

A CYCLE OF SILENCE:

A SHORT STORY BY GIFT OGBUENYI

Synopsis:

"A Cycle of Silence" explores the life of Ann, a woman who seeks refuge in marriage, only to discover that her new husband's seemingly caring exterior conceals a world of emotional abuse. Having escaped a traumatic past in her elder brother's home, Ann hoped for a brighter future. However, her husband's insults, mockery, infidelity, and financial control force her into a cycle of agony once again. As Ann grapples with her internal turmoil, a pivotal moment forces her to confront the painful reality of her situation. This story delves into her journey of self-discovery, resilience, and the pursuit of healing, highlighting the importance of breaking the cycle of abuse and finding empowerment within.

Disclaimer:

This short story is based on real-life events and experiences, primarily those of Ann. While many parts of the story are drawn from actual events, some parts have been modified or fictionalized for the sake of narrative clarity, privacy, or creative expression. Therefore, certain details may not be entirely true to life.

Most importantly, I have permission from who inspires this story (my mom), to tell this story. I hope this story can be a source of empathy and inspiration to many African women going through similar ordeals.

CHAPTER ONE

The sun hung low in the evening sky, casting long shadows over the vibrant streets of Maiduguri, Borno. The year was 2001, the street was bustling with 'GSM agents', the recent introduction came with new ideas and hope for the new millenium. However, Ann cared for none of it.

Her major concern now was the mood she would find her brother in. As she approached the turn that led to her brother's shabby, two-bedroom, face-me-I-face-you house, she muttered a quick prayer. As Ann sneaked up to the rusty gate, she opened it gently. It made a quiet, tired sound, like an old friend sharing a secret. The soft creak echoed in the still night, a hushed warning.

Ann held her breath, hoping her brother wouldn't hear. Luckily for her, his brown sandals weren't at the front door, meaning he hadn't returned back from his shop.

This could either end good or bad for her, he may return late because sales didn't go well today and take out all his frustration on her. If that was the

case, she would accept it, after all, it is a 'small sacrifice' to be made, she would soon find someone to marry and move out of his home.

Ann dashed inside, determined to quietly fix supper and avoid any issues. However, her hopes were dashed when she found Chinwe, her brother's wife, lounging at the table with a half-empty bottle of "ogogoro" beside her.

Chinwe's bloodshot eyes locked onto Ann, and a wicked grin spread across her face. "You don't come back, today you wasted time o, you lucky say your *brother* never come back," she quipped with a voice thickened by too much beer.

Ann clenched her fists, her dislike for Chinwe deep and simmering, but she held her tongue. She managed a strained smile. "I no know say you go show face quick."

Chinwe cackled like a witch, the sound grating on the ears. "No fear, I no go tell am say you come late today, but I wan chop rice, o *nwanyi oma*." She sneered sarcastically.

Ann tightened her jaw as she made her way to the kitchen, her resentment bubbling underneath the surface. She knew that responding would only escalate things. So, she endured this night, like so many others, silently yearning for a way out of this tough life.

She prepared dinner quickly like she did every other day, after serving Chinwe and her brother's children, Chiboy and Mummygirl, she sat on the kitchen stool, waiting for her brother to come home.

Soon enough, the quiet of the evening was disrupted by the sudden, jarring sound of the front iron gate. It clanged open loudly, echoing through the compound. Ann's heart skipped a beat as she recognized the telltale sign. Brother Emma was back from his shop, and the way that gate had screamed open sent a clear message—his mood was far from pleasant.

Her pulse quickened but she braced herself to greet him. As she did, she unwillingly met his bloodshot eyes. "Good evening brotha." She bent to welcome him.

"Did you cook rice again? Is that the only thing you can make?" he roared moving close to her.

Ann dared not look at Chinwe who requested for rice, instead she spat out a fear-filled apology hoping to pacify her brother's wrath. She failed to calm him down and received a resounding slap instead.

Her cheek stung from the blow and with teary eyes, she moved to the kitchen to prepare oha soup and semo as per his demand. She had hoped she could ask

for permission to have her dinner, with brother Emma's current mood, she dared not. It was already 9:30 pm, Ann would go to bed with an empty stomach as she had done so many times.

CHAPTER TWO

Ann sat in the dimly lit living room, the soft glow of her phone's screen illuminating her worried expression. The room had changed dramatically since the tumultuous nights at her brother's house in Maiduguri two decades ago. Now, it was filled with the sounds of her grown children, two of whom were away at university, and the other two busy with their secondary school studies. It was a stark contrast to the silence she had once endured.

This morning, she had received a life changing text message, she must now decide her future. It was from a woman she didn't know, but the words were all too clear: "Tell your husband to take care of his responsibility, he knows what I'm talking about."

Confused, Ann started a conversation with this mystery woman, a conversation that led her to discover her husband, Austin had a child outside of their marriage. She looked around at the family photos adorning the walls—images of her children's smiling faces, evidence of the love and stability she had strived so hard to provide. How could he have done this to her, to their family, after all these years? How much more pain was she expected to endure?

Was all the sacrifices she made over the years meaningless? Was this another tragedy she was expected to endure?

Austin was never faithful, this was no secret to Ann. She knew her husband was two-faced, exceptionally cunning and manipulative, she knew him like the back of her hand. She had borne children for him, she was never taught to *abandon* her family because of some *mistakes* he had made. This was her home and she would stick by her children, but today she decided to confront her husband with full force.

She asked him about it and he promised to explain truthfully when he got back, Ann didn't trust him, knowing all too well the man she married was a pathological liar. As Ann waited for Austin to return after dropping off their kids at school, a million thoughts raced through her mind. The text message from the woman still gnawed at her, and she couldn't shake the sense of dread.

She wondered how Austin could explain this secret he had hidden for so long. What would it mean for their family? What about their grown children?

Austin returned, and the air in the room grew heavy with tension. They sat in silence for what felt like an eternity, both aware that the conversation that needed to happen would be excruciating.

Finally, Austin cleared his throat and began to explain, his voice devoid of remorse. He spoke about the affair and how he demanded for the child to be aborted seven years back all while Ann's tears flowed freely down her cheeks.

He felt entitled to her forgiveness, he had no right, Ann had decided she had had enough.

As Ann sat there, tears streaming down her face, she couldn't help but feel the bitter irony of her situation. Twenty years had passed since she endured the torment of her brother's house, yet here she was, still suffering, still bearing the weight of betrayal and heartache.

The regret gnawed at her, not for the choices she had made but for the relentless cycle of pain that seemed to haunt her. She had believed that marriage would be her escape, her chance to build a life free from the abuses of her past. But as she listened to Austin's cold explanation, she couldn't escape the cruel irony that her past had caught up with her once more.

Her brother's house had been a place of agony, and she had fought so hard to break free from it, only to find herself in a different kind of prison. The sacrifices she had made for her family, the resilience she had shown in the face of adversity—all of it seemed to have led her to this moment of despair.

In the midst of her tears and turmoil, Ann couldn't help but wonder if the universe was playing a cruel joke on her. She had hoped for a life free from suffering, but it seemed that her past had other plans, and her heartache had followed her into a new chapter of her life.

Frustrated, she jumped up and immediately began to pack her things, she was going to leave, even if it meant returning back to her late father's house in the village. In that moment, she didn't think about anyone but herself, allowing herself to be 'selfish' for once.

Austin got on his knees, a fake attempt to seem remorseful. Ann scoffed at his tricks, she had fallen for it too many times but today, it would be different. Ignoring him, she resumed with her packing. According to him, this affair happened in 2014, the same year she was toiling away at his village building the family house.

Ann wept profusely as she recalled all the pain she had felt over the years, after her husband stopped working in 2015, she had been the sole

breadwinner of the home and it had not been easy. The sudden inflation in prices followed by the new presidential regime had taken a toll on her. Was this is how she was repaid for all her hard work?

Slumping to the floor, shoulders shaking with choked sobs, Ann clutched at her chest, a failed attempt to ease the heartache she was experiencing.

She never left, with time she forgave him.

‘Many had endured worse, I have to stay for the sake of my family.’ she told herself.

CHAPTER THREE

It was September 2002, Ann was to be married soon to her sweetheart, an older man from Abuja. He was financially stable, even had a car of his own. God had finally answered her prayers, her betrothed would save her from the suffering once and for all. She was chased away from her brother’s house that same year, although she felt relieved, it bugged her that she was heavily misunderstood.

Her heart ached whenever she recalled the painful memory, her sister-in-law, sowed the final seed of hatred into her brother’s mind which drove him to throw her out. After going back and forth to stay with her mother in the village and her other brother, Bony, she was to be wedded soon. She would no longer be a burden to Brother Bony, her elder brother and current landlord.

In April 2002, Ann met Austin through her friend Queen, who also happened to be Austin's distant cousin. Queen thought they might be a good match and introduced them, hoping Ann could find love and happiness after a tough past.

Ann felt hopeful about the future. She had faced a lot of difficulties living with her brother and wanted a fresh start. Meeting Austin seemed like fate giving her a chance at a better life.

He was a kind and generous man. Despite being 15 years older than Ann and having experienced a divorce, he treated her with care and often offered her rides in his comfortable car. Ann felt hopeful about the future and believed that they could build a life together despite their age difference and Austin's past.

Back then, being unmarried at 25 was seen as a stigma. Ann had just celebrated her 26th birthday, and she felt a sense of relief, as if she had escaped society's judgment. At work, she put on a brave face, pretending not to be affected by the flood of compliments that followed the announcement of

her engagement. She showed off her ring and subtly bragged about her rich fiancé from Abuja who would take her there after marriage. She wouldn't need to work anymore because he made enough, he would *change* her life.

She could finally start a family of her own, this seemed like a great compensation due to her past struggles.

Two months later, their traditional marriage was held. Ann's white wedding took place in April 2003, and by then, she was already seven months pregnant. Her wedding dress cleverly concealed her growing belly, as she was naturally slim but had gained some weight due to the pregnancy.

In June, Ann and Austin welcomed their first child, a boy, named Samuel. His three siblings were born in the following years.

CHAPTER FOUR

Samuel turned 20 today, her first child, how much time had passed since she was a 26 year old young lady terrified of giving birth? She took one loving look at the young man in front of her, eyes watering as she recalled all the insults she received from her husband because of him.

Samuel was autistic, a condition most likely passed on from his father's line. However, Ann was ridiculed mostly by her husband for 'giving birth to an *imbecile*.' She loved her son and was so proud of him, she vowed to make him happy and feel loved despite his father's harsh criticism.

Austin had finally gotten a job and Ann was currently unemployed, it was truly a tough time for her. His salary wasn't much and she didn't expect him to celebrate his 'least favorite' child's birthday, so, she made the day as meaningful as she could.

Samuel's younger sister, Onyinye baked a cake and with the little they had, the day was marked.

Not a day passed when Ann wasn't filled with regret of her marriage choice, however, one look at her children, filled her heart with warmth. Her husband was no saint, but her children could be.

Ann made a solemn promise to herself: she would ensure her children never settled for less. She was determined to break the cycle of generational trauma and societal expectations that had plagued her own life.

She raised her sons with the intention of molding them into better men and, eventually, better husbands. Ann wanted them to know the importance of respect, empathy, and love in their relationships.

For her daughters, Ann's message was clear: they would learn to recognize their worth and never accept less than they deserved. She was determined that they wouldn't suffer the same fate she had endured, and she would empower them to make choices that honored their own happiness and well-being.

She stayed in her marriage, although she saw her husband as nothing more than a roommate. The love she had for him had died long ago, together with his failed promises.

Ann saw hope in her children's futures. Her sons grew up to be respectful and caring, while her daughters knew their own worth.

The cycle of pain was finally broken, and Ann's life started feeling brighter. Her children brought her happiness and fulfillment, and she knew that her future was full of possibilities. With them by her side, Ann's life had truly begun anew.

Conclusion:

My mom, Ann, is the inspiration behind this story, and her real-life experiences reflect the struggles of many African women. Their strength and determination are often hidden beneath the weight of societal stereotypes. Through this tale, I hope to shed light on these challenges and inspire change. We can break free from these stereotypes by recognizing the value of every woman's journey, just as I've learned from my mother. It's time to celebrate their resilience and rewrite the narratives that hold them back. Together, we can create a future where every African woman can shine.