MY FATHER'S NEW WIFE

A short story by Jekwu Anyaegbuna

Our tongues grew hair from shock, and we started to question ourselves the day my father, Ogbonna, brought in a new woman. There had been a scorching sun that dried up the sand, but rain soon touched down with a few drizzles and soon withdrew itself, and left the sand clinging to the feet as they stepped on it, as if the rain understood we needed to move around to sort things out with him, with his new love. It was as though the sand, too, needed an urgent marriage with the feet by clinging onto them.

"Did he marry her for himself or for my first son, Ikenna?" my mother, Ugochi, asked, pointing at me. The twelve of us, her children, sat around the fire she had hurriedly made inside her kitchen when the rain came. She was sitting on a low stool, gazing at the thatched roof, her hand on her chest, as if the roof had perfect answers.

"Does Ogbonna not know it is my turn to marry?" I asked, and gazed at the thatched roof too for answers. It was normal to us, the thatched-roof-gazing custom. At least, if the roof did not have answers, it would pass on the questions to the smoke that passed through it for onward delivery to the sky. But we did not need the answers from the sky because we already knew them, because Ogbonna was the one who had prepared me for the *Ibu-nwoke* rites in preparation for my marriage. It was Ogbonna who helped to build my own hut near the breadfruit tree, where I would live with my wife?

"What? *Maka ginidi?*" she asked. "Ogbonna's stupid character could make a hen lay a premature egg. After twelve children, seven boys and five girls, Ogbonna still thinks he wants to expand his family. Why can't he just think and concentrate on his farmlands, his yam barns, his goats and cows and sheep and cocks and hens?"

"Has he forgotten that if an animal runs too fast, it would be shot too fast, and legs that walk too fast are equally seen by eyes that see too fast," I said.

"Did he eat his faeces and drink his own urine? Is his brain sick? Perhaps, he is bringing her in for you to marry, Ikenna."

"I don't think so, Ugochi, because he never told me about it."

"Then *Ulasi* must punish him; this god must punish him for me, for us. Does he not deserve to be punished?"

I did not answer her and did not ask more questions, although there were more questions. It seemed asking more meant knowing less, meant questioning the same questions we had questioned before, meant doubting the same answers we knew. We were silent, Ugochi and us, her children. The silence was intelligent and adhesive, binding us together. It bound us to the answers which followed the questions we failed to ask. If Ogbonna were here, maybe it would have bound him to us, to realize the stupidity of his new marriage, the illogicality of his decision.

"Both of them are back. Ugochi, Ikenna, come and see them," my younger sister said in a voice so low that I wondered if a louder voice would scare the new wife away, would make our anger more complex. My sister usually saw things before anyone because her eyes were less busy, because ours had to see too many things at a go, including the things we already knew we saw daily.

"Dress your *jigida*, your waist beads, *nne*. They don't look well arranged anymore," Ugochi told my sister as we sprang up to go and see the new couple. I wondered if my sister's beads had become angry with her waist, if they had questions to ask her waist and simply refused to ask, but chose to scatter themselves in a crooked manner. Her hands immediately flew to her waist in a way that seemed they were always ready to adjust the waist beads, in a way that showed that they had been adjusting the beads frequently, revealing the beads were not in fact her exact size.

"Thank you, Ugochi," my sister replied, still standing and arranging and looking to see more things.

When we came out of the hut, we saw the new wife going into my new hut and Ogbonna coming out of it with his machete and climbing rope. He spat. His mouth shot out the saliva in a clustered mass before falling on the back of a white goat sniffling things on the sand to determine which one to eat. I guessed he was going out to bring fresh palm wine for his new love this evening, and I guessed too that the sun felt ashamed because it had gone dimmed, because it wanted to show solidarity with us by not shinning in bright tentacles. I wondered if Ogbonna did not know he was going to defile my new hut.

Ugochi almost refused when I told her that I had to go into the hut to see the new wife first. She said it bothered her more than anyone else. When I insisted, she agreed, hesitantly, to wait.

"Welcome to our family, lady," I said as I moved into the new hut to greet the new wife. Although tall, she was one of the women I thought God created while he received dead visitors into his house because he was too busy to mould them well. I did not see in her the things I was used to seeing in complete women: the intimidating smoothness of my sister's chubby round face, the exclusive wideness of Ugochi's hip. The things I saw were bland, unattractive, and almost masculine.

"Thank you," she replied. Then I noticed the technology of her teeth. One of her incisors hung on in an unpleasant sort of way, its size cut halve the size of the other, the colour going green, perhaps from abandonment and dirtiness and carelessness. Her going-green tooth appeared as if she had just finished eating a pot of vegetable soup, and the greens clung stubbornly to the tooth, refusing to be swallowed or simply washed off. She held her face dull, the face of one who had seen many different faces and, in confusion, found it difficult to differentiate among them, difficult to remember the ones seen before.

She was looking into my eyes, as if searching for some lost love. I averted my eyes because I did not want the veins in my eyes to see the veins in hers, because I did not want our veins to strike an accord, to find similarities. Her chest was intransitive; it contained no milky objects, just bare. I wondered what her babies would feed on, wondered whether her chest, too, knew her body was too limp to carry objects. The shade of her skin was inconsistent, the shade of a roast yam: scaly, black, and hoarse.

"Ikenna, what is happening inside there?" Ugochi shouted, impatiently, and receiving no reply, forced the door open, her eyes wide with questions.

"I am just getting to know her," I said.

"Young lady, what is your name? Gini bu aha gi?" Ugochi asked, her voice normal, the voice of one with an aborted sorrow - not high, not low.

"Uju," she answered, simply, and looked on with iniquity. But I began to share in her iniquity because this was the question I ought to have asked her first but kept wondering, wandering in thoughts.

"Which village do you come from?" Ugochi asked.

"Ekwulu," Uju answered, looking underestimated, as if she had to mention another village that was not hers, as if her own village was not too prestigious to be talked about. She was a quarter of Ugochi's size, although taller in a lanky way.

"Ekwulu *aturu*. Sheep!" Ugochi shouted. "All Ekwulu people behave like sheep. They are all stupid and senseless. Ekwulu people fight and kill themselves over puppies before the poor little dogs are actually born. Ekwulu people climb atop a palm tree and deliberately fall from it just to demonstrate how the previous person broke his head and died. Do your parents not know that Ogbonna already has a wife?"

"I don't know whether they don't know, and I don't want to know if they know," Uju replied, and her going-green incisor stood out, drawing my attention. I wondered, for a brief moment, whether she had eaten a very strong dog bone before and got part of the tooth shredded off.

"So you're ready to share Ogbonna's penis with me," Ugochi said, her voice raised. "I do hope you will not starve me of it because I know I will not tolerate such nonsense. I still need *it* as much as you do. New butterflies should not deny the old ones equal access to the nectar. I don't want to call you an intruder but I don't know what else to call you."

"It is not my fault, *nne*. I love you. I will cook and farm and wash and clean for you. I will plait your hair and make your beads. I know how to make beads very well. I *love* Ikenna too," Uju said, feeling afraid, the feeling of one who knew she was going to be killed, who knew she had no chance of survival, and had to say something soothing, the feeling of one struggling between fear and freedom.

"Eziokwu, this is not true," I said, and wondered whether her eye veins had actually gone into chemistry with mine, without my knowing it, whether my own eyes had trespassed into hers before I averted them.

"Love *kwa*? Don't love my son and me please. Go and love Ogbonna!" Ugochi shouted, holding out her right hand towards Uju's mouth in the way our people do to tell someone to shut up. Surprised, Ugochi started to move around her, as if to measure her shape and height, to be quite sure she was really tall. "Look, I have nothing to lose in this matter. I'm not against Ogbonna getting married to you but I'm totally against marrying and bringing you into this house without my consent, *I nugo*." Uju simply nodded, as if she agreed with her. We went back to our old hut, as quickly as we had left it.

But what was Ugochi really driving at? What was she really saying? Did she understand what she had just said? Did she not contradict herself? Why did she say she had nothing to lose whereas there was a whole lot to lose? What about Ogbonna's bed? Would she not lose it? The bed was up for grabs, I knew. It worried me. But then I thought perhaps she must have noticed Uju's bare chest after moving around her and concluded there was nothing much really to lose because the objects were absent. Ogbonna might not really feel comfortable with the emptiness of her chest. Ugochi might not really be taken out of relevance after all. Then I reconsidered it – Ugochi's objects were still there for him, though sagging now.

Ugochi felt restless. I knew from the way her eyes blinked furiously as she shouted. The blinking eyes alone could frighten Uju, and send her packing right way. She wanted to unearth the reason behind this sudden vanity that was between Ogbonna and Uju. The witches that lurked around and everywhere, worldwide witches, could be responsible for this. Perhaps it was the mysterious wild cat that meowed last month till daybreak on the paw-paw tree at the backyard that had driven Ogbonna into this mess. Ugochi must find out. She must consult a *dibia* to find out from the oracles. But only a female *dibia* could truly see the reason and say it out; the males would consider Ogbonna's headship of the family and mask the truth, she reasoned.

"I am going to see Agadi this evening," Ugochi said, determined. "Ikenna, prepare and come with me."

"But Agadi is from Ekwulu. Will she speak the truth?" I asked.

"What we want to know is not about knowing the truth but knowing whether there is anything at all to know, including falsehood."

"Won't she tell us stupid things and behave selfishly like a typical Ekwulu person?"

"She doesn't get her control from humans; she's controlled by the spirits."

"But an Ekwulu human controlled by an Ekwulu spirit will surely produce an Ekwulu result."

"Ikenna, you talk like someone wearing a foreign brain this evening. I have known Agadi for long and I trust her divinations. Let's just go there."

As I tied my short white wrapper around my waist and picked a machete, Ugochi had already prepared herself with a befitting wrapper and waist beads to match, portraying a woman in search of a reason for a general phenomenon, yet peculiar as far as she was concerned. Ekwulu was across the river, and a fisherman was already waiting when we arrived at the riverbank, as if he had known earlier that we were coming. We climbed onto his boat, and he paddled us across the river.

Agadi lived alone in a neighbourhood that harboured nobody else, except her and perhaps the spirits. Her hut, with a pointing thatch at the top and half-burnt doors and windows, appeared as though fire had once gutted it but was repaired recently. Sitting lonely on a mat, she bade us welcome. Her large round eyes seemed like they had never seen sleep in years, the whites looked soaked in palm oil, the pupils darting piercingly bright inside the palm-oil-soaked whites, the eyes of one who saw sprits frequently, the eyes of one dead but alive. Her hair had taken on the discordant shade of peeled cassava inside water waiting to be washed, some part white and some part black. She left the hair open, perhaps to underscore the importance of her openness and transparency to the spirits, to the things she saw that we did not see and could never see, as if covering it would equally cover the spiritual eyes with which she saw the things we could never see.

"Which village do you come from?" she asked, startling me, because this was the same question Ugochi had posed to Uju. I wondered if Agadi had heard Ugochi from Ekwulu and decided to ask the same question.

"Unubi," Ugochi answered in a swift, one-word way, the same way Uju had answered. Then I thought Agadi must be controlling her from an unknown realm, making her answer questions like an Ekwulu person.

"Ooom, huuh, Unubi people are very wise in many unwise ways, so wise and unwise that they know the smell of a fart even before it finally comes out," Agadi said and spread her bunch

of divination pebbles on the mat she sat on. "I know why you've come to see me, but you do not know a pregnant lizard unless you turn it upside down. Since you already know the answer, I don't know why you've decided to come and wake up the sleeping spirits."

My eyes met Ugochi's. We couldn't discuss much here, but I told her with the movement of my nose that our journey had been pregnant with nothing and given birth to nothingness, given birth to Agadi's parables. The day had become dark now, and the insects were singing with bright twinkles in the dark when we left Ekwulu village.

The next morning was *Afor* market day, the day Unubi people bought and sold in their market. I had woken up before everyone, but did not want to see Uju first this morning because whoever you saw first in the morning determined your fortune for the rest of the day, because seeing her would make my palm wine unsold in the market.

"Good morning, Ikenna. Did you sleep well last night?" It was Uju's voice. I did not want to look in her direction, did not want to be unfortunate today. I grabbed my climbing rope and calabash and made to dash out to prepare my palm wine for sale.

"Did you not hear your name, Ikenna?" Ogbonna shouted from a goat-house nearby and I decided to look in his direction first. I had seen him first, and could now turn to look at Uju, could now face her and discuss. But I wondered whether I would still be unfortunate today because I had heard her voice first. Perhaps, the voice could be more powerful and ominous than the eyes.

"Why do you people call everybody by their own names?" she asked, smiling, when I moved very close to her. Her mouth, or perhaps her going-green tooth, smelt unpleasantly, the smell of a rotten egg with a dead chicken inside.

"Because it is our custom in this family to use real names," I answered. "It makes us feel we're together, bound always to the umbilical cord that binds us together." I felt she just wanted to impress me with her supposed good manners, wanted the veins of our eyes to meld by sounding so friendly that I wondered if she had dreamt the question overnight.

"I feel it's not proper that way, *O joka*," she said, her eyes trembling. "You should refer to Ogbonna as *nna*, and Ugochi as *nne*. They're your parents, aren't they?"

"Teach me Igbo language," I said, growing slightly angry. "You want to teach me etiquette, don't you?" I did not wait to hear her answer and entertain more discussions and tolerate her smelly mouth.

I was atop a palm tree when our neighbour, Nwankwo, started to quarrel with his wife. He was a third the height of his tall wife, and always seemed to be her house servant.

"This he-goat will never impregnate my she-goat, chaa-chaa," his wife declared.

"It must impregnate it," Nwankwo countered. "Do you know how much I've paid Ogbonna for renting this he-goat?"

Nwankwo had rented the goat the previous day from Ogbonna and paid the fee.

"I don't care how much you paid. All I know is this he-goat will never be father to the children of my goat." They stood far from one another, their voices raised high, pointing variously at the goats as they argued, and as the goats moved enterprisingly around the compound.

"Have you gone mad? Has Amadioha visited you?"

"Yes, I am mad, but in my madness I will never allow this goat to climb on top of my she-goat."

Jekwu's Short Stories

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"Why?"
"Can't you see why? Don't you have eyes to see the reason?"
"Stop saying rubbish, woman, and tell me why?"
"This he-goat carries diseases and looks sick. Can't you see it?"
"Don't you carry diseases yourself, woman? Are you not sick yourself?"
"Who?"
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"You!"

"Me? Sick?"

"Yes. You."

"Look at who's talking," his wife shouted, placed her hands on her waist and continued to rant. "Nwankwo, so you've got a mouth to talk, eh. Look at Nwankwo who buried all his money underground for termites to chew, Nwankwo that cleans his anus against the stems of saplings instead of the leaves, Nwankwo who has refused to be initiated into the masquerade group because of fear, Nwankwo who has refused to send his first son to learn an art."

Nwankwo looked up and saw me, and I wondered whether it was shame that made him stop talking, because his wife had won the talking contest and whether he assumed I had heard and seen them quarrelling.

Many weeks had gone now and Ogbonna still behaved strange. He still talked sparingly today that both of us were working on his farm. In fact, since his new wife arrived, he had been very careful with words, like one who had many things to say and many different mouths to say them but did not know which one to use because the mouths were too many, perhaps, because the words had different shapes and had to be said with an equally shaped mouth.

"Ikenna, that woman at home is your wife. I will formally introduce you to her later," Ogbonna announced and dropped his hoe, looking at me.

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"Who?" I asked, standing bemused.
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"Uju."

"Why?"

"Because she perfectly suits you," he said. "I carefully selected her for you. Look, I have slept with her for weeks under the same roof in the same hut and found she's your exact match. Everything about her suits you, believe me. O maka." He pronounced everything with an emphasis.

"Ogbonna, I'm afraid I don't agree," I said. I wanted to say more, to emphasise my refusal but my tongue felt heavy as if it had hooks. I wanted to ask questions but the words felt chunky on my tongue, just refused to melt out. Ugochi would feel totally scandalised, devastated. I did not even want to think of thinking that I would ever think to agree.

"You must marry her."

"Ogbonna, I won't," I replied, frowning.

"I said you must."

"Ogbonna, I won't marry a woman you've already slept with."

"But it is in your best interest. I did it just to determine her suitability for you because I don't want you make mistakes choosing your own wife."

"I am going to find my own wife myself," I said, finally, and left the farm.

THE END

Back to Meskot

The views reflected in the above story are solely of the author and are not necessarily shared by Meskot. You may contact Jekwu Anyaegbuna for comments at correnz@yahoo.com.