

Odili

Chika Unigwe

Odili would tell whoever asked that he left because he grew spikes on his backside. *Bloody thing was ruining my sex life. Couldn't get laid like that. Had to come here to get it fixed.* The truth was less dramatic. He left because he could not *not* leave. Having become a professor at the same university he'd graduated from, owed so much money in back pay by the government he could not even afford to marry, he'd given up on Nigeria. But he stuck to the spikes story because, as unrealistic as it was, people loved hearing it. Everyone knew the British loved three things: their pubs, their tea and feeling needed. They liked hearing that, despite the crazy weather, the scandals with the Royal Family, the overcrowded tubes, people died crossing the seas for a stab at the British Dream. Odili had a British passport. Born in England before Thatcher pulled the rug under automatic citizenship for children born in the UK, a British passport was the single most important gift his parents ever gave him. It meant that he, who had never been back since he returned to Nigeria at three months old, could swan in now with the coveted passport. No shady middlemen, no huge bribes to anyone, no perilous journey across the Atlantic. All he had needed was to scrape up enough money for a ticket. So what if he'd sold his sole inheritance, the land where his parents were buried? No one could eat a pineapple without peeling it, his late mother always said. He was here now, although this was no longer the country his parents had lived in and worked

in and loved in. *The British loved us*, his mother would say. *But they are an odd lot*, his father, who found their penchant for punctuality startling, would add. His father once invited a colleague home for drinks at 7 pm. *At 7 on the dot, the bell rang!* He must have been standing outside the door looking at his watch. *Ndi ocha, odd lot!*

Odili had often thought of how his life would have been had his parents not believed in Nigeria and returned in 1983, which really was the worst time to return because, a month after they did, there was a military coup. But his mother had got a job as a nurse at a top government hospital and his father wanted to set up his own civil engineering business. And they didn't want to raise their only child abroad. The government job paid less than had been promised, when it did. His father was owed so much for contracts done, Odili's mother became the sole breadwinner. *By the time you're out of school, Nigeria will be a first world country*, his father used to say. *All those people leaving the country now? They'll start pouring back in like sand* – his mother was certain. Two optimists who could not accept that they got it wrong by coming back.

Tall and broad-shouldered, it had been easy for Odili to get the job as a security man at his local Sainsbury's. So what if he had to bear the likes of Charlie, a pimply young cashier who complained most loudly about *foreigners coming 'ere to snatch our jobs and our women*. No one would touch Charlie with that warzone on his face, Odili thought but never said. And how old was he? The kid looked twelve. It bothered him, too, that Charlie called him by name, talking to him like they were mates. Still, Odili thought, *respect never fed anyone. I get paid on time, every month*. And there was the NHS for the spikes in his backside.

Chika Unigwe

Chika Unigwe was born and raised in Enugu, Nigeria. She is the author of four novels including *Nigh Dancer* and *On Black Sisters Street*. Her short story collection, *Better Never than Late*, was published in 2019. She has received many awards for her writing. She presently lives in Atlanta, Georgia and is a professor of creative writing at Georgia College and State University, Milledgeville.

A recording of this piece can be found at **writersmosaic.org.uk**

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