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THE GIRLS WHO FAINTED AT THE SIGHT OF AN EGG

By Yemisi Aribisala 9:00 A.M.



Illustration by Eleanor Taylor

I love the congeniality of eggs, how quintessentially composed they are, the way they snuggle into the cupped hand. The way the eye is compelled around the ovalness, the different coffee-and-milk complexions, recycled-manila-envelope pores, the fragility. Yet it feels slightly pretentious to be a Nigerian and muse about eggs; we are supposedly too no-nonsense for that. I think, for instance, about our national disdain for sell-by dates. How we might drolly concede their significance when heads of lettuce left in the fridge turn to black mush or green peppers melt into slime. But as far as the egg sitting in the average Nigerian fridge is concerned, it is so perfectly composed, so cool when we are not, that we are reassured that all we believed about those *òyìnbós*, those global northerners and their hangup about dates, is true. I have never seen a sell-by date on eggs in Nigeria. And maybe I never will. Our point of view on the matter is that if the egg has salmonella, it is too bad for the egg!

My maternal grandfather bred farmhouse chickens. He introduced me to guinea fowl, duck, and turkey eggs, all as food, not as objects of contemplation. As a child I was taught how to carry an egg and how to move protesting chickens gently aside. When we were on holiday in Ososàmì, Ìbàdàn, my siblings and I had to collect chicken eggs as one of our chores. My younger sister, Morótì, has a scar near her eye that looks like the Igbo scarifications given to sickly children for protection. It is nothing so dramatic. We are not Igbo. It was only a furious chicken flying up in the air one day and pecking her for touching her eggs.

I know, in exact detail, what my perfect chicken egg is like. In size it must be average, or even small. When it is broken into hot oil, it must spread no farther than three to four inches. The yolk must have the energetic, luminous complexion of yellow maize, and it must fall into the pan and not budge, like a spoon of àkàrà in new oil. And the egg must smell like an egg. This is not stating the obvious. In 2003, I lived in Houston, Texas, for five months, and in that time I did not encounter one fried egg that smelled like a fried egg, like that lavish, heady, tangy aroma of grease and creaminess calling for onions, green peppers, roasted mushrooms, sausages. It was the clincher, believe it or not, for whether or not I could live in Houston.

Once, on Twitter, with six words, Ruth Reichl broke down my carefully built defenses. All she had to say was “soft custard of slowly scrambled eggs” and I teared up. Longing burrowed from my stomach to my heart. You see, ever since I contracted some unjust metabolic illness, several years ago, my body refuses to quietly digest eggs. After I eat them, I can recognize where all my nerves start and end. They converse loudly, and this goes on for days, even in my sleep, painful electrical currents firing across my head and my arms. So I can no longer eat eggs, no matter how excruciatingly I long for them.

I could never cook eggs with sardines as well as nostalgia can. Two tablespoons of coconut oil or King’s groundnut oil in a frying pan. One tin of Titus sardines; the original thingamabob with the curly-headed bust of someone (surely Titus) on a maroon-and-sepia tin. Six eggs. A few thin slices of onion. Maybe one tomato, half a green pepper, and one yellow, scented-not-hot Scotch bonnet. The Scotch bonnet is chopped extremely fine and tamed in the hot oil for a minute. The oil will have the powerful fragrance of hot pepper, which will linger tantalizingly well past the end of cooking. The tomato is chopped roughly and added to the frying Scotch bonnet with the onion slices and green peppers, and stirred until the onions are translucent. The sardines are broken up into large pieces with a fork and added to the beaten eggs with a good pinch of salt and a splash of water. The heat is turned down completely, and the mixture is added to the pan. As the eggs cook, the edges are lifted carefully, the pan tilted, and the uncooked eggs directed under the cooked parts to form a thick crust.

I suppose there is something about not being able to have eggs that compels another, more acute level of obsession: staring at them, obsessing about shades of khaki, reading egg recipes that taste fabulous in my head, and collecting egg stories. My favorite was told to me by a friend who, as a child, had to go and live with his grandparents after his parents’ marriage broke down. His father was a proud man who did not believe that men should say they are sorry. His mother had another suitor. The matter had gone well past the attempts to pretend all was well. My friend’s grandmother was an extraordinary woman. She was willing to embrace other people’s children and care for them, but she was famous for her uncompromising views about everything, especially matters of discipline. Many relatives sent their daughters to live with my friend’s grandmother, for an unequivocal induction into life by a no-nonsense

matriarch. These girls had to learn to keep a home, farm competently, and take care of children. Their parents believed that, at home, the girls were too comfortable to take instructions to heart.

The grandmother apparently saw through everything—doors, walls, closed lips—and she read minds and bodies, too. She could tell by the angle of a woman’s bottom whether she was “fornicating” or “contemplating fornication.” If you were on your way out of her room and your head caught a cobweb, you would be grounded and made to sit with her the whole day. The web was a sign that if you were allowed out, something bad and irrevocable was going to happen. The grandmother also administered a homemade virginity test to all the girls and young women in the house. That’s where the eggs came in.

On the relevant morning, the girls would be made to wait outside the testing room, not in a formal queue but in a reluctant mass, apprehensive bodies sitting, standing, leaning, fainting from fear. The apprehension was not unreasonable. In those days mothers told their daughters all manner of stories to try to get them to abstain from sex. If you kiss a boy you immediately become pregnant. If a man sees you naked, you become pregnant. If you see a naked man, if you are fondled, you become pregnant—with twins. Some girls had become pregnant just by having a man brush against them on a busy street. It was dangerously contagious, this pregnancy business.

By the time a young woman had spent long hours on the farm, fried a vat of gari, taken turns to cook meals from scratch, and cared for the younger children in the household, sex was possible, desirable, hormonally pertinent, but not a condition that was acted upon. To be sure, there were girls who knew everything and had done everything, but they dared not live in my friend’s grandmother’s house because they would never pass the test.

The grandmother’s instrument of investigation was a small, free-range egg. You would have to lie back, hitch up your dress, close your eyes, for goodness’ sake, and instinctively clench. You hoped for the best with what little you knew of your body or of rudimentary biology or of the phenomenon of contagious pregnancy. Whether you liked it or not, whether you were willing or not. Whether you thought it was unfair that the boys in the house could do what they liked and fondle whomever, or wondered why pregnancy seemed to be the punishment for sex. If your body reverse-

hatched that egg, your life was not going to be worth living. The excuse that your hymen “broke during physical and health education” was never going to fly with this omniscient grandmother. All hell would break loose if the egg passed from the grandmother’s hand into that dark part of your anatomy you knew so little about. Before the week ran out your parents would come to get you even if they were coming from Kotangora.

It never happened, though. Not in all the years my friend lived with his grandmother did a girl fail the egg test. The fear of that egg was overwhelming. And afterward you never look at an egg the same way again. The egg is such a ubiquitous object that you are reminded constantly of contagious pregnancies. You reach for warm eggs laid by chickens and you think of the mysterious regions that produced eggs. Of what it is like for a chicken to pass an egg and whether it is the effort that makes them so irate. You do not hold it and feel consoled by its khaki blandness. You do not tear up with longing at the sight of eggs.

Even when your wedding night comes and goes, and you have permission to fondle and be fondled, the sense of shame will remain ingrained. You will wonder about the shape of things, the discrepancy between that which is oval and that which is long and tube-like. You will think of the wages of sin. By then, of course, you will understand that there is no such thing as a Bluetooth pregnancy, and you will feel both ashamed at your own foolishness and angry that you allowed yourself that degree of ingenuousness. When you are bearing your children, you will wonder if this is a good or bad thing. You will wonder if perhaps that is why chickens are so foolish and confused—too much coming and going, too little understanding of the reasons why. You will sleep and imagine yourself turning into a large chicken, but you won’t tell anyone because of the shame.

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