

Sneers Of A Sickening Society

THE ETHEREAL THING FLAPPED against the wind, moving as if in a dance.

Its orange hue, majestic, exuded power. From the fire mould where pieces of firewood kissed, the sparks sprung another dancing embers of the menacing flame. The brightness from the enigmatic fire that graced the night made folly of the waning moon which sat lazily up, up across the darkened sky. It was one of the nights you couldn't look at the sky, smile and say, "Ah! What a beautiful night!" Even the stars hid their presence. Maybe...just maybe, the stars feared. Maybe they knew. And they wanted no part in what was to happen. The chirp-chirping of the crickets provided a perfect tune for the events of the night. Surely, it was no ordinary day. At least, I knew that.

Mma Balewa, the octogenarian who had defied the idea of what it meant to be old, very old, sat on her usual hard-carved wooden stool—the very one she had sat on for over twenty years when she started her career. She gestured for the grinding stone to be brought to her. Her orders were carried out. Swiftly as they were given. Even her silence spoke in ways that were as mysterious as they were loud. Her face lit up as she bent over to drop the round stone into the screaming fire. Seeing her face against the fire, a part of her face brightened by it, I wondered how she could be alive at this age. Was it because she also conformed? I stopped myself from asking those questions again. Mma Azabu had warned me to stop asking a lot of questions. She said I was a girl. Mine was to follow, nod along and not ask questions that would land me in trouble. So instead of battling with my mind further on the obvious questions, I

walked out of my mind to focus my attention on Mma Balewa, who was still bending over the fire, making sure the stone was getting heated. I looked at her skin. Even her skin had given up on her. There was no sign of flesh under the dried-date skin she wore, so graciously.

All she had was just the rubbery outer layer of the human skin on bone. Yet, she moved with so much agility (as she turned the stone in the fire) that made stupid the idea of old age.

Not so far away from Mma Balewa, I sat, my gaze fixed on the burning flames and the stone it housed. It was going to happen to me and I couldn't decide what to feel. Was it fear? Sadness? Anger? I just couldn't pick one. But when I look back now, as I sit here writing all the accounts, having had deep introspection about my ordeal, I think it was "anger" I felt that night. I was angry, yet I couldn't show it. My heart burned with anger, yet I couldn't express it. I got angrier that I couldn't have a say in what happened to my own body. That I had to be subjected to that much pain. That I had to always conform to what society demanded of me. All for what? For being a girl? I wanted to see my younger brother being subjected to any kind of ritual, any kind of pain... I guess I would have to wait for long because there aren't any!

"Azabu, join me here," Mma Balewa said in a thick Mamprusi accent, the words rolling out of her tongue like they were being forced out.

I flinched in pain, nodded and silently walked over to where she sat.

Even before she could perform her ritual, I felt the pain. Just by looking at the fire lick away at the stone, thinking about how hot it was, my skin began tearing apart. It felt like each tissue wanted a way out. It was as if they all sought refuge and the mere rush of their escape

caused pain to me. It was unbearable but what could I do? The real pain was about to start. I sat on the stool, still numb, unable to say a word.

“This will hurt a while,” she said, and I wanted to get up and run, or worse, pick the stone up from the fire shrine, press it hard against any part of her body and ask her if it *did* hurt “*a while*”. But instead, I turned away.

I saw Mma Azabu, my mother, walk towards us, her lanky figure very obvious even in the dark. Sometimes, I wondered if her physique had any stories to tell? Maybe it spoke of how a young girl as she, when she conceived my eldest brother, wasn’t allowed to grow fully before being plucked, a new bud, into the perils of the society that thought of only itself. Or maybe that was just how she was moulded. Maybe, I was, as usual, spending too much time in my head.

“It will hurt but it is for your own good,” Mma Balewa added. Tears filled my eyes defying my conviction—my conviction not to cry. *For my own good?* My mind begged to ask. Well, again, thinking about the events of that night now, I cannot say I blame them. Mma Balewa or Mma Azabu or any other woman. I don’t blame any of them. I cannot blame them. I blame the society that made everything *so*. I blame the society that forces the hands of mothers to subject their daughters to that much pain just to right a wrong. I blame the society that says: *If you want to save your daughter from the same pain you went through, put them through more pain*. That kind of society makes me sick. More than my mother made me when she told me I had to get my breast ironed. It was raining that night. The night she broke the news. The thunder that followed her announcement was as loud and deafening as the weight of her message. That night, I wished the thunder would strike me down, finish me before society did.

I am sure you want to know why we had gathered around *the* fire that night. Why I speak of pain, a kind of pain I couldn't do anything about. I will tell you.

Here's the thing.

My mother married Baba when she was only sixteen. Her mother, my grandmother, married her Baba even younger—at age thirteen or so. Other women before them also married earlier than they were supposed to. It is just a long, unending string of lines. From mother to daughter. All it took was for your breasts to show growth. All it took was to see those pointy things sit lower, more natural, close together, each so shapely and moulded to a perfect form. The next thing you'd know was you were being given away to old men for marriage. Mma Azabu told me how she cried on her wedding day. But what was her respite? Her mother went through it. Her grandmother went through it. Those before her did. She told me once that we lived in a man's world. The men were never going to stop. She said women were like chess pieces (she didn't actually use 'chess' but a similar concept) on men's chessboard, a pawn to be used any way they liked. So now, as a counter-attack, they (the enlightened women) have devised a way to delay a girl's growth, to delay the breast's sprout, to keep girls still young and innocent.

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I screamed, my voice harbouring pain itself. Puffs of smoke escaped from where the hot stone licked, my skin melting down with it. I fought, really fought, to free myself from their grip but *they* wouldn't let me go. Their grip was firm, too tight. *Arrrhhhhhhh!* I screamed out my lungs. No, seriously, I *did* scream my lungs out. While the repetitive pounding continued, as the pain blinded me, I saw my lungs fall out. Maybe a hallucination before passing out but they crept

out, covered in blood, two *bold things* on their way to freedom. That way, they had no part of the pain I felt. I envied their freedom. I watched them go, ran free until everything turned dark, void.