

REBIRTH IN ADVERSITY

by Sharon Uzochukwu

✳I used to dream that by the age of thirty, my name would be followed by a string of academic post-nominals: Ebube Ndubuisi, BSc, MSc, PhD. Yet, here I was, bearing a different title at nineteen, one I never expected: widow. Only a week ago, I was Mrs. Ebube Chibueze, wearing colors other than mourning black. Now, I sit among my family who intermittently mutter comforting words to me. We are surrounded by strange villagers. It is my first burial experience, and it is my husband's.

The East's unforgiving heat envelopes us. My entire body aches from the long journey yesterday. I slowly raise my head to study my environment. A few feet away lies Chibueze's open casket, plain and ordinary. His visage, once so familiar, now seems ethereal. He is dressed in his favorite cream senator native. I used to tease that it suited his dark complexion, but in truth, I liked how it hid his protruding beer belly.

The villagers gather round, men in their worn-out traditional clothes, women in faded wrappers, and children with curious eyes. They sense tragedy, though they cannot understand. My mother sits beside me with trembling hands, clutching a handkerchief my father's oldest sister, Aunt Nnena, had given her. Her sobs punctuate the otherwise heavy silence. Behind me are my twin younger brothers, Chukwuemeka and Chukwuebuka, who are only a year younger than I am. Chukwuemeka extends his hand to me, and I reach out to him to draw strength. My father is absent, I am sure he is huddled somewhere with my uncles deliberating the next course of action. Before we left Jos yesterday to begin the 12-hour journey to Chibueze's hometown in Imo state, his sisters had warned us not to step foot in their village, but attending his burial was non-negotiable. They have never disguised their disdain for me, and now, his death has given them even more reason to unleash their venom. My thoughts wander to how it all began, a year and 4 months ago...

I was on the cusp of my 18th birthday, thrilled about the possibilities it might bring. While some of my friends from school had plans to get married soon, I

had different aspirations. Marriage was at the bottom of my goals. One sunny Sunday after service, Aunt Maureen, an older lady from my church, pointed him out to me, asking if I liked him. It was an unusual question, and I was baffled.

"Brother Chibueze?" I asked, surprised.

He was at least a decade older than me, hardly a romantic prospect. Back home, I recounted the encounter to my mother, who hinted that there might be more to it. She shared that Chibueze was an eligible bachelor. I could not fathom why my mother was suddenly interested in my romantic life.

Days later, both my parents held a meeting with me.

"We have good news," my mother informed me.

"My daughter," my father continued, "watching you grow into a beautiful young woman makes me very happy. At every stage in one's life, we must make important decisions that will ensure we have a happy future." That last sentence made me very uneasy.

"In a few days, you turn 18," my father went on, "people are already coming for your hand in marriage, and we don't want you to make mistakes. What do you think of Brother Chibueze?"

It all began to make sense now, the conversation with Aunt Maureen, and the exchange with my mother.

"I am still a child," I wanted to scream, my eyes watered because I could not understand what was unfolding.

"You are no longer a child, my dear," my father insisted, "we want you to settle with a good man who will take care of you."

"We want you to marry with your purity intact," my mother said.

My parents wanted me to get married for these trivial reasons? I wondered. With shaky voice and teary eyes, I whispered, "I don't love him."

"What do you know about love?" my mother sharply retorted.

"But he is far older than me," I appealed.

"33 years is not bad. You need a mature hand to take care of you..." On and on my parents gave reasons why marriage with Chibueze was a good decision.

My mind was numb as I mechanically prepared to visit my best friend Freda to inform her of these new events. I bawled my eyes out as I let my friend in on everything that had taken place.

"Is he rich?" She quizzed.

"No."

"Hmm, is he handsome at least?"

"I don't know, and I don't care. He is too old for me," the tears started again.

"Jay Z is older than Beyoncé with twelve years," Freda joked.

I laughed for the first time that day. The banter with my friend helped uplift my spirits. We both agreed that all would be fine in the end. I resolved to have a long courtship. I would insist we wait until I graduated from the University. Most likely, NYSC would take me to a state very far from home, and the relationship would die a natural death. This sounded like a solid plan but oh, how wrong I was!

I was married to Chibueze seven months later on a dreary harmattan day. I felt like I was living someone else's life. My relatives had come from all over to

help with preparation. I had little to no interest in all of these activities, as the future I had envisioned slipped away. I sat in my room, absentmindedly running my fingers over the sequin fabric of my wedding dress. My mother's younger sister Aunt Amara came into the room with a make-up artist in tow.

"Wedding jitters?" She asked with a smile.

"Many old women are looking for a husband; you are very lucky," the make-up artist opined.

"I do not love Chibueze," I said to my aunt.

"Love is not everything. You need stability. Chibueze will give you this."

"but aunty..." I started.

"I did not love my husband when he married me," my aunt interrupted, "I wanted stability. That is more important."

I was yet to meet any of Chibueze's family members. Earlier, he had informed me that his parents would not be able to make the long journey from the East for the wedding, but his sisters would be present. As the make-up artist finished up, the door opened once again, and four women I did not know entered. The oldest among them pointed at me,

"You must be Ebube." I nodded.

"You are the girl preventing Chibueze from traveling to the UK?" another woman spat out.

I realized then that these must be Chibueze's sisters. I got up to greet them properly.

"Excuse us," the oldest woman said to the make-up artist and Freda who was seated beside me.

As soon as they left, she continued, "I am Njo, and these are my sisters: Faith," she said, pointing to the lady who looked at me with disgust, "Onu and Matilda," she continued, gesturing toward the other two ladies.

"Chibueze wants to marry a fine girl," Matilda scoffed.

"Is she even pretty? With all that pancake on her face" The four of them threw their heads back in mocking laughter. I had never felt so small in my entire life. I never imagined my sisters-in-law would be such spiteful women.

I cannot remember the details of my wedding day. What I do remember is that it was the unhappiest day of my life. After the ceremony, I visited Chibueze's house for the first time. My belongings had been brought over by my uncles the previous day.

"My wife, you're now a madam," Chibueze informed me with a cheesy smile.

My wedding night was a stark contrast to my romantic dreams. I felt cheated by all the romance novels I had loved to read. I had always imagined my first time would be sensual. I cannot describe the hurt I felt as this man pounded away on top of me. In a few minutes, he was done, and he rolled away. I soon heard guttural snores coming from him. I ran into the bathroom, tears pouring down my cheeks, and blood running down my legs.

My eight-month-long marriage to Chibueze was uneventful. We did not share a passionate love, but I convinced myself it was enough. However, one thing I couldn't accept was motherhood. Chibueze wanted children immediately, but I secretly took contraceptives, unwilling to start a family at that point. It turned out to be a lifesaving decision.

Every month after our marriage, Chibueze's sisters would call him to ask if I had conceived. He gave the same response, "Nothing yet."

One thing that plagued me, though, was his sisters' unwarranted hatred for

me. The comment they made on our wedding day about me preventing his travel to the UK troubled me. I finally mustered the courage to ask him one day.

"Faith wanted me to marry her friend in the UK so I could travel. But the woman is seven years older than me," he laughed.

Chibueze's sudden death shocked everyone. I found him lifeless one morning.

"My husband," I said, tapping him lightly. "You'll be late for work." When he did not budge, I knew there was trouble.

Panicking, I ran for my phone to call my parents. "Daddy, Chibueze is not breathing," I cried.

My father answered sleepily, "What do you mean?"

"Chibueze is not breathing," I repeated. I could hear my father's frantic movements as he called to my mother to bring his car keys. He told me to call Chibueze's sisters and inform them. I had not spoken to them since the wedding day, and I dreaded it now. I reached for Chibueze's phone, tears pouring down my eyes.

"Where is my brother?" His sister Njo harshly answered upon hearing my voice.

"Chibueze is not breathing," I said between sobs.

"What do you mean? What have you done to my brother?!"

I tried to explain what had happened.

"You have killed my brother!" She screamed and ended the call.

She lived in Bauchi state, only a few hours from Jos. I knew she would be

here soon. I frantically ran out of the house to alert the neighbors. They immediately rallied around me. The only person who had a car was Daddy Onome. He pulled his car to the entrance of Chibueze's apartment while other neighbors carried Chibueze out. While this was going on, my parents arrived. They helped fit Chibueze into Daddy Onome's car while the rest of us jam-packed into my father's car. We drove to the hospital together, where Chibueze was pronounced Dead on Arrival.

My whole world stopped. I slept beside this man last night, and now he was dead?!

I was led into a holding room where his body was kept before it would be taken into the mortuary. He was already covered in a white sheet. I gently lifted the sheet away from his face. He looked exactly how he did when he slept. I was a widow.

Tears slowly trickled down my cheeks as I watched Chibueze's face. I stood crying until I heard loud screams from outside the room.

"Where is that brother-killer?!"

My body froze with fear. His sisters had arrived.

The holding room doors burst open as they charged in with long brooms in their hands, my family and neighbors in hot pursuit. Before they could be stopped, they managed to hit me a couple of times with their brooms. I fell helplessly to my knees.

The hospital staff rushed to take them away as shouts of "man-eater, murderer" echoed down the hospital hall.

I was taken back to my family house.

"Your daughter has succeeded in killing my brother," Chibueze's sister Faith shouted to my father over the phone. "She killed him to inherit his properties.

She should not step foot in Chibueze's house, or I will kill her like she killed him!"

What property did Chibueze have that I would kill him for, I wondered sorrowfully.

A while later, Daddy Onome called to let us know that Chibueze's sisters had burnt my belongings. He and other neighbors had tried to salvage some items, but it was futile.

Four days later, Chibueze's father informed us that they had made funeral arrangements. He would be buried in their hometown, and I was expected to perform some rites to prove my innocence.

"You will not perform any such thing!" my father comforted me.

I do not know how long I have been lost in thought, but loud crying brings me back to the present. Chibueze is about to be buried. As I stand up to watch the undertakers lift his casket, his old mother, whom I am seeing for the first time today at her son's funeral, lets out an ear-piercing shriek. She unravels her old wrapper to reveal her nakedness underneath and bends down to pack a handful of sand in her hands.

"You killed my son. You will not live long," she throws the sand and spits in my direction. Chukwuemeka tightens his grip around me as if to protect me.

I finally see my father and uncles walking briskly towards us. My father comes over and whispers to my aunt Nnena.

"Your father says that Chibueze's people have bad plans for us. We have to leave soon," she tells me.

As young men cover his grave, his family stares at us menacingly. The tension is palpable. While we wait for my father to tell us when to leave, we hear Igbo war chants coming from a distance.

“We must leave now!” My father’s younger brother, Uncle Michael, shouts to us. We run to the Sienna bus my father had hired for this journey. As we scramble into the vehicle, the chanters come into view: youths bearing clubs, sticks, and stones.

Uncle Michael gets behind the wheel and drives like a crazed man out of the compound as the infuriated youths give us a hot chase. They run after us for a distance until they realize they cannot catch up.

I know I should feel sadness at the death of my husband. Looking back, seeing Chibueze’s family, the angry youths, and his hometown fade into the distance, I feel the first glimmer of hope and relief. God may be giving me a new lease on life, I think. I do not know what the future holds; I know it will be dogged with stigma and prejudice, but it is a small price to pay for my freedom.

“I am free,” I smile to myself.