

The Grasscutter's Curse

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THE MIDWIFE, NNEKA, CHECKS my dilation for the fourth time this morning, cheering me on as I journey through the valley in the shadow of death. She says my cervix is dilating too slowly. She tries to smile, but her eyes are sad, her lips thinned out in concentration. She looked like my dead grandmother.

She helps me off the table and we stagger into my ward next door, which I share with another pregnant mum-in-labour, Kelechi, who has been cussing her husband and his ancestors, blaming him for putting her body through this ordeal. I sit on the edge of my bed, breathing through my mouth as Matron Nwosu had taught us. I suppress the beginnings of another scream rising to my throat. I grab my waist and wheeze. I grip Nneka's hand and beg her to save me. I promise to give her everything she asks for if she can just make this pain go away.

On the wall are the carcasses of the mosquitos I squashed last night. The ceiling is a brilliant dusty white like crushed nzu, the walls are a dull blue now smeared with browning blood. Over in the hallway are other mothers trudging the length of this side of the hospital, some

clad only in stringy wrappers, some naked like the day they were born, all of them yelling or cussing or begging to go into the toilet to take a shit. It is midmorning and the walls are already breathing hot. The hospital's generator ran out of gas last night. It won't be switched on again until the doctor shows up in the afternoon. Last night a mum pushed out her baby in the glare of hand-held torchlight.

Nneka rubs my shoulders, says I must endure. She throws open the curtain and sets my pillow and stretches my feet on the bed. The pain has passed for now and I pull the sheet over my chest and tuck my legs in, as if protecting myself from another onslaught of contractions. Nneka pats my shoulder and says she will be at her desk. I shut my eyes and sigh, thankful for the opportunity to breathe again. But minutes later I jerk awake as my lower body stretches and clenches. Someone has taken a hammer to my waist and is clubbing me to death. I grip the edge of the bed. I let out the suppressed cry. I sputter unintelligible tongues. Nneka returns and rubs my shoulder and waist. 'You are shouting too much,' she says. 'Shouting never helps. Endure this like a strong woman, like your mother did.' Words of encouragement, but I shove her and tell her to go to hell. I scream. I cry. I want to jump out of my skin. She holds my shoulders, steadies me. She is the most patient nurse I have ever met. She simulates the breathing pattern, her lips pursed in an O, and urges me to mimic the pattern. I do this, looking at her face, surprised by how uncannily she looks like my dead grandmother. All of a sudden, I want to see my grandmother and I want to get out of here and visit my hometown and weep by her gravesite.

More women strip their wrappers as the pain takes over their minds. Kelechi, too. She is big and round and short and naked, leaning by her bedside, bent over, clutching her waist. She wheezes, cries. She calls on God to come down right now. I just look at her. Her breasts are perfectly upswept, and her nipples are puckered and pointy like fat black moles. My nipples are embarrassingly inverted. I keep my dress on at all times because I am nervously conscious of my body and also because when I first came to the hospital and saw some of the naked

mums-in-labour screaming up and down like their lives were over, I swore to never betray myself like that. I intend to keep this promise, but then it is a hundred degrees in here and the heat rashes on my back begin to tickle and itch, and every nerve in my body screams as my waist expands and threatens to burst out of my skin.

Kelechi jerks up from the bed, shakes her head, says, 'Mba!' and rushes out of the room. She bounds into the connecting toilet, saying she can no longer hold this shit. Nneka and a second nurse, Rose, are quick. They catch her before she sits on the bowl, and drag her into the theatre and bang the door shut. Her cries tear through the gaps in the door and flood our room, the hallway. The nurses urge her to push. She says she is dying. They say she will not. I sit at the edge of my bed, paralysed with pain, gasping. The voices clash and rise as I try to catch my breath.

Later, the cries of a baby come and I hear the nurses singing in Igbo, 'Thank you, Jesus! Kelechi, you have given birth to a being with a penis!'

I stare at the door and my rage makes my hands shake. I want a son because only a son will keep my feet rooted in my husband's home. I really want this son and I want this ordeal to end quickly. And now Kelechi, who joined me in this room hours after I checked in, has completed her journey. Now she has a son.

My contractions come in spiteful bouts and I can no longer take it at this point. For one, my husband, whom I am going through this hell for, is somewhere in Dubai cruising through polished streets, entering exotic bars and stores, living his best life.

Plus, my cervix stubbornly dilates at snail pace, opening less than three centimetres in the 24 hours since my water broke. My contractions are irregular and spaced out and interrupt every attempt to sleep. Each time Nneka takes me into the theatre to check my progress, she mutters encouraging words and says something funny, like how my baby probably is taking all the time putting on makeup, dressing up

so it could look pretty for me. When she brings me into the theatre again and sees how sloppy my dilation still is, she tries another joke, anything to lift my spirits and I will just lie on that uncomfortable bed and bawl my eyes out.

Now I am irritable and itchy, my mind webbed with pain. I strip off my dress. I howl at the ceiling and say I am fucking done with this rubbish. I am uncontrollable and inconsolable. And my husband is not here to see the hell my body is being put through.

All through my trimesters his relatives visited and threw terrific parties in our sitting room, and chatted about *his* coming baby, possibly a son, the one who will inherit his legacy. Occasionally, they invited me to sit with them, and told me how happy they were that I was finally redeeming myself. One evening, the month before my water broke, they brought home a grasscutter and told me to cook it. The animal was a few pounds heavier than the rats that lived in our drainages in Kano, those fat ones that bite wide holes through your kitchen door and steal your meat and fish and crayfish at night.

I disemboweled the dead thing and discovered her three tiny babies all curled around themselves, motionless. Horrified, I called my husband into the kitchen.

‘This animal is pregnant. I don’t think it is a good thing,’ I told him, my mind numbed.

He frowned at the corpses and said I should quit being superstitious. ‘Grasscutters are always pregnant,’ he said. ‘Don’t worry about it. It doesn’t matter.’

But I was worried. I reminded him of the old taboo about grasscutters, which his mother told me when I revealed my pregnancy: a pregnant woman must not eat the meat of the grasscutter, or its spirit would haunt her and cause her labour to stretch for as long as it takes a grasscutter to give birth.

‘Rubbish,’ he said. ‘You must eat it. You can’t spend all the time cooking and not have a taste of your own food. That superstition is a load of nonsense.’ He offered me a warm smile I understood was

meant to reassure me. He was 16 years older than me, a tall, broad-shouldered man whose demeanor smelled of safety the first time we met; it was in the arrangement of his shoulders, the square jaw, eyes hooded under thick brown, and lips that stretched into an endearing smile, all of which said he was always right, dependable, and would never forsake me.

After he returned to his siblings in the sitting room, I was left alone in the smoky quiet of the kitchen. The ingredients for soup were laid out on the table. Night had come and the neighbourhood was coming alive with Highlife music, the shouts of men watching football in the nearby café, the worship songs from the loudspeakers of the church behind our house.

I resumed cooking and my eyes watered to the fumes from the kerosene stove. I skinned and chopped up the grasscutter. I pounded the yam. I prepared the soup with the rich spices and herbs, the uda and ose and grounded crayfish and uziza and utazi and Maggi. I dished the delicacy in large bowls and set them on a brand-new stainless tray for my husband's relatives. When I set the tray on the dining table, my husband and his siblings gathered around me and patted my back and showered me with praises. 'Our wife,' they called me. 'We married a good, hardworking wife,' they said. They sat together and ate and drank bottles of Maltina and Harp.

My husband's sister, Tina, entered the kitchen later. 'You should save a bone for when it is time to give birth to your baby,' she said. 'I hear that when you hold on to the bone, it works like a charm and you won't go through three days of labour like grasscutters.'

When I told husband this, he laughed it off. 'Don't listen to that nonsense. Did you eat the soup?'

'Just a little,' I said.

'You are fine,' he said. 'Nothing will happen. That superstition is rubbish.'

But I never forgot the grasscutter and her dead blind babies. I don't forget the dead. I don't.

The doctor shows up in the evening, checks my progress, and tells Nneka to put me on a hot drip the following morning if my contractions are still weak. I'd heard terrible things about the drip and so I tell the nurse that I don't want it.

'It will help you,' she says. 'Your baby is getting stressed out, so it is not wise to take unnecessary risks.' Her voice is firm, her face set in tense lines.

Something leaps and pushes against my chest, and I try to appear calm. I feel my belly, mutter something incoherent to my baby, will for it to move and distort the shape of my belly as it had always done in the past. I had learned to accept its restlessness: sometimes it performed acrobatics in the middle of the night, for ten minutes or more, then relaxed and allowed me some sleep. Other times it danced until dawn crept in through the crack in my window. Those times, the bones of my waist would stretch, a dull ache pulsing. Everything pulsed at such times, in my ears, my temples, even the surface of my skin. Every inch of my body would tingle, as though they were in some sort of symphony with this child, and I would pray for it to tire so I would get some rest.

Now I long for that restlessness, but my belly stays firm and round, at peace, as if my baby has fallen into a long, dreamless sleep. What was that prayer my mother uttered when things got out of control? *Chukwu m, do not forsake me at this time, please.* I whisper this under my breath as a new bout of contractions surges through me.

My sister-in-law Uzo walks in with a flask full of food. She looks at me, her face squeezing, fleetingly, into a mix of concern and fear. It is an expression I know so well – eyes bulging as though popping out of their sockets, lips parted, revealing her perfect dentition; it is the same expression she had months ago when our mother-in-law collapsed on her way to the bathroom. It is an expression I don't want to see, not at this time, not when my baby has gone still and my torment stretches, without cease.

Uzo sits beside me and holds my hand until the contractions pass.

She rearranges her expression into something warm and hopeful, the look that says everything will be alright. 'How are you, nne?' she says.

I want to say I am not fine. I want to say my baby is yet to move since I woke this morning. I open my mouth but no words come out. Uzo just sits there, holding my hand, a reassuring smile on her face. She is only 20, a year older than me. She is tall and thin and carries her shoulders like she is holding something elegant and fragile on her neck, like she has just walked out of the cover of a glossy magazine. A year ago, she gave birth to her first child, a boy, after a ridiculously short labour. Now she sits here watching, her eyes telling me that everything is going to be alright.

'They are going to put me on a hot drip,' I finally say.

'Good,' she says. 'It is better that way. They should have thought of this earlier and not allow you to go through all this pain.'

My waist stretches, pain sweeps over my body like hot pins. A woman is screaming in the theatre, her voices hoarse from crying. The nurses urge her to push and her heaving sounds flood into my room, causing the curtains to shiver. Moments later, a baby's cries pierce the charged atmosphere and the woman is crying and the nurses are singing another Igbo song of praise. Uzo grips my hand and offers that reassuring smile.

'You will be fine,' she says.

A spasm of fury surges through me, tightens my chest. She is the perfect wife who has given her husband a son, and her body was not subjected to a long labour. She is everything I want to be, but I am trapped in this room, with its smeared walls and damp air, enduring turbulence. She must feel superior, with her patronising smile and proper ways, while I go through a hell that shows no signs of abating this night, or even tomorrow morning, when I will be strapped to a hot drip and raked through hot coals, something she never had to experience. She is the stronger woman; my body is weak and lazy, betraying me every minute. Something bitter fills my mouth.

'How would you know, tell me, just how?' I say. 'How would you

know what I am going to be put through.'

A shadow passes over her face, clouding her eyes, briefly. 'It is alright,' she tells me. 'It is alright.' She pours me a glass of water. She wipes her head with a kerchief. She fans my body with a newspaper she got from a side table. She simulates my breathing pattern when another contraction grips my body. When our gazes meet again, I think I am crying.

'You will win this battle,' she says in a mother's voice. 'God is on your side, believe me.'

My cries come in sputters. Of course, I am afraid. But I bob my head and say what she wants to hear: I say I will remain strong. I say God is on my side.

My mother-in-law, Mama, comes in the morning and she immediately wants to know why this labour is taking too long. She is small and hunched and has a skin so fair, like she's never been kissed by the sun. The first time I saw the photo of her and her nine living children and the husband she cared for until his death at 78, I just stared in disbelief. Uzo told her on the phone that my labour is still lingering. So she trekked all the way from her house at Ngwa Road to the hospital at Tenant Road, stomps into my ward clutching an end of her slipping wrapper, breathing like she just ran a marathon.

I am rolling and tussling in bed, screaming the roof down, a bag of hot intravenous liquid dripping the devil's fluid into my vein. Mama starts praying.

In my dream, I turn away from her voice as spasms of contractions have their way with me. A thousand pins shoot up my body in excruciating waves. I roll off the bed and someone catches me. I jerk up and they hold me down. I tug at the IV and the needle shifts and my arm begins to swell. Another nurse, whose face will forever remain blurry in my memory, removes the needle and finds another vein. I sit next to Mama in my dream, begging her to help me, but she is more worried about the grasscutter's bones. She wants to know if I saved a bone, where I kept it. Uzo says something to her, their voices merging

and bleeding into each other's. They are talking about me, soon talking to the nurse about me, their voices edgy with panic and fear. Nurse injects a clear liquid into the bag and minutes later, the pain comes down some notches, a certain fatigue settles itself deep in my bones. My mind slows. My eyes droop close. I am in pain but my mind is suddenly muddled with a hunger for sleep. I shut my eyes and drift the blurry line between sleep and wakefulness.

When I open my eyes again, my sister-in-law Tina stands over my bed. 'Her body is weak,' she says, as though in contempt. A stocky, cantankerous woman, her voice drowns out others. What is she doing here? The longer she talks in here the more I want to jump out of the bed and lunge at her with balled fists. She and I don't get along and each of us thinks the other is disrespectful and rude. Once we had a quarrelling match after she took the shoes my husband gave me without my permission, and it ended with her saying I was a terrible wife, which drove me to tell her that she should maybe go and find herself a husband, and we didn't talk to each other again for a full month.

'Tina should stay away from my house so I can enjoy this marriage,' I told my husband later.

'She's my sister, you know,' he said. He is the good brother, always bringing his gazillion siblings together, always wanting to please everyone. They troop to our house every minute of the day and banish me to the bedroom so they can discuss Important Family Matters in the sitting room, whispering as though to safeguard their secrets from this intruder, lurking around the kitchen to check how many pieces of meat or fish I dished for myself. They tell each other that I am wasting their brother's money, eating like I had never done in my father's house. They actually are somewhat a close-knit family, and I really like it when siblings stick to each other like broomsticks in a bunch, but this lot are just people who enjoy making my life miserable.

Now Tina touches my shoulder, rubs it, and I make to swing at her or something, but my hands are heavy like concrete and my mind is

returning to a fugue state, and I shut my eyes again.

I roll over in half-sleep, wheezing as the bones of my waist stretch and contract. Tina mops my face with a towel, muttering inaudible words.

Aunty Ngozi walks in, the oldest in my husband's family, and everyone turns to her, greets her. Aunty Ngozi bends over to look at me, while Tina and Uzo rub my back and mutter more comforting words. I give her a brave smile, but I start to sob – long, ragged sobs – my mind drifting again between wakefulness and sleep, all the faces melding into one fat smudge.

Aunty Ngozi shakes her head and fishes out her phone, dials and begins to shout at the doctor. She wants him to come immediately. She is disappointed in him. How could he leave me, her own relative, in the care of these young nurses?

It is like a family meeting in here, the first one I would be included in since marrying into this family. I wish they would all leave so that I can cry these pains in peace. But I am glad that they are here; if I were to die, at least I would not move on to the next life isolated in this mosquito-plagued hospital. I struggle to stay awake against the force of the drug dragging my eyes shut, and begin to breathe through my mouth, loudly.

Mama resumes praying. Tina mops my face. Uzo talks in low tones with Aunty Ngozi. I stare at each person, wondering if they really care about me or if they aren't just here to perform some sort of public unity. And I see the answer on their crumpled faces, heard it in their voices that are now weighed down with sadness: they love me and they will not turn their backs on me.

It is afternoon and I have half left this world, and every time I open my eyes, I see relatives shuffling about, faces tense, mouths moving in frantic speech. They have never seen a labour like this and I have never been in a hell like this. I keep my eyes open as long as I can. I try to talk to them but can't make sense of my slurred words.

Doctor walks in wearing a brilliant white coat. He looks around

the crowded ward. He says something and everyone starts talking at the same time.

'I will teach you a lesson if anything happens to my wife,' Mama shakes. Doctor tries to apologize. Mama is a robust small woman who married as young as I am, and has lost her last two children, twin boys, during the Biafran War.

Two nurses show up and they take me to theater. My legs have melted, and I feel strange inside my body.

Stretched out on the table, I stare at the white ceiling. I can feel the nurses watching me as they prepare birthing tools. Doctor works a vacuum extractor and inspects the cap. His eyes are kind and his hands are quick. He is Auntie Ngozi's favourite doctor, a family friend, and delivered all her babies, including Somto who was so large his shoulders ripped her body to pieces and doctor patched her up and nursed her back to life. Something comforting spreads in my chest. I briefly close my eyes.

Doctor scoots my butt forward and the nurses gaze between my spread legs. I work on the speech I will give to my husband when he gets back from Dubai: *After all this, this child should belong to me, should bear my name and pass it onto generations to come. Because you did nothing. You know nothing. You will never know what my body knows and I will never, ever, ever, ever go through this again for your glory. If you want more children, go and get yourself another willing fool!*

The doctor picks up a scalpel. It is slim and small and looks sharp. He nips at my perineum, fuses the cap of the extractor to my baby's head, and tells me to push. I am too numb to push.

But I lift my upper body and heave with all my strength. Again and again. Kind voices urging me on. Something fat and thick and frightening surges out of me, sucking all strength and screams. Darkness hovers and my soul leaves my body and floats to the ceiling.