of dissuasion. But the young man's heart was hardened, and his father eventually gave him up as lost.

'I owe it to you, my son, as a duty to show you what is right and what is wrong. Whoever put this idea into your head might as well have cut your throat. It is Satan's work.' He waved his son away.

'You will change your mind, Father, when you know Nene.'

'I shall never see her.' was the reply. From that night the father scarcely spoke to his son. He did not, however, cease hoping that he would realize how serious was the danger he was heading for. Day and night he put him in his prayers.

Nnaemeka, for his own part, was very deeply affected by his father's grief. But he kept hoping that it would pass away. If it had occurred to him that never in the history of his people had a man married

a woman who spoke a different tongue, he might have been less optimistic. 'It has never been heard,' was the verdict of an old man speaking a few weeks later. In that short sentence he spoke for all of his people. This man had come with others to commiserate with Okeke when news went round about his son's behaviour. By that time the son had gone back to Lagos.

'It has never been heard,' said the old man again with a sad shake of his head.

'What did Our Lord say?' asked another gentleman.

'Sons shall rise against their Father's; it is there in the Holy book.'

'It is the beginning of the end,' said another.

The discussion thus tending to become theological, Madubogwu, a highly practical man, brought it down once more to the ordinary level.

'Have you thought of consulting a native doctor about your son?' he asked Nnaemeka's father.

'He isn't sick, was the reply.

'What is he then? The boy's mind is diseased and only a good herbalist can bring him back to his right senses. The medicine here quires is Amalife, the same that women apply with success to recapture their husbands' straying affection.

'Madubogwu is right,' said another gentleman. 'This thing calls for medicine.'

'I shall not call in a native doctor.' Nnaemeka's father was known to be obstinately ahead of his more superstitious neighbours in these matters. 'I will not be another Mrs Ochuba. If my son wants to kill himself let him do it with his own hands, It is not for me to help him.'

'But it was her fault,' said Madubogwu. 'She ought to have gone to an honest herbalist. She was a clever woman, nevertheless.'

'She was a wicked murderess,' said Jonathan who rarely argued with his neighbors because, he often said, they were incapable of reasoning. 'The medicine was prepared for her husband, it was his name they called in its preparation and I am sure it would have been perfectly beneficial to him. It was wicked to put it into the herbalist's food, and say you were only trying it out.'

Six months later, Nnaemeka was showing his young wife a short letter from his father:

It amazes me that you could be so unfeeling as to send me your wedding picture. I would have sent it back. But on further thought I decided just to cut off your wife and send it back to you because I have nothing to do with her. How I wish that I had nothing to do with you either.

When Nene read through this letter and looked at the mutilated picture her eyes filled with tears, and she began to sob.

'Don't cry, my darling,' said her husband. 'He is essentially good-natured and will one day look more kindly on our marriage.' But years passed and that one day did not come.

For eight years, Okeke would have nothing to do with his son, Nnaemeka. Only three times (When Nnaemeka asked to come home and spend his leave) did he write to him.

'I can't have you in my house,' he replied on one occasion. 'It can be of no interest to me where or how you spend your leave—or your life, for that matter.'

The prejudice against Nnaemeka's marriage was not confined to his little village. In Lagos, especially among his people who worked there, it showed itself in a different way. Their women, when they met at their village meeting, were not hostile to Nene. Rather, they paid her such excessive deference as to make her feel she was not one of them. But as time went on, Nene gradually broke through some of this prejudice and even began to make friends among them. Slowly and grudgingly they began to admit that she kept her home much better than most of them.

The story eventually got to the little village in the heart of the Ibo country that Nnaemeka and his young wife were a most happy couple. But his father was one of the few people in the village who knew nothing about this. He always displayed so much temper whenever his son's name was mentioned that everyone avoided it in his presence. By a tremendous effort of will he had succeeded in pushing his son to the back of his mind. The strain had nearly killed him but he had persevered, and won.