

# When God Is a (Wo)man

OBINNA OBIOMA

YOUR PALMS TURN RED from clutching the seatbelt tight. It is either that or you fall off the unclosed door when the vehicle is rocked by the numerous potholes on Wetheral Road.

‘Kwesili, chill now,’ she says. ‘Na boy you kiss. You no kill pesin.’

Everyone in the tuke-tuke bus cast puzzled glances at her, and then at you. Only the (wo)man sitting beside the driver keeps angry eyes on the road. The driver misses an adventurous motorcyclist by a hair’s breadth. Curses and mutterings rise.

‘Driver, you wan kill us? Keep eye for road o!’

‘She say na boy im kiss?’

‘Be like the boy na homo.’

‘Na them. Bukuru people.’

You look at the people on the sidewalk, at the paint-washed buildings left behind in speed. In the fading background, the passengers resume their chatter, about how westernisation has reformatted the mentality of most women to now think, dress and make themselves appear equal to men. She ignores the side talks, and reaches out to pat your lap. You

silently curse whatever made Oyoyo, the family driver, to be absent this morning of all mornings. You hang on to life.

‘You will be fine. This is nothing.’

Wrong. This is everything. You’ve been punished, shamed at the school’s assembly ground, suspended and told to come with your parents after two weeks. Now, you are about to enter the principal’s office with two women: Maama and Mazpa, the other (wo)man.

It runs in the blood. Nnùà, your grandmother, you were told, married a new wife – Iko-Nwanyi – for her husband when he couldn’t stop visiting the young mistress almost every midnight. So she paid the full dowry to bring her home, and more to keep frolicking grandfather’s penis between his legs. Nonetheless, this had never before happened in all of the *Ngwa* tribe. Not in the dim and distant past.

That day that Nnùà married a new wife, the Umuada, daughters of the clan, gathered to pour cold ash and vent obscenities on her. It was unheard of – a woman paying for rivalry herself, sharing her man with a younger maiden. The men congratulated old granddad over many pots of pami. They watched the ash-throwing ceremony from a distance. By evening, Nnùà, shoulders high, handed over a co-wife to the man she called ‘nna m’.

Anyway, drunk Grandfather Midnight Tryster, that very night, slept eternally before he could do his duties by the new wife. They said defiant Nnùà hissed at his dead body during the washing ceremony for wasting her hard-earned cowries. She pissed on his grave for not eating the supple dish in her presence.

Howbeit, someone must eat the dish. Iko-Nwanyi was Nnùà’s wife now, and so must make children. She did. No one knew how. She came back one day, bellyful. Nine months later, the other (wo)man you call *father* was born. That was a long time ago. You were not there.

‘Welcome, Mrs Arugo,’ the proprietor says, ignoring your own greeting. He turns to you. ‘Kwesili, you were asked to come with both of your guardians.’ He knows Maama, but not Mazpa who grits their

teeth and take a seat without being asked. You know they are seething, and the proprietor's ignorance is not even the cause.

'These are my parents, sir,' you say.

He looks at Maama. 'Mrs Arugo, please, this is a dire matter and I shall need to speak with your husband.'

'You are looking at my husband,' mother replies coolly.

'Ma-dam?'

'That'd be *Sirdam Mazpa* to you, Mister Principal,' Mazpa glares at him, speaking for the first time. 'Now, if you would get to it. We don't have all day to haggle over who is what and what is not.'

'Oh, right, ma-sir-dam.' The owly-eyed potbellied man stutters and sits behind the clustered office table. Mother sits, too. You stand guard beside them. Your legs wobble for the reproach to come.

'Ahem! Ma-sir-dam, your boy here was reported to have been engaged in an unholy act with, errr, a fellow boy in the male bathroom. Now, not to say this school does not allow any form of illicit relationships amongst its students, this is a more grievous offence—'

'Because he was fucked by a fellow boy?' Mazpa's lips purse in an angry smirk.

'Em... I find your words a bit too strong.'

'Ehn now. Let's call their sin by its right name.'

The proprietor shifts uncomfortably in his seat. His belly heaves. 'We frown at every form of affair that takes place behind these walls, ma's'dam.'

'And how many of such cases have you had?'

'None.'

'How about the boys sneaking out of classes to have porn-inspired masturbation, as I can see no female students around here. Do they meet with this same punishment?'

'Pardon?'

'Thirty strokes of the cane in a public assembly, two weeks suspension and an eighty-leaves exercise book filled with the Lord's Prayer—'

'Ma's'dam, if you think we were harsh in our treatment...'

‘Maltreatment, mister, maltreatment. You literally flagellated my son! Tell me, do you believe two women can sire a child by themselves?’

‘What? No!’

‘But the theories of a virgin birth you never witnessed is more acceptable, eh?’

The man’s face contours into discomfort.

Mazpa looks up at you and smirks, ‘I told you here was a bad idea. God is not so unkind as to disrespect the sacrament of liberal beings.’

‘S’ma, if you do not see anything wrong in what he did, then you are wrong.’

‘No. The only thing he did wrong was getting caught. Because he was hiding! When all he could have done was wait till vacation, bring his lover home and do him all he wants in a place where his sensuality is respected!’

You stand there, listening. The argument rising, falling. Few teachers come to see what the fuss is about. Maama sits there with a smug grin as Mazpa say *fuck* again and again, to the proprietor’s chagrin. You can’t help but applaud your parents inside. *Tell him, Mazpa! Show him! In your face, Mr Scrawny Face Academic, in your face!* They are doing a great job defending you until they, again, bring up the question of your procreation – the Achilles’ heel to your reality.

For all your knowledge and love for biology, you know you are not a product of asexuality. You know that, like Mazpa’s true paternity, yours is an unrevealed memory. You know this goes beyond the chemistry of a trans body and a physically attractive woman who, like her mother-in-law, loves the very idea of making a child with no history. Perhaps, there is a form of fornication culturally acceptable which must be explored. Your family tree traces you to an improbable root, and God knows it bothers you some time.

It bothers you when other boys at the football field call your father *pussy*. You know they are right – but not in a derogatory way they intend it. It bothers you when Maama tells you to ignore them and not fight the world because she’s sworn the oath of silence. Mazpa tell you

that **their** lives, like yours, are a choice and no man's business. Like their father, Nnùà, they decided to become a husband figure when three of **theirs** died in America before they could become a mother.

They come back from the States transformed. Menopause set in like early morning dew. Someone needs to propagate the Nnùà lineage. In time, Maama becomes that surrogate species swinging both ways. Theirs is an unconventional matrimony. Twelve months later, you become the blessing of the pendulum union. You grow and learn to love the wom(x)n in your life.

But when adolescence comes, it teaches you to crave for absence. Your life swings underneath weightless, suppressed urges for a male body. Regulated by fear. Until your final senior secondary class when this boy unveils the truth, one night. He gives you two tennis balls and tells you to rub them whenever you need him, and he would come. He does come, many nights in those weeks when the SS3 students stay back in school to prepare for WASSCE. You fancy the fantasy, how dreams come true, until the night the janitor becomes a watchdog.

Caught. Exposed. Disgraced. You think your world will fall apart. You feel sorry for Boy, too. But the worst is yet to c o m e.

'Wait, you mean to tell me this boy was not punished, too?'

'Actually, S'madam, your son forced himself on this boy.'

'What!?'

Maama and Mazpa echo your disbelief.

'I tell you, ma'am. It was rape. The boy testified.'

Mazpa looks up into your face, shocked. Speechless, you wag your head: it is not *totally* true. They glare at the proprietor.

'I want to see this boy. Now.'

Boy is called into the principal's office. Head bowed. But everyone can see the uncanny resemblance between you two. Sometimes, you want to think you bonded so well to look alike. Like you were predestined to be together. As brothers, as lovers. Everyone called you both twins after he joined the class. Maybe that was what brewed the friendship. So, how come this heartrending denial?

Mazpa gives him a once-over. ‘What’s your name, boy?’

‘Bironye Nnanna,’ Boy answers, head still bowed.

You notice Maama squirm on her seat. Something more than surprise pervaded her face when Boy mentions his name.

‘Bironye?’ she asks.

‘Yes, ma.’

‘Tell us what happened, Nnaa. As truthfully as you must,’ Mazpa entreats. Maama withdraws into silence.

It is all lies – what Boy said you did. You know it. Your parents know it. Because you’re as soft-spoken as a man pleading to put ‘just the tip’ into a naïve virgin on a cold Harmattan night. And, of course, you can’t possibly bully a boy bigger than you. It’s either consensual or he’s decided to save face.

You can’t believe your ears. Boy’s words are defacing, not what the constellations heard him tell you over and over again in the cover of darkness. In the commotion – Boy trying to sound as believable as he can, you crying out your innocence – someone else storms into the office. Maama is the first to see him.

‘Abraham!’

‘Arugo!’

You are taken aback by the knee-jerk reaction of the two. Maama has suddenly come out of her shell. What exactly is going on here?

Mazpa lets out a false cough. Everyone is jolted back to reality.

‘Mr Bironye, please, have a seat,’ the proprietor gestures with his hand.

He sits beside Maama.

‘What are you doing here?’ Maama leans in to whisper.

‘A new boy molested my son in a very serious sort of way, two weeks ago. Just few weeks here and someone has turned my son into an asshole! I was called this morning to come and find out who—’

‘It’s our ... *daughter*,’ Maama nudges him calmly.

The man looks up at you in sheer unbelief. ‘Oh. My. God.’

Mazpa coughs again.

You were born Obiageli. First of your name. You thrived on this other side of life where boys dominated the playground and the girls clung to their mothers' laps to learn how to be domesticated. You grew and fought and cursed with the street boys of Lagos because Maama said, 'Why not? Are you not as strong as them?' Yours was a popular world where you sang and danced with the Jackson Five and moon-walked with grownup Michael Jackson.

The last time you saw Jackson's documentary on Fox 24 was at his funeral. You were 13 and wondered how a handsome ebony boy could have grown to become this fair *beautiful* man. You wondered why he ran from his true colour to become a version of your cravings. Long wavy hair, curly locks dropping over his serene face, he was a total upgrade to Will Smith, your secret crush and favourite Hollywood actor.

At your first costume party in junior school, you became both – the dead artist and the living legend. Maama approved. Just like Mazpa agreed to fill your wardrobe with unisex cloths because you were obsessed with the in-betweens. Black tux, white sleeves, matching slacks inches above ankles, gleaming white socks, trendy moccasins: everyone said you looked like a young version of black MJ, except your hair was shorn as low as Smith's in *I Am Legend*. You peered with the boys, danced with the feminine finesse of MJ and the will and strength of Smith. Then people started talking.

It started with the gossip girls who you rarely kept company. It was on the lips of the older women of Obalande. Until you no more could understand why they wouldn't let you be what you knew was normalcy for you. At senior school, when Mazpa said it was okay to use phones and the Internet, your first Google search was *Why can't I be me, here? Is this transfiguration? Am I an example of incomplete metamorphosis?*

At 17, Google replied: *Development of self-identification as [words omitted because they do not totally define you] is a psychological and socially complex state, something which, in this society, is achieved only over time, often with considerable personal struggle and self-doubt, not*

*to mention social discomfort.*

True. You *are* the apophysis that was never mentioned. You shrank inwards, and so did your breasts. They refused to bloom as big as Eniola's. *Will doesn't have chest as big as Dwayne Johnson's, does he?* So, you never needed those, either.

Mazpa and Maama mirrored your evolution, aided your recreation. When for the third time a school refused to accommodate your choice of being, you all moved to a place where you can be yourself without fear. You left Obalande for Victoria Island. You left Obiageli for Kwesili – a name which, in any tongue, had no label.

'OK. What was that about back there?' you and Mazpa ask at once, walking towards the school gate.

'Exactly what you're never supposed to find out,' Maama smiles and winks at Mazpa. Her eyes plead with theirs to get the wing of it without making her explain much.

'Oh no! Really? That's him?' They let out a hysterical laugh.

'Wait. Th-that's who?' You still don't get it.

'Your father!' they chorus.

'Actually, surrogate-father,' Maama explains. 'We borrowed his seed in a round. That's how it's always worked. Like Nnùà, your *grandpama*, Mazpa looks the other way, I pick a man, come back nine months later, we have you, and ta-da! Are we not one queer family?'

It is a hard purchase – the revelations, the possibility that...

'You've been sleeping with your brother this whole time, Kwesili!' Mazpa shrills. They crack up.

'Technically, it's your stepbrother,' Maama says.

'Really?'

'Yeah. Why else do you think Mr Bironye dropped all charges for all the things we know you didn't do?' Mazpa says.

You're now starting to get the hang of it. 'So, basically, my actual father is not supposed to know what became of your pregnancy, Maama?'

'Nope. All he knows is he has a daughter. It's all in the contract,

so he won't wake up one morning and decide to claim you. In fact, he already did have a family when we met.'

Mazpa rolls her eyes. 'Hello, people! I am standing right here, and I still am not supposed to know who slept with my wife.'

You all laugh. How much you love these two. You *are* one queer family, and you couldn't help but imagine how baffled Mr Bironye must have felt looking into the brown eyes of a boy who supposedly should be his daughter, in an all-boys' school!

'Will he tell Nnanna?' you ask.

'Will you?' Maama asks.

Oh no! Lord knows you won't. Too much discovery for a day. You're doing all you can to take it all in. Boy already has much to contend with. One more secret and you think he might fall off a cliff. But, what if he knows?

'Kwesili!' someone calls from along the hallway. It is Boy. You sigh, but not in dejection, and wait. Maama and Mazpa continue on their way. Boy runs up to you.

'Hey.'

'Hey.'

You both stand there, staring into the other's eyes and counting your teeth. Heads poke through classroom windows. They snigger and grunt, wonder what exactly is going on between you two. Moments pass. You take his hand.

'I am sorry,' he says.

'Me too. Umm... I'll see you on Monday, or this weekend or ... whenever?' You rush the words fearing he might hear the percussions of your heart like djembe drums at midnight.

'OK. Weekend then,' he smiles, and walks back to class.

'Maama, did you see the look on the principal's face when dad kept saying "fuck"? His face kept puffing like an overfed baby about to throw up!'

'Mind your mouth, Kwesili. No f-words,' Mazpa warns. 'I and your mom are the only ones allowed to use them. It's an adult's thing.'

They exchange knowing looks and laugh loud again.

‘You know you almost blew this, Kwesili,’ Mazpa says, serious now. ‘You have to really tread cautiously here until you finish your exam, then you can travel to the States.’

You think about the United States. It has a queer ring of braveness, and freedom, and liberty. Like *temenos* – a sacred circle for every *body*...

‘But wait o,’ Mazpa’s voice jams into your reverie. ‘How is it you get to rape a boy? I knew something was wrong the moment the principal said you raped that boy.’

Almost everyone in the *tuke-tuke* bus turns to cast a puzzled glance at the three of you seated at the back, to confirm their ears. You don’t need a soothsayer to tell you that the whole family chitchat is making them uncomfortable. It is *un-African*, unethical, uncouth. The driver steps hard on the brake, missing a wheelbarrow pusher by the skin of his own teeth. Curses and mutterings rise and fall.

‘Driver, you wan kill pesin? Keep eye for road na!’

‘She say nah boy im rape?’

‘Who him dey call dad?’

‘Be like the boy na homo.’

‘Na them. *Americana* people.’

You ignore the side talks and applaud yourself for having saved the situation, although not totally. No one in school is supposed to know you are not exactly what you look like. So, when Boy caught you, pants down, easing yourself in the boys’ bathroom, there were only two things to do: tell him the truth and fall in love with him. The plan worked, kept working, until the janitor caught two ‘boys’ making out at night in the bathroom. The story, however scandalising for both parties, needed a little twist to save Boy (and yourself) from the greater consequences, if the actual truth is to be told.

For love’s sake, you get the strokes of cane and suspension, and your lover gets to be the ‘big boy fucked in the ass by a smallie.’ You are not expelled from school (would have been the fourth time) because, of course, Abraham is your father and your God is a (wo)man. You

look out of the side screen and smile at your own deceit. In the fading background, the passengers chatter about how westernisation with its education has reformatted most women to now think, dress and make themselves appear as men.