

**The Madness of Ndidi's Patience — a Short Story by Ene Okoh**

“What is it that the elders say again, “*The cow in the slaughterhouse eating to its fill does not see death cleaning its plate*”.

What does that have to do with my father's absence you ask, everything I tell you. Everything.

“*Dinne, ogini I ne kwu? I maara ebe nna gi no?*”

I tilted my face towards my mother's voice, perceiving the panic diffusing through her words. How can she panic for a man who hated her? I had to believe he had visited our local *Ezemmuo* to arrange the blocking of her sense. How else would such a beautiful woman stay with the goat I called my father? Yes, goat because only goats would live their lives as my father had lived his. Oh, it is sweet to speak in past tense regarding him, so sweet.

“Ndidi, didn't you hear your mother? Do you know where your father is?”

That came from the *Igwe*.

“*Igwe I might know because I sent him there.*” I said carefully as I turned to face his sunken features held steadily emotionless in an obvious assurance of his power.

What is this smile hiding behind my lips? I must keep her locked in or they will call me mad. My madness must be acquitted and justified before it can rear its head in public.

“I know you know Agu the fisherman, Agu the pillar, Agu the tiger as you all call him,” I said with a faintly underlined tone of jest as I looked around the faces surrounding the *Igwe's* zebra print cushioned gold throne. “Agu the tiger”, I repeated to myself in my familiar realization that the title made absolutely no sense as you see, *Agu* means tiger. Of all the celebratory nicknames to give him, they

settled on *the double tiger*?! How can a goat be seen as twice a tiger? This thought had baffled me for many years.

“But let me tell you about Agu the father and Agu the husband then you will discover for yourselves where Agu is.”

The gasps of shock floated into my ears at once; most definitely caused by my absolute audacity to call my father by his first name, an act seen as an abomination. My madness laughed, this abomination would soon be a grain of sand to them compared to the beach of abominations Agu stood on.

“Everybody here must remember my mother’s first child, Chioma, and her last child, the son whose name we do not even whisper in a crowded market. What did Agu tell you happened to Chioma?” At this statement, my eyes focused on my mother’s, seeing a slight confusion followed by a realization of what I was about to do shine through her features, realization mixed with a silent pleading.

“*Ahn ahn*, was it not malaria?” I turned towards the chief who had answered my question.

“Malaria,” I repeated with a sarcastic laugh.

“Well, he lied. Chioma is with *Imo mmiri*, your river goddess. The man she called father sacrificed her to water. Why? Well, now I will tell you about Agu the goat.”

This time, my madness had no time to focus on the shocked looks painted on the faces around her. She had a story to tell, a testimony to give for her release.

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My birth had been a double-edged sword. On one end, my mother, Binyelum Agu (nee Achebe), showered me with overflowing love. As my father had not cared enough to, my mother named me *Ndidi* which means Patience. Patience for what, I had never bothered to ask her. As I grew older, she began to call me *Dinne*; her personal conglomeration of *Ndidi* and *Nne*. She called me a mother’s

patience. Whether she agreed with my actions or not today, I believe she had named me to be exactly what she needed and to do what had to be done in time. I was her time. *Her* patience.

My father on the other hand, had never looked into my eyes lovingly from the day I was born. Literally. On the day of my birth, when the midwives called him in to hold his new born child, he looked once at what lay between my legs and walked out immediately, infecting the air of my first breaths with his hate and reverence for sexist traditional beliefs. I called him Papa but he never called me daughter. Not until the day the son came into the world.

If I understood then that this is what it would take to be seen by him, I would have gotten pregnant myself and given him all my sons.

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I never knew Chioma, after all she died so I could be or rather, so the idea of what my father wanted, could be. I always asked Mama about her; what she was like, what her favorite meals were, how she died, the full spectrum of questions.

“Pounded yam and *egusi* and I’ve told you before Dinne, malaria took Chioma away from us”, my mother would say to me as her eyes shifted away from mine and back to her present task. We had always held each other’s eyes closely but every time I brought up her *Ada*’s death, she always held me loosely and let go quickly like she would a stranger.

One day the answer changed from malaria to *Imo mmiri*. Okay I said that wrong, *Imo mmiri* was never said to *me* but was instead screamed at my father.

I can never forget that day; the day Agu morphed into a goat before my eyes, metaphorically speaking obviously (although, if I had magic powers it would not be a metaphor and I would be enjoying a hot bowl of goat meat pepper soup seasoned with his tears).

You see, Agu had dreams of all male children; male children who could carry his legacy, whatever legacy a goat could have, to the four corners of the world. His disappointment must have stood like a mountain in the Agu house when mama gave birth to a child with a vagina, a mountain you could not climb. He must have been raking his head, asking the gods where the penis he had dreamt about was.

On the day my father became a goat, mama had sent me to the market to buy *uziza* for the *Oha* soup she was preparing later in the afternoon. I had waited to leave; laziness was my middle name.

She must have thought I had left.

I can never forget, even if amnesia over took me, this day was too frightening to forget. Agu had returned early from his day of fishing, he called out for mama in his ruggedly ugly voice. Mama's soft footsteps filled the humid air around me.

"Useless woman, where are my sons?"

Agu was more irritated than I knew him to regularly be. His hostility towards my mother had showed its face earlier than I was used to.

"What sons? Did you give me sons to keep for you?"

The sound of a hard slap filled the air. I squealed, my madness awakened.

"Agu, why?! WHY DO YOU HATE ME THIS MUCH?!" Mama screamed at him.

"You took my four-year old fruit and you threw her into the river. You fed *my* child to *Imo mmiri* FOR WHAT?!"

I could feel her tears on my own cheeks, her breathing sang a song of despair into the air.

"You want a son *abi?* *Bia cho ya n'ime afo'm!* You hear me Agu?! COME AND TAKE HIM FROM MY STOMACH!"

Agu laughed, that ugly laugh that resembled the cries of a dying goat.

“You call that thing I sacrificed to Imo mmiri *fruit*? I laugh. Even Imo mmiri must be laughing at the useless thing, she still gave me that rag you call Ndidi. Useless, all of you. All you’re good for is the thing between your legs and even that, *you* are not good for. Useless!”

The goat hissed.

“What are you doing in my house if you have nothing to show for it? Binyelum don’t provoke me, you better give me a son or go back to your dead father’s house! *INA-ANUM?! You have made me a ridicule among my fellow men, everybody in this village is wondering when my sons will come!*”

My madness huffed and puffed, willing me to blow this house down. *Ndidi*, I told her, have patience.

I do not remember the exact details of the moments that followed. Yes, I know I said even amnesia could not take this day from me but at the very moment I heard Mama scream “AGU GET OFF ME! Do you want to kill me?! AGUUU!”, a smoke of hate filled my head. Forgive me if the details got lost in the fog. I don’t recollect moving but I was no longer standing in my room but instead, peeking into my parent’s room, seeing my mother’s body on the floor, convulsing, half-naked and being crushed under the weight of Agu’s body as he violently thrust and forced his hideous manhood into my mother.

I saw her, her tears, her hopelessness, his ugliness, everything.

If I cried as I saw, I do not remember. If he said anything in response to her cries, I do not remember. All my mind retains of that exact moment was my mother crying and screaming at the goat, “Agu, *hafu’m biko!* You’re taking me without my will! You’re tearing me ohh! Agu *biko!*”

At the tender age of twelve, I didn’t know a word for it but today I recognize the vile pain: rape. Agu raped my mother, she had told him to tear her stomach for his son and he had done just that.

This is one of the reasons why I hate the gods. Tell me why they rewarded this goat with a son for his actions. Shouldn't they have struck him with all versions of death that exist? Nine months later, the son arrived. I never brought up that day to my mother. How do you ask your mother about such a dehumanizing pain? Such a traumatic experience should be buried in the deep crevices of the mind and left to decay.

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Maybe I should not be as happy. Maybe I should understand that the son was loved by my mother just as much as, if not more than, he was loved by the goat. My heart couldn't understand; the buried pain couldn't understand. I should have appreciated the fact that the day the son's penis came to the world was the first day my father looked into my eyes with recognition. He began to call me his daughter once that son rose from the dust.

But as the Westerners say, "Karma is a bitch and she will always come to bite you in the ass."

The son died at the tender age of five. What would kill such a loved child, you ask? Malaria.

Oh, how much my madness laughed when the *Dibia* walked out of the Agu house announcing to the goat that his beloved son had been taken away by malaria. At that moment, I didn't hate the gods as much. My mother wept, of course she did. I wept, I had to unless the verdict for my madness would have been guilty before the case was presented.

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I thought Agu would take the news and sit with it. I thought he would let the news of his dead son settle into his heart. Well, we think but thoughts do not always mirror reality. The night malaria snatched the son from my mother's arms, my father walked into my room demanding the son from me. Help me out here for a

second as I am not a business woman, but do you not ask the person who took from you to pay you back? Why was this goat coming to ask me for his son? Did someone tell him I was hiding him in a calabash?

That night, I discovered pain's ability to numb your senses. My mother's womb had become useless to him; she had reached the ages of menopause, so the goat came to pluck his male fruit from a fresh tree. He had no respect for my sleeping mother in the room next to mine.

Agu did not care that I was his own seed. He ripped my *wrapper* and tore into me as he had done my mother. Maybe I screamed before he trapped my hands above my head with one of his rough, ugly hands and covered my mouth with the other. I do not remember as that familiar fog filled my head.

As he raped me, he never looked into my eyes or at my face.

Two weeks later, I knew my brother had settled within my womb. I couldn't tell mama; how do you tell your mother of such a burden? My madness had shaken the twenty-three walls of my mind, she shook and screamed for her release. Patience, I told her, have patience. *Ibo obo bu otu efere kacha mma maka oyi.*

I knew the right time to tear Agu out of my life would come. The goat religiously smoked his snuff before heading out to fish and for a reason unknown to me, my madness decided today was her day of release.

After Chioma died, my mother planted *myaramuo* right on top of her daughter's grave. That was her way of keeping her alive. Mama had told me the flower was both lovely and deadly. I decided to test the validity of her statements. I plucked a few petals of the flower, ground them fine and mixed them into Agu's snuff stash while he ate his breakfast.

What you do not know will not kill you, well this one will kill him. My madness laughed.

I expected Agu to be dead before he had taken up to ten steps away from the house but I watched him smoke the snuff and leave. I silently followed him a way and was disappointed to find him alive and visibly unaffected. Deadly, I thought as I walked back home, Mama must have been mistaken.

Five hours after his usual arrival home, he had not returned and my mother, overtaken with worry, grabbed me and went around asking the neighbors about his possible whereabouts. Accompanied by her worrying lack of clarity from the neighbors, we headed towards the *Igwe's* palace to raise a complaint.

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“So you see my elders, I sent my father to visit death. I had my doubts but if *myaramuo* is as deadly as mama told me it is; your tiger is somewhere sitting at death’s table right now. Where exactly? I cannot tell you.”

My mother screamed at my words and threw herself on the ground. Was she screaming at the fact that I was pregnant with my sibling or the fact that her husband might be dead? I didn’t care to focus on the shouts of exclamation the elders made as two young men ran into the throne room wailing and exclaiming. “*Igweeee!* We don find Agu the tiger ohhh! Agu the tiger don diee! *O dara n’ime mmiri!* Na for inside water we find am! Agu don dieeee-ohh!”

Screams, Wails, Cries.

Smile.

My madness danced free.

*Translations and Author’s Comment below.*

## ***Igbo to English.***

*Binyelum* : Stay with Me.

*Achebe* : The goddess protects.

*Chioma* : good God/gods.

“Dinne, *ogini i ne kwu? I maara ebe nna gi no?*” : “Dinne, what are you saying? Do you know where your father is?”

*Egusi*: Traditional Igbo soup made with grounded melon seeds

*Ada* : First daughter

*Bia cho ya n’ime afo’m!* : Come and look for him in my stomach!

*INA-ANU’M?! : DO YOU HEAR ME?*

*Agu hafu’m biko!* : Agu, leave me please!

*Ibo obo bu otu efere kacha mma maka oyi* : Revenge is a meal best served cold.

*Myaramuo* : *Datura Metel* aka “Devil’s Trumpet.”

*O dara n’ime mmiri!* : He fell inside water!

## ***Author’s comment:***

Women have taken an astronomical amount of absolute and utter shit [excuse my french] from the people they share the earth with. Sexual assault, harassment, domestic violence, emotional abuse; these are just a few crimes committed against women which this short story presents a commentary on.

If you won’t hear our sanity, our insanities will speak up. Maybe the change we need is sitting in the hands of our madnnesses.