

My heartbeats rise in tempo, a rhythmic dance of anticipation, as I traverse the expanse before my thatch-roofed hut—a sturdy abode, larger than its peers within the kingdom. Amidst the tendrils of sound, the shrill cries of encouragement from within intertwine, cocooning me in a reassuring embrace. Again, their resonance cascades outward, arresting my steps in a breathless interlude, knuckles pressed to my mouth, eyes drawn toward the sanctum within.

“Push harder!” a voice emanates from the hut's core, a command that reverberates within me, a drumbeat of anticipation. A cry ensues, a note of vulnerability that crashes against the fortress of my ribs, and a shiver, like an icy current, races down my spine.

“Gods of our land, please shield my wife and our unborn child,” I murmur fervently, a plea cast into the realm of divine providence.

Steering to the left, I settle upon a bench, an observer on this stage of life, positioned beside the chamber whence the cries emanate. A slender kitchen forms a connective bridge between the two domiciles, the adjacent house oriented toward the farmlands and the other, a sentinel facing the compound's ingress, a vantage to discern any visitor's approach.

“Now! The baby is emerging!” The proclamation ignites a cascade of urgency, and like an arrow released from its bow, I bound to my feet, a gust of motion propelling me to the threshold. Leaning in, I strain my ear, a cup pressed against the wall, ensnaring the symphony of a newborn's cry.

A sigh escapes me, the realization dawning that I trespass upon a sacred moment. Why am I barred from entering? Is she not my beloved, my partner in life's grand tapestry? This silent query hangs in the air, unanswered, a common quandary for husbands in this fragile threshold between life and birth.

But a fragile wail pierces my contemplation, snapping me back to the corporeal realm. My heart, tethered to the moment, leaps at the sound, a triumphant sonata of new life. Swiftly, I sink to my knees, arms extended towards the heavens, a benediction offered in gratitude to the gods.

“Eh... Okoro. This one you're praising the gods, has your wife given birth?” A measured inquiry from the advancing figure—Mazi Obialor, an elder of repute in the kingdom of Ụmụọwa, a domain where seven villages intertwine their destinies.

“Yes, nnanyi, mere moments ago.” I reply, my words laden with the gravitas of a father's pride.

Yet, as the sands of time slip through the hourglass, another voice, diminutive yet resonant, pierces the ether. A gasp catches in my throat, an exclamation poised on the precipice—have twins graced this world? Oh, gods of our land, what providence have you unveiled?

“Aru emela! Abomination!” A midwife materializes—youthful but middle-aged—a midwife whose hands bear the crimson hue of birth, clasping her head in disbelief.

“Ọbụ gịni nwanyi, what has happened?” Mazi Obialor queries, a chorus of concern lacing his words.

My mind, a seer of omens, glimpses the truth before it is unveiled. And there, in that moment of prescience, the midwife's words cast the die—my wife, she who I cherish, has borne a profound transgression.

“Okoro's wife has birthed an abomination,” the midwife intones, her voice a lament, each syllable heavy with sorrow.

Mazi Obialor's impatience seethes, eager for revelation. "What form of abomination is that?"

With tempestuous gravity, the truth spills forth. "she has given birth to a pair of identical twins."

My legs falter, a foundation crumbling beneath me, and I crumple to my knees. "The gods! Gods of our land, why? Why have you decided to punish me after seven years of consultations and sacrifices? Am I unworthy of your blessings? You know of the tradition yet you still went ahead to give me twins."

Twins—a taboo etched upon our land's consciousness, a menace incarnate, a catalyst for chaos. Their birth, an affront to past generations, a tradition observed with relentless fidelity, woven into the very fibers of our existence. I waver, torn asunder by history's weight and the poor babies' families can never do anything. A man who once tried to stop his twins from getting killed had gotten himself slaughtered alongside his family, putting an end to his lineage. A husband cast into an abyss of uncharted destiny.

Mazi Obialor's voice dwindles, receding like an ember's glow, his presence a specter evaporating. Tear-tracks glisten upon my cheeks, and I rise from my knees, the midwife a sentinel beside me, hands affixed to her head.

"And my wife?" My query, a lifeline, a tether to the precipice of hope.

A sigh exhales, a requiem for the unknown. "She is still unconsciousness and—"

Yet, amidst the disquietude, a duet of cries reverberates, two distinct voices coalescing into a symphony of life. A mother's lullaby, birthed from agony's crucible, a whisper of survival that clings to hope's frail vine.

**

As I stand poised on the brink of uncertainty, the impending summons from the king weighs upon me, a dark cloud heralding the verdict for my sons' lives—a judgment already etched in the annals of destiny. Self-imposed exile beckons, a solitary path devoid of alternatives, the walls of constraint closing in around us. Beside me, my wife stirs from slumber, a shade of sorrow shadowing her countenance. Cradling the twins, she embraces them tenderly, a facade of joy concealing the deeper currents of pain, anxiety, and concealed apprehension.

Grief hovers, an ethereal specter waiting to consume us should we fail to shield our children from the abyss that looms, their cries echoing as we gather our belongings in somber silence. Do the infants sense their impending fate, their voices carrying a poignant refrain that echoes within my thoughts?

“Are you prepared?” I inquire of my wife, Ołamma, her frame bearing the weight of a cloth bundle clasped within, garments bound and secured. The twins, like yin and yang, embrace two distinct hues of skin. The child she cradles, Chinedum, aptly meant ‘God is leading me,’ boasts fair complexion and eyes that glisten with an ancestral light. A legacy etched in the irises, a patrilineal heirloom.

In my arms rests Tooohukwu, christened ‘praise God,’ his ebony skin radiating beneath the veil of sunlight. Akin to his twin, his eyes bear the same shade, a bond unbroken. These appellations, endowed with purpose, carved from the stone of circumstance that marks their entry into the world.

One final glance at the hut reveals a tableau of abandonment—a bamboo bed, ivory plates left behind, and five kegs of calabashes. Stepping into the world beyond, the faint glow of the sky signals the opportune hour to depart, to vanish within the folds of night before darkness descends upon the earth.

“I sense an emptiness, a void as if I'm leaving a huge part of me behind,” Ołamma whispers, her arms an anchor embracing the firstborn.

A nod of agreement accompanies our trajectory, as we trace a path encircling the dwelling, venturing toward the shelter of the forest's embrace. A tether to tradition and lineage, I am bound to this land, yet forced to sever the ties that anchor my heart—a legacy unraveling in the face of inexorable reality.

A dichotomy of choices lies before us, each a step upon a precarious precipice. As the prospect of confrontation with the relentless might of the Ȩmųȡwa warriors looms, the inevitability of their pursuit casts its shadow, a harbinger of turmoil and upheaval. The clarion chirping of crickets rises, weaving an orchestral backdrop as we traverse the wilderness, a strategic refuge born of necessity.

A misconception takes hold—a sanctuary granted by the forest's embrace, the echo of our passage disguised by nature's shroud. Yet, the undercurrent of distant murmurs pierces the air, faint voices punctuating the dark tapestry of the night. Figures emerge, torches aloft, soldiers in pursuit. A realization crashes upon me—an awareness that our escape has been unmasked, betrayed by the very woods that promised us sanctuary.

“Run now! They are the royal warriors,” I command, my grip firm on my wife's wrist, the twins cradled securely in her arms.

Navigating the labyrinthine darkness, we sprint, sidestepping obstacles and ducking beneath looming branches. Despite the inky blackness, the urgency propels us onward. Halting to allow Ȣlamma a moment's respite, I am greeted by the cacophony of warrior yells, a camorous symphony punctuating the serene night.

She falters, her frame a portrait of vulnerability, but I intervene before her fall, preventing her stumble against an obscured trunk. Gasping, she finds her voice, exclaiming, “Ah! My leg.”

Her cry rends the stillness, a brawl that disrupts the reverent hush enveloping us. Seated upon the trunk, she clutches at her injury, the silence imbued with the spirit of pain.

“It's alright. We have to keep going ” I assure her, attempting to aid her ascent. Yet, her resolve falters, and she descends to the tree's stem, beset by fatigue and discomfort.

“I cannot stand,” she confesses, her voice a somber note against the backdrop of urgency.

The pursuit of the warriors looms large, the number evident from their shouts that echo through the forest. “Dearest, rise—The warriors are getting closer,” I beseech.

In the absence of response, I press her free hand into service, resting the slumbering infant upon her palm. “I have to draw their attention away, provide you the opportunity to flee,” I declare, despite her resistance.

“No, we have to keep going,” she insists, her grip unwavering despite her burden.

Seeking her cheek, I brush away unspoken tears, a silent reassurance exchanged in the absence of visual contact. “If there's one person that needs to keep moving, that's you. The twins need you more than they need me. Tell them, their father loves them and will continue to love them even in the afterlife. Tell them, they should not see twins as evil but a blessing to mankind and they shouldn't hesitate to fight this barbaric tradition till it ends.”

A surge of courage overtakes me, a defiant spirit emboldened by the direness of our circumstances, a precipice where bravery and fear conjoin. I stand no

chance against the warriors but I have to try. If not for my children, then let it be for the unborn twins to come.

Against the backdrop of her sobs, I cling to the vow we forged, my fingers clenched into a fist.

“Please, don't leave. Remember our promise to each other.”

“I shall. Yet, I have to protect you and the twins.”

In a poignant moment, I pivot, retracing the path we traversed, a return to the impending onslaught. For, in the face of insurmountable odds, the love of a father, a husband, and a guardian endures, an unwavering testament against the tempestuous tides of fate.