

THIS SKIN IS MINE

Maami woke me up again when the hens were making too much noise. Once I felt the cold water on my leg, I knew it was time to drink again. I did not enjoy drinking the green juice this early, but couldn't care less since it was not bitter. What I found most inconvenient was that I had to calculate the hours to be able to drink it. The house had only one wall clock, and it was in Papa's room. Papa did not like being disturbed in the morning when praying or reading his bible. He also liked to hum while chewing on his morning stick when cleaning his mouth. He was a quiet man. His voice was seldom heard in the house but carried authority and grace when he spoke.

I had to drink the green juice four times a day, using the big blue cup we used to collect water from the black drum in Maami's kitchen. It was a kind of measurement. I was not allowed to skip it, but if I did, I was to drink it as soon as I remembered. For two weeks. Fourteen days.

"Maami, but you can just call my name now," I cried at the top of my voice.

"My friend, Dakkada, do not waste my time." I promptly eased out of my sleep at the sound of "friend." You are only Maami's "friend" when you are doing something wrong.

I hated that Maami felt the need to pour water on my legs each morning to get me to wake up. She thought it got the job done just in time, and in a way, she was correct, it was just freezing. And she never listened to me.

But on a good day, I remember not to get mad at Maami, even though she had her own role to play. My mother dropped me off with her. It is she I blame.

On the Monday morning we were to leave for the village, Father had traveled to his elder brother's place because they had to plan how Grandpa's properties would be shared since he left no will. Father was particularly interested in the land beside the road, just a stone's throw from the church we worshiped at. He planned to use it to plant cassava for the first three years before building shops on them. He thought having shops instead of building our own house was wiser since we would collect

rent monthly even though we were still paying rent where we lived. You can imagine Mother's displeasure at this. Most of her age mates were house owners and wives of landlords, but she was not. That morning, she did not serve Father his tea like she usually did every morning. Instead, she came into my room, woke me up, and decided that was the best time for her "private talk" session.

She was about to begin when we heard Father's motorcycle zoom off with such speed that it screamed annoyance and displeasure. Mother said a lot that morning, but nothing made sense to me then. I did not understand in practicality what I was about to undergo. I thought it was just a festival for first daughters, and I felt honored to attend and spend the holiday with Maami. I liked Maami. Until I did not anymore.

"Don't put on the white dress, wear the blue one. The white one is for your special day".

"Special day? Mother, which special day?"

"The day of the ceremony, Adiaha. Haven't I gone through this thing with you before?"

"Oh, that? Okay ma"

Mother had gotten three new dresses for me and gave strict instructions on when and where to wear them. But I was seeing Maami for the first time this year and liked the white dress.

"Turn, let me zip it for you".

The event was the annual skinning ceremony. Each family had to bring a female child, starting with the first daughter, Adiaha. In other villages where sons were celebrated more than daughters, our village was the reverse. The presence of female children in a family was an indicator of the family's wealth, whether potential or actual. For one, daughters were expensive to care for and maintain, and the other reason would be that they would always usher in wealthy men, kings, and princes alike into the home. The number of daughters was equivalent to the number of canopies in the compound. I was the first of five and had just reached puberty, meaning I was ready.

The skinning ceremony was a marker for two things: the girl child's readiness for marriage, which also meant sexual intercourse, and the virginity of the female. The women took the ceremony a bit too personally, eager to welcome the girls to womanhood, even if it meant in the most painful and life-damaging way. Their mothers' mothers passed it on, so they were obligated to pass it on to their daughters.

It was preceded by an initiation ceremony two nights before the skinning event. During the initiation, a concoction would be given to us based on our sizes: the skinnier girls, smaller portions, after which our bodies massaged with palm kernel oil extracts and white clay. Some other incantations would be carried out, but this was all the orientation Mother gave me. One thing she kept repeating was, "It is for your good," "It will not kill you; am I not still alive?", "Adiaha, it will make you disciplined and focused on your husband alone."

I was at Maami's house for only a week and three days when the daughter of the lady living directly opposite us came to visit one day. I opened the door after she had knocked angrily, and I thought the face was familiar until she introduced herself. "Hello, Adiaha. I live opposite you and came to give this paw paw to Maami. Is she home?"

"Hi," I said, smiling like I did not hear the statement she had just recited to me.

"I like your hair," I said again, admiring the girl as though she just dropped from the sky, and for some reason, it looked like she did.

Her hair was dark and thick, rich with curls, and very long. I knew it was long because she parted it into two and made a long, thin bun. After parting it in two, it looked like she split the half into two segments and wrapped each segment around each other until it came to an end. Then she knotted it and tucked it inside so the ends would not show. She then added a single white cowrie and sea shells on both buns.

"Thank you. I made it myself. See, I even got the parting right." She turned to show me how neat the parting had come out while still holding the pawpaws she bought for Maami."

"I'm so sorry. Let me get that from you." I realized I should have gotten the gift from her instead of putting her through the stress of spinning around with the two pawpaws in her hand.

"Thank you. My mother said to greet your Maami for her help yesterday," she said, then stood back like she wanted to tell me something else.

I nodded and looked at her hair again. I was not allowed to let visitors into the house when no one was around, so I stood at the door while she was on the other side.

"My mother said you came for the ceremony. I did mine last year. I never wanted to, and if I had much power or money, I would not allow my sister to do hers. But I can't help her, and my mother says we have to do it so our husbands don't return us home after the wedding night," she said in one breath.

"The thing is very painful, and you would keep bleeding for days. I thought mine would never stop. That's why I do not want that for her. Anyways, she is only five years old now."

Mother had told me about the pain and bleeding but also mentioned that I had to drink the green juices for two weeks so I would heal properly and faster.

When Maami returned, she met me in the living room, sitting with her neighbor's daughter and playing with her hair. She did not need to say it out loud, but I knew play time was over. I went inside to bring the pawpaws to show her that the neighbor's daughter had gotten them for her in thanksgiving. By the time I came out, my new friend had gone. It was just Maami in the living room, with her black Baggo sack bag and her cat curled at her feet. I showed her the pawpaw and left to get my green juice. I did not want to be reminded to drink it again this time.

I could not sleep that night.

I kept recounting the pain and torture the neighbor's daughter had described.

The initiation process commenced on the fifteenth day, just after the juices had been religiously taken. It was a period of buying the needed materials, knives, glasses, aprons, and napkins. The clays and palm kernel oils were also paid for. One strange thing that happened during this initiation was the inspection of the vagina. A group of women in a group known as "NKA IBAN" were responsible for the entire

ceremony, from the herbs to procuring the materials for the skinning procedure. These women were appointed to each girl, and my friend described them as unkind. The woman in charge of a girl was not to be related to the girl in any way. And so, after necessary documentation of the name, age, and herbs drunk, in that order, the woman would follow the girl and her mother to the market. That night, she was not to return home to her mother or, in my case, that would be my Maami. The girl would pass the night at her Guide's. At midnight, she would be taken to the stream for a cold and quick bath, and her life would be begged to be spared by the gods. I remember Mother saying this was important as it was not uncommon for girls who did not bathe in the stream to be found dead a few days after their skin was ripped out. Especially the ones who grew up in the city, like me, whose parents did not allow bathing in the stream. So, Mother mentioned that every girl's life must be begged for.

After the bath, the Guide would inspect all the layers of flesh above the vaginal hole and the hole itself to ensure no penetration had happened. The fingers of the Guide would be oiled in petroleum jelly and inserted into the hole until a tiny skin was felt. That was thought to be the hymen. The skin was meant to be broken only by the Husband.

I woke up with beads of sweat on my forehead.

I had four full days left.

I thought of begging Maami not to allow me to be taken. I thought of asking her to hide me in her big metal box hidden under a pile of clothes in Papa's room.

I also thought of running. That was a bad idea because I would be found and punished. I thought of the pain of the entire skinning procedure. Of the carved glasses used, the knives that were sharpened the night before and placed over blue flames to get rid of germs and prevent infections. Of the piece of ice placed on the flesh above the vagina for about twenty minutes, after which a portion of the skin was pulled and quickly cut with the knife. How the fingernails of the Guide pulled on the skin to the length, the parent agreed. Then, promptly cut again. How some mothers wanted the skin partly cut, while others wanted it completely cut off. Of the

daughters of the "NKA IBAN" members who had it worse because theirs was totally severed and stitched after urine holes were incised. Their skin was usually held out, looking like a semi-circle so other mothers would see that their daughters were not 'cowards.' Their vaginal hole would then be stitched close only to be opened by the husband on the night of the wedding. This was why some husbands returned the women they married after the wedding night if they realized they did not make a tear that would render it open. It meant the tear was done by someone else. Or the hole had not been sealed at all; therefore, it was impossible to track the girl's sexual activities.

Mother did not want me to be returned by my husband. The way Father did not her. She wanted the husband to be proud of me. The one that I did not have.

The removed skin was handed over to the maternal head of the family and buried under a tree in the family compound planted on the day the daughter was born. Because the bleeding would start, herbs were prepared for drinking and rubbing to help with the wound and pain. It was because of this bleeding that the juices were drunk for two weeks before the procedure commenced to provide enough blood to be wasted. The healing herbs would be placed on the wound site, and the leg tied with raffia string from the hips down to the ankle. That string was not to be removed for a week. This also meant no movement.

My body shook with fear as I walked to Papa's room for the first time and knocked on his door. Papa hummed a response. I walked in and knelt by his bedside.

"Papa, please help me. I do not want to be skinned. It's so painful; the neighbor's daughter told me everything that happened to her. I will lose blood and die. Please convince Mother to change her mind."

I had done my initiation, and a strange finger had entered my vagina to be sure it was still sealed. My Plea to Papa held no result except for an urgent family meeting in my name.

I wore my white dress the morning of my Skinning, and white clay was rubbed all over my body. My face was also painted with it.

I took a keg from the kitchen and told Maami I was going to give it to the Village Palm wine tapper for our weekly wine refill for Papa. She told me to be back in time as the Guide would come to fetch me for the ceremony.

I collected my wrapper from the mat I slept on, took the keg, and strolled away from the compound, stealing looks to the side and my back to be sure I was not being followed.

When I reached the Catholic church just at the corner of the big electric pole, I ran.
