

# Green Onions

GRACE ADENIYI OGUNYANKIN

*Dans "Green Onions," Anabelle décrit la difficile expérience pour une maman émigrante de trouver du travail au Canada. L'auteure invoque le symbole des oignons verts pour définir sa vie de famille et l'amour d'une mère pour ses enfants.*

I could barely speak English when I arrived in Canada. But then I was only eight years old. Although many people say I was too young to remember anything about moving to Canada, I know that I remember many things. Too many things are indelible in my mind. I especially remember that the first coherent thought I formed, unassisted, in English was "I hate green onions."

Green onions? You may wonder. Yes, green onions. I can't tell you too much. But I can tell you enough. We escaped my home country during the night and snuck into a neighbouring country so we could fly to Canada. I remember being scared. Petrified. Almost incapacitated by fear each time we passed one lifeless body after another decorating the roads. Hideous and unnecessary decorations. Decorations that still give me nightmares to this day.

My parents, thankfully, had the foresight to start processing our visas to Canada before the war erupted. Their foresight was our saving grace, because that monster and his callous foot soldiers had my parents as their next target. My parents' dissident voices had to be silenced.

My father never made it into Canada with us. Fatal gun shot wound. I still carry the scar. Gun shot wounds I should say. To my soul and my heart. Mama wouldn't let me say goodbye properly. She miraculously managed to maintain her wits as she continued to rush my little brother and I to safety.

For me, a tidal wave of cold torrents hit my face. "Papa! Papa! Papa!" were my vehement reiterations for hours afterwards.

"Shh, Anabella. Shh," was all Mama could say. "You must stay strong. You can't let them win."

Mama's words were incomprehensible to me. As incomprehensible as English was when we came to Canada. My young mind could not understand how I could still win. How could I stay strong when my world, as I knew it, began to crumble before my eyes?

Everything after that, until I got

off the airplane, is all a blur now. The only poignant memory is that I was in mourning. I had retreated like a turtle into a shell I did not even know I possessed.

The Canadian airport seemed chaotic, but it was a surprisingly welcomed chaos. It was different from the war-torn zone I had just left behind. We managed to get through immigration without too much hassle. Mama spoke what sounded like gibberish to the immigration man who I caught peering disconcertingly at me. I supposed I must have been a sight. With snot all over my face, red eyes, and a slightly shivering body reacting to the Canadian cold even though it was late June, I can't blame him.

By the time we got to the small, dingy, one bedroom apartment one of Mama's friends had arranged for us, I was exhausted. But not too exhausted to notice that Mama finally broke down and cried. Though her tears were silent, in my foggy haze, I could see her body shudder and I could hear her sniffing.

The next morning Mama was all smiles. She kissed my little brother Jonathon and I good morning. The

first words out of Jonathon's mouth were, "Papa? Papa here?"

Mama, looked at Jonathon sadly and said, "Papa, not here. Papa, gone."

It was Jonathon's turn to cry. I think he was crying not because he comprehended the ramifications of Mama's word, but from his lack of understanding and his frustration that he didn't know where Papa was.

usually did when she went to teach at the university. She had borrowed a pair of jogging pants and t-shirt from her friend.

Mama was gone for what seemed like forever. Pascalina was nice but I didn't want her there. I behaved, however, and learned to say "hello," and "My name is Anabella" by the time Mama came home.

When Mama came home, a revolting scent accompanied her. When I went to hug her, I couldn't ignore the strange, noisome smell. I inquired about the stench and she explained that after her cleaning job she had gone to the field and spent most of the day there. She said being around onions all day would probably explain the smell.

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**"This is a new country. Things are different over here. I just can't be a professor here. But I am a Kudasi woman, and we Kudasi women are known for our strength. We persevere in the face of adversity. We will survive this challenge. These next few days, weeks, months, and years will be tough. But always remember that things will get better."**

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Mama took me aside and said, "Anabella, I don't know how much you will understand right now, but you have to be brave. This here is our new life."

"Mama, what about papa? What about Johanna and Mariem?" I whimpered as tears streamed, uninvited, down my face.

Mama wiped my tears with her hands and explained to me why Papa had to die. She also promised me that I would see my friends Johanna and Mariem again, some day. I asked when, but she remained noncommittal. She told me that she had to begin working immediately because we needed money. I remember thinking that was strange because we never needed money before; at least not to my knowledge. She told me her friend's daughter, Pascalina, was going to come and teach me English and babysit while she went to work. I wanted to resist and throw a tantrum, but I laid aside my childish inclinations when I caught the sorrowful look in Mama's eyes. Somehow, I instinctively knew that I should comply.

When Mama left for work that day, she didn't look dressed up like she

When Pascalina left, I finally asked Mama why she was not dressed the way she used to when she was teaching. I remember saying, "I hope your students didn't laugh at the way you were dressed."

Mama smiled forlornly and shook her head. "Dear, dear Anabella. I don't teach anymore. I clean houses now and starting tomorrow, I will also pick green onions at a farm."

Mama must have seen the quizzical look on my face. She continued to explain our new situation to me. "Anabella, this is a new country. Things are different over here. I just can't be a professor here. But I am a Kudasi woman, and we Kudasi women are known for our strength. We persevere in the face of adversity. We will survive this challenge."

"Kudasi?" I asked Mama.

"My maiden name," Mama replied. "So, Anabella, these next few days, weeks, months, and years will be tough. But always remember that things will get better."

"Yes, Mama" I said, even though I was unconvinced.

The next day, Mama donned her garb and went to work. Pascalina watched Jonathon and me.

From that day on, I never hugged Mama when she came home. The odour was just too horrible. In hindsight, I had probably psychologically associated the smell with my recent trauma and the way my life had just been turned upside-down. Mama used to bring home green onions every time she worked in field because she got them for free or for an incredibly low price. That was all she cooked with. Name anything that could be cooked and Mama found a way to make green onions the primary ingredient.

One day, after a few months of English lessons, and after two days of a hunger strike, Mama asked me what was going on. I spoke to her, or maybe shouted, in clear, audible English, "I hate GREEN ONIONS!"

Mama was shocked. I'm not sure if she was astonished by my "fluent" English words or by my abhorrence of green onions. Mama didn't respond right away. She just started crying. And she cried and cried. I was bewildered. I was caught off guard. I didn't know what to do. All I could think to do was hug her. She smelled. That pungent green onion odour. But I hugged her anyway and I kept

hugging her. I hugged her for what seemed like eternity until the green onion “perfume” became part of me.

Mama, through her sobs, told me how much she hated the smell too. She told me that every day she wanted to quit. But she couldn’t quit because of us, her children. She told me that it wasn’t easy finding a job as a foreigner in Canada. She told me that the type of work available for her now was either domestic work or farm labour. But she swore to me that one day, one day, she would find something else. She said that she was almost enticed by the job offer of one of her employers the other day. There was a lady whose house she cleaned who offered her a position as her children’s nanny because the other nanny quit. Mama said she almost took it because it meant she wouldn’t have to work so hard on the farm to pick the onions. She told me that her wages depended on the quantity of onions she picked and not the hours she worked. But when she calculated how much the woman was offering it was slave labour compared to her onion gig. Moreover, being a nanny meant that she would only get the Sunday off and she would have to find someone else to watch us.

I felt so selfish as I heard Mama’s story. I wiped her tears with my shirt and continued to hug her.

“So you see Anabella, I hate green onions too. But the love I have for you and Jonathan is stronger than my hate. Never forget that. So forgive me, if I continue to bring this smell home but until I find something better it’s our best choice.”

I nodded. By the time Mama was done giving her speech, I also had tears streaming down my face. “I’m sorry Mama. I’m really sorry.”

“It’s okay baby, it’s okay,” whispered mama as she gently stroked my tear-stained face.

Years later, I still remember that moment. Who would believe that

green onions would have such an effect on my life?

Mama eventually found a better job a year later, but she never found anything stable as a professor, although she had adjunct positions here and there. Her employment was always precarious. Yet she managed to keep us fed and ensured Jonathon and I attended university. Jonathon got the job Mama never could get. He’s a tenured professor of Political Science.

Me? I write stories. I fight for immigrants’ rights. I decry the injustices of migrant labour policies. I don’t have direct experience. But I saw Mama live it. I saw the pain in her eyes. I saw her sometimes, when she

thought I wasn’t looking, hold on to her back whenever she tried to bend over or do anything that proved too strenuous for her back.

Most importantly, I’ve found a way to find the good in green onions. I’ve found a way to make delectable meals with the help of green onions.

I love green onions because Mama loved me.

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## SUSAN MCCASLIN

### Uttermost

I have been in my uttermost mettle  
a mother, kind, unkind,  
obsessive, crazed, outraged,  
hungering for my child waif  
to hunger for her womanhood,  
to cup her day and drink.

Yet I too am Kore, a witness  
in the land of the dark Lord,

and I mother with tumult and fanfare  
or quietly as a reef  
the self that, once marauder,  
now is barely drawing breath,  
ghosting the shore.

*Susan McCaslin is a Canadian poet and Faculty Emeritus of Douglas College in Westminister, BC, where she taught English and Creative Writing for twenty-three years. She is the author of eleven volumes of poetry, including her most recent, Demeter Goes Skydiving (University of Alberta Press, 2011). The latter was a finalist in 2012 for the BC Book Prize (Dorothy Livesay Award) and the winner of the 2012 Alberta Book Publishing Award (Robert Kroetsch Poetry Book Award). Susan resides in Fort Langley, British Columbia.*