

Sweat rolled down from her hairline as Ifedi's face contorted in agony. Her nerves popped out of her forehead and her fists were folded very tightly as she fought to push the child out of her womb. Her travail very visible to all who cared to watch her in the act of parturition. And a lot of women did care about the visual. But as was the custom, no one came to help. She was, after all, doing what her body was meant to do. Instead, they sang and danced in a circle; clapping and calling to their *chi* to make the way easier for the newest addition.

*... chi biko mee ka uzo di nma, o na-abia ife gi ofufe ...*

Ifedi lay on a low bed in the middle of the women. Red clothes and palm fronds were used to mark out where she lay. To the untrained foreigner's eye, it seemed more like a ritual. And it was. Another *nnette* was about to join the family, coming to join her mothers to serve the priests and their servant boys. From the moment of her conception, she was already doomed to a life of service, and if she dared challenge the status quo, she would be killed, or worse given to the newest servant boys to do as they pleased with her.

Which usually ended in death.

Many women of the secluded village of Umuja wanted to join the sacred group. Apparently, they believed sweeping the temple, cooking for and giving their bodies to the undeserving priests were noble. However, they were from the wrong bloodline and were only stuck with their wishful musing. They would only hope for their sons to be chosen for priesthood.

Usually, it was against the custom for an *nnette* to be friends with a common village girl – to avoid getting corrupted – but Ifedi and I disregarded such fatuity. When we were very young girls, she confided in me, revealing her hatred for their rules and her discomfort in sleeping with men she couldn't even stand. Once she told me that the high priest's right-hand man was smelly down there and he liked being sucked off.

But her quiet spirit and non-confrontational personality made her silent. And quite frankly, she didn't want to die. After all these years, self-preservation was still the go-to for humans.

When she wrote to tell me that she was pregnant, I immediately sensed something was off. As we corresponded, she told me the first wrong - that she knew the exact priest who was responsible. And this was because she loved the priest. Again, this was strictly prohibited.

An *nnette* didn't fall in love with a priest. As this would mean that she would treat him better than other priests and over time wouldn't want to sleep with the others. This would breed jealousy and thus, threaten an imbalance in the system. They were to be rotated; which meant that they wouldn't know the man who was responsible should they become pregnant.

If this forbidden love story fell on the wrong ears, it would cost the two lovers their lives and so I was sworn to secrecy. Not that I even had anybody to tell all these things to but I loved doing whatever that would make Ifedi's heart at peace.

The second wrong however, I didn't know. Ifedi didn't know too. It was a pang in my spirit, an intuition. I didn't tell my friend because I didn't want her to worry. But in the eighth month, I moved back to the village to be closer to her. Even though the nnenne wouldn't let me come to her, I knew she felt better that I was around.

The pang in my chest didn't cease. Instead, it became more tangible.

One afternoon as we walked around the village, I told her what I had been feeling.

"Ife, I have a feeling that you're going to have a boy." I began cautiously. "I really hope not but you know that –"

"That your feelings don't lie." She completed.

Her face grew pensive as we continued our walk. No doubt deep in thought of what that could mean for her and her baby. Baby boys were typically the revered babies. Symbols of strength and continuity. But to the nnennes, they were a curse. After all, a boy was unfit for service. And *chi* forbid that he gives his body to the priests. He would be burned naked on the stake in the village square, visible to all to watch his shame.

*Nnenne*, mother's mother. A boy couldn't be a mother.

Ifedi's baby would die.

Her maternal instincts kicked in and she made me promise to take her child and run if it turned out to be a boy. A week later she asked that I take the child even if it turned out to be a girl. She wouldn't let her daughter suffer the same fate she did.

If the nnennes were as powerful as they claimed to be, if they were more in tune with the elements, they would have noticed the dry, humid air. They would have heard the owls as they flew across the compound. From where I – and the other common women – stood, I noticed and saw even more. Like the redness of my friend's eyes, the strange way the red cloths and palm fronds waved despite the static air and when I squinted my eye just a little bit more, towards the far left, hidden behind the bushes was Nnamdi, her priest lover.

He had tears in his eyes as he watched his lady-love give birth to their baby. If he was caught, he would be banished. Men, especially priests, were not allowed to see women at their most unclean state – it would make them unfit to serve the gods.

"Lekwenu isi ya! Q na-abia! Q na-abia!" a woman shouted. *Look at her head! She is coming! She is coming!*

The atmosphere charged ominously with its very elements. And with excitement from the women. Their chants increased with fervor, their claps became synchronically erratic. Their strange dances, sacrifices to the gods, even more shambolic. My chest pounded. Sweat pooled in my armpits and my fists got clammy.

Ifedi pushed the baby out and its wail pierced the eardrums of all present as loud shouts of joy broke out from every lip. A birth would always be precious. The connector of many women around the world.

I and the nnennes watched with hawk eyes as she examined the baby, searching for either a vagina or a penis. Soon, it was obvious that it was a *he*. Ifedi let out a loud cry. Then commotion burst out among the villagers.

*“Arụ!” Abomination.*

*“Tufiakwa! Ihe ojo emele anyi!” God forbid! A bad thing happened to us.*

The Ezinnes, the highest-ranking nnennes, gathered round her. Soon as the songs of joy turned into mourning, they began the chants for his execution. My heart broke for my friend and my godson. I willed her to speak up, to at least buy her some time with him so I could take him as we planned.

Thankfully, she did. With the little strength she had, she lifted her voice. *“Kwụsị! Ụnụ biko Kwụsị!” Stop! Please stop!* “Please, please let me have just a night with my son –”

The Ezinnes had already begun shaking their heads, they couldn’t even believe that she was asking for this. She was supposed to know this was going to happen.

Ifedi was relentless. “Let me at least know what it is like to breastfeed my child! Tomorrow, at this time, I will give him to you. But don’t deny me this.”

Arguments broke out. Confusion was ripe in the air. And then I looked to see if Nnamdi was still there. He was. But now he was crying, ugly tears that marred his otherwise handsome face. And for the first time I wondered how he felt seeing his lover and son in this position. It was easy to discard a man’s feelings but as I watched him, I pitied him.

He might never touch his son. His child. He wasn’t even close enough to at least look at his face, to see a resemblance.

When I finally went back to paying attention to the happenings in front of me, I saw that they conceded for a day. She would be the first nnenne who was granted this. They sent the younger girls to help Ifedi, to clean her. But not the baby, they were not to be in close contact with a curse. They sent the women away with the promise that they would return tomorrow for the sacrifice.

I joined them to leave. But not to my house. I hung around the premises of their abode knowing well that they would be too distracted by the birth of the boy to care about trespassers.

The plan had begun.

Ifedi was to go to her hut, but with the protection of some women. They would stay outside her door to make sure the child was safe, safe for its death the next day. But according to the plan, I was to go to her hut first. So I did. I went with the doll I made from raffia and soft clothes and hid with it in Ifedi’s closet. A few minutes later the women came with Ifedi, ready to begin their vigil. I watched as they lay my

friend and the fussing baby on the bed. They didn't care about teaching her how to breastfeed. After all, he wasn't going to live. They would even be happy if he died of starvation between now and tomorrow. They'd say the gods did it.

Intermittently, they would enter the room to see that both of them were still there. I realized that they came in after every fifteen minutes. I had only fifteen minutes to execute our escape.

At 2:24am, after their routine check, I knew it was time. I would snatch my friend's baby out of her grasp. She probably may never see him again. I wore her nnenne outfit and took the basket they usually carried when they went to clean the temple. I came out of my hiding place and went to exchange the doll with the baby. I hoped the bush babies will cry often to mask the silence of the doll. Ifedi's eyes leaked tears. But we couldn't speak for fear of being heard.

I put the little baby in the basket and prayed that he didn't wake up. Just as I went to the window to climb out, she whispered weakly to me, "His name is Nnamdi." I nodded with tears as I watched her rock the doll.

At thirty-three, it was quite a difficult feat to climb through a window. My pounding heart almost failed me as I navigated my way out, a deed only made possible because of the hours I spent studying the map Ifedi drew me.

"Who is that? And where are you going?" a voice stopped me.

Willing my voice to not shake, I replied, "Nne ndewo." *Hello, mother.* "I'm going to the stream. I-I have been facing some eh, issues. I haven't seen my period for three months and I want to seek the face of the water goddess. I want to get pregnant; I want to bring other nnes to this world."

It wasn't the best lie I had told but it came easily and apparently she thought it was good.

And so, I walked.

Then I ran. And ran. Despite the hunger and weakness, I ran. Soon the baby began to cry but I didn't stop. I couldn't stop till I reached the next village. And the next day, I went to a far village, so far that the customs of the Umuaja people were unknown.

It was there that I heard that the Ezinnes killed Ifedi when they cut the baby and realized it was a doll. I mourned my friend. For the life she could have lived. And I mourned for Nnamdi, for he will never know his mother. He was mine now.

I dared not show my face at Umuaja. At first it was self-banishment, condemned to never return to my hometown just so Nnamdi could live. Then, it was self-preservation and guilt. I feared the wrath of the nnennes. I didn't want to die because I *didn't want* to die. But I lied to myself that it was because I didn't want Nnamdi to lose another mother.

And then guilt because sometimes I thought that I had a hand in my friend's death.

When Nnamdi was thirteen months and the noise his birth roused had died down, at least to a minimum, I sent a cryptic letter to his father. I knew some of the words Ifedi used with him so I infused my letter with them, hoping he would make the connection.

He did. And eight days later I received one from him saying he will visit soon. I arranged the house, wanting him to know that his son was loved and safe. A few weeks later, Nnamdi was in my house. This would be the first time I spoke to the man.

We tried to make small talk, but the elephant in the room refused to be ignored. So instead of bringing him a meal and boiling water for his bath, I went to the room to bring the sleeping child. His child.

Then I handed him over. I watched in amazement as Nnamdi traced his son's face, tears running down his face. It was still jarring to see a man cry; especially one that cried in front of a woman.

"He's so beautiful." He whispered brokenly. I nodded and just watched them, silent. He held him close to his chest, looking at him in wonder. I knew he wanted to wake him up, to know what he was like when he was conscious. But he didn't.

At thirty-four, I was a spinster. And yet it was abominable that a man would spend several days with me, in my house. My blasé attitude and blatant disregard for culture made me every man's nightmare. Usually, I didn't care. But as I looked at the picture in front of me, I wondered what it would be like.

My thoughts made me uncomfortable – he was still in fact my dead best friend's lover – so I stood and asked to put the baby back to bed and went about preparing his food. I just needed something to keep the thoughts at bay.

I set his food before him and sat down, rigid, too uncomfortable to do anything that would reveal my thoughts.

"What's his name?"

"He's name is Nnamdi."

He looked at me for a few seconds, our eyes met, and time froze.

And I just knew it was meant to be. Nnamdi would finally have a family.

