

Winner of Vindigo Press Short Story Competition 2023

SHE USED TO MAKE ME OMELETS

By Jackie Chikambure



Jackie Chikambure is a Zimbabwean author raised in the small sugarcane town of Chiredzi. She has four degrees including a BA in Film and Media (Scriptwriting), an Honours Degree in Creative Writing, and a Master's degree in the social sciences. She is passionate about societal and cultural diversity and this seeps into her work. As a writer, she enjoys creating dramatic fiction, has published a novella called *Kee* and won the ShonaReads short story competition in 2023. Her book *ANAI SHE* was recently published this October and is available on Amazon. Jackie wrote her first science fiction story called 'My Lil Melanin Princess' which was long-listed in the Brilliant Flash Fiction Science Fiction Contest. Jackie has started a storytelling business called Tell Our Story, here is the link to the website: www.tellourstory.org



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She Used to Make Me Omelettes

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I couldn't understand why my Great-Granny, GG, was choosing The Final Goodbye. I had overheard my grandmother trying to convince GG to keep taking the life preservers. Grandmother argued that Great-Granny was only 124 years old now, so “she didn't need to die”. GG countered that the world she knew was *long* gone, and she was ready to go too. This was a recurring conversation between them. On the last few occasions, Grandmother had succeeded in convincing GG to take the preservers but this time, GG vehemently shook her head no, she wanted to go and there was no changing her mind.

“It's time my darling daughter, there is no place for me in this world.”

I didn't understand what GG meant about *this* world, from what I had read about the past, it had been a miserable existence. Back then, just 27 years ago, humans lived with the hanging threat of a global apocalypse, disastrous climate change and catastrophic societal demise. Now, the world was great! Better than ever even. There was no threat of the world ending; the stringent climate and social laws had assured that. There was no more hunger anywhere in the world and people could live for as long as they wanted with the life preservers. Technological advancement meant we needed nothing more than our AI to live incredible lives. Why would GG not want to stay in *this* world?

“Mum, listen, I know things are not the same, but we have survived so much worse. Please just stay with us for five more years...” Grandmother begged once more; she really did not want this Final Goodbye.

GG kissed her daughter's cheek, “Let go, my love, I have made up my mind.”



And that was it. My grandmother cried, my mother, sobbed, and I spied inquisitively from the hidden, wooden stairs.

So, we were all here today packing GG's life belongings, preparing for her Final Goodbye. I was begrudgingly here; I would have much preferred to play whizz outside with my friends. Although it was a bright Friday afternoon; GG always had her room environment set to "orange sunset" no matter the time of the day. She also set the ambient sounds to "chirping birds". The noise from those birds irritated the hell out of me. Honestly, who truly wanted it to feel like the sun was setting every single moment of the day and hear squeaks at odd hours? That was GG.

She rocked quietly in her chair, while Mum and Grandmother chatted and packed fancy ceramics into bio-boxes across the room. I observed GG and I'd never noticed before, an emptiness in her hazel eyes. I had made jokes about her wrinkled skin, which folded ten times all over her face, and her dark and unbleached brown complexion. Sometimes I would see her admiring her hand as though she took pride in being dark-skinned. I didn't understand it. I had noticed her yellow teeth, which she refused to whiten like everyone else, but today, I picked up something new, her eyes. They were still, as though all the energy had been drained from them. It was then I realised, she had already said goodbye before saying *Goodbye*.

I had never seen anyone perform The Final Goodbye, so I was not sure what to expect. Mum said I would know once it happened, but I knew it meant the person was never coming back. Maybe it was morbid curiosity, or maybe I had started to care because she was dying but I tapped my left ear, switched off my music, and approached her.

Surrounding her were ankle-high piles of paper; she had always been a hoarder.

"GG, what is this?"

"Noxolo, I told you to call me Great-Granny," she groaned.



“And I told you to call me Noxy.”

I warmly smiled at her, and she smiled back. For a second her eyes lit up and then the light vanished. She was still again. I picked up the book that was closest to her feet. Her deadpan eyes hardly moved as I examined the item, it was some sort of a written document. I couldn't believe the amount of paper that was used back then.

I read the bold print, “**June 2034, *The Impact of Sudden Temperature Humidity Index Spike on Mortality in Laying Hens.***”

Suddenly, GG moved, and I jumped backwards.

“Ah, I used to be a scientist you know,” her voice was barely a whisper. I leaned in so I could hear her better. She smelt like melted, almost burnt, marshmallows.

“What kind of a scientist?”

“An environmental engineer. I decided to be one after I lost the memory of her... and the eggs.”

I examined the book again, it had a lot of complex terms, but the first line told me it was: *a study, aimed at assessing the effects of something called THI on mortality and panting rates in hens exposed to different thermal conditions.* GG's name was listed as one of the researchers and writers of the dissertation. I had never thought of her as anything more than the old lady who rocked by the faux fire all day in a sunset-lit room, she was suddenly interesting to me.

“What is, a hen?”

“Those are egg-laying chickens”

Oh my word, it took everything in me not to laugh at her out loud. Egg-laying-chickens? Wow. She really was senile. Again, I was not sure what kept me asking but I guess I was intrigued. Before I could say anymore, she started telling a story.



"Every day before school, I used to beg my mother to make me eggs for breakfast," GG paused and stared out the window. "Not just any eggs, I wanted her omelettes because nobody made them like Mama did. She would always say '*No because they take too long to make*'. She said this as she fussed around my hair. I never had my hair combed in time for school. We didn't have mobile salons like you do now, back then, she used an afro-comb to straighten the kink and get all the knots out. My older brothers would be waiting in the kitchen, and finally, Mama would make us all quick scrambled eggs and shoo us off to school." GG coughed and pointed to the glass of water by the side table.

I handed her the water and chose to sit on the stool. GG wrapped her fingers around the glass. I waited eagerly for her to continue her story.

"So, every day, we did this dance, my Mum and I," she paused and looked into the far distance, right past my face. I wanted to rush her but decided against it.

"I would beg for an omelette, and Mama would comb my hair and say no, until, one day. I had learned to comb my own hair," GG chuckled. "Oh, I was excited to show her. What a surprise it would be when she came in the morning to find that I had already done my hair. When I asked for an omelette, she would have to say yes, right? No, she said no."

"Noxy, are you slacking off over there?" My own mother was yelling at me.

"No Mum!" I screamed back. "Gosh. GG is telling me a story, leave us alone please." I turned my back to my mum and focused on my great-grandmother again. It did not even look like she heard the interruption because she had continued speaking without me listening.

"...told me how proud she was of me, and that Saturday Mama offered to make me an omelette. It was one of the happiest day of my life."

Damn it, I had clearly missed something. GG patted my hand, I guess she was done talking.

"Why were her omelettes so special?" I quickly asked, not wanting it to end.



“Oh, she made them with the finest green herbs, added milk, ham and cheese, and just the right amount of salt and pepper. Every time I did something good, something that made her proud, she would make me an omelette.”

“Your reward for good behaviour was eggs? Really?”

GG’s chest rose and sank heavily. Had I annoyed her with my sarcasm?

“We were never rich growing up,” GG started talking, “and omelettes need at least 2 eggs. So having more than one egg for breakfast was such a treat. We got the eggs from the poultry farm down William Road. The farm eventually closed. You see the perfect temperature for laying hens is between 19 to 22 degrees, but as you can imagine, with global warming, all the chickens either died of heat stroke or stopped laying eggs completely.” She handed me the empty glass and gestured that she wanted more water.

I lumbered up from my seat to the kitchen, thinking about what GG was saying. The story sounded too wild, even for someone her age but from the way she was telling it, she seemed to have been thrown into the past, a past that she missed. I imagined her by the kitchen counter with her mother, being excited about eggs, it was so simple yet, kind of beautiful. Then I remembered that the story was obviously made up. There was no such thing as egg-laying chickens. I could ignore the entire story, knowing it was a tale from a senile woman, but I would feel bad letting GG die without knowing the truth. So, when I returned with her water, I shared it with her.

“GG, I’ve got to tell you. Eggs don’t come from chickens. They are made in the synthesiser.” I hoped my news would not break her heart.

“No, no darling, those are not eggs. I’m talking about the ones that have been laid. With rich, gooey, yellow yolk. Eggs coming straight from a healthy plump hen,” she smiled, and I grimaced. I looked at the article again, it read: *the study emphasised the severe impact of sudden*



THI spikes on mortality in laying eggs. What did that mean? GG stopped me from reading the rest by pushing the papers gently down. She let out a loud sigh and patted my knee.

“Global warming, that was just the beginning. We were warned but I guess...you never really know what you have until it's gone. Like chickens,” she laughed. It was a cold pained laugh that came from deep within her soul. “I made my kids omelettes too, with real eggs; your grandmother and mum will know what I am talking about. Who knew I would miss chickens, one day they were there, and the next they were gone.”

Egg-laying-chickens? It still sounded so bizarre to me, but I actually, almost believed her, just a little bit.

“The world you live in now may be liveable, but you are not *truly* living.”

I could tell that GG wanted to say more, but she leaned back into her rocking chair in silence. I was a little annoyed because I had not expected her to affect me like this. She was not talking about just the eggs, or the chickens. I felt the inexplicable urge to touch her arm.

"I'm sorry," I whispered.

"I pray for your generation every day."

"GG, you know I don't pray," but she didn't hear me.

"It's time for me to sleep Noxolo."

"Sleep well G – I mean, Great-Granny."

I covered her with a shawl. She had a small smile on her lips, and her eyes were empty again, this time, in a permanent kind of stillness, and then she shut them closed. I had never seen anyone die before, so I didn't know what I had just witnessed. I felt joy that she had shared that story with me, and I would ask her more when she woke up. I put my music back on and ambled over to my mum.

"By the way, I think something is wrong with GG. She was going on about eggs coming from chickens and..."



Then Mum very loudly announced, "Oh eggs yes, that just made me hungry!" She yanked my hand and exclaimed, "We're all hungry. Go pop on the synthesiser and make us some omelettes, will you? I just had a sudden craving for them."