

Childbearing

The first time Grandma slapped me I was ten. More than anything it was the suddenness of the slap that surprised me, the speed and agility with which her wrinkled hand cut through the air to greet my right cheek. I remember it was cool out, not unusual for that time of year, there was no power, as usual, and we had settled in the court yard to enjoy the evening air and each other's company: Grandma, Mum, Amara and me. Dad and Uncle Udo had gone over to Pa Nzube's compound for the *umunna* meeting after dinner, so it was just us women.

Grandma was seated on a low wooden stool. She sat as upright as she could, swathed in several blue and orange wrappers, one to protect her legs from the mosquitoes, the second draped around her shoulders, as was her habit. Her jumper, which Mum would later put on the pile of things to throw out after Grandma died, was made from fat red wool. The cuffs of the sleeves were frayed, the stitches coming apart, and little balled-up clumps hung all over the jumper as if undecided whether to stay or drop off. Grandma's hair always reminded me of that jumper: thick and remnant of a past time. Not a strand of black remained. The greying mass had been plaited into large box braids that curled ever so slightly at the tips, like baby's fingers.

Opposite Grandma was Mum. Mum was seated on a metal chair with her legs spread open—like a man—so that the thin cotton of her dress had to stretch to hide the space between her legs. In the middle of the two women, forming a small imperfect circle was Amara and me. I, straining to make sense of every word being said, Amara, half-leaning on the wall behind her, her eyes trained, half-seeing, on the space in front of her. Half the time Amara looked like she was not all there, like she never stopped dreaming, but she was probably following the conversation better than I was. Why wouldn't she? Although she was only fifteen months older, Amara was everything that I would never be and more. She was clever, pretty and fully-bilingual. While I laboured to follow common household conversation, Amara spoke Igbo as easily as the sun shone in the sky, and even her name—Igbo for grace—was a constant reminder of her polish, of her refinement, of the fact that the Almighty *Chukwu* had taken extra time when he had made her.

That evening, after a dinner of *eba* and peppery *ukazi* soup, Amara and I had been eager to please Mum and Grandma. We had done the dishes swiftly and without complaint. The soup had had plentiful chunks of periwinkles, which we both loved and of which we were both starved since Mum never cooked them at home. She claimed that the feel of their chewy bodies sliding through the slippery soup was enough to turn her stomach. Yet it had been Mum that had gone to the market that day to buy the dinner's soup things, Mum that had washed the bag of periwinkles in the kitchen sink, Mum that had licked bowl after bowl of *ukazi* soup—without *eba*. That should have been the first sign. Back then though I didn't give it too much thought, especially when I was benefitting from Mum's inconsistency, and so I sat, stomach-full and happy on the enamel-topped stool, listening to Grandma and Mum talk about the latest additions to our home town.

"Just last week, I went to visit our neighbours, the Nwapas," Grandma said flicking the fingers of one hand absently behind her head, "Chika gave birth. Twins—two boys that are big like this. Throughout the time I was there they didn't stop crying once. This one would cry for breast and wake the other and then the other one would start crying. You should have seen Ma Chika running around, doing this and that for the babies as if she was the one that gave birth. She was happier than the boys' own mother."

Mum cooed in the way that all Igbo mothers coo when they hear good news.

"*Kita kita*, now now, before they left, Udo was telling me that Ma Chidiogo put to bed too. You remember Ma Chidiogo? Vincent Nwankwo's wife? The woman who was married five years before she was able to give her husband a child?"

Even though the questions were aimed at Mum, I considered what I knew about Ma Chidiogo. She was a thin woman, about the height of a full-grown he-goat who drew, presumably in the name of 'fashion', arched black lines on her yellow face for eyebrows. Her daughter, Chidiogo, was equally fair and about a hundred times more acerbic. Whenever she got the chance, which was every time she was in earshot when I spoke, Chidiogo made sure she commented on the un-Igboness of my Igbo. My vowels were too nasal. I didn't emphasise the tones like I ought to. The

sounds of my compound consonants seemed divorced – *did I think I was speaking English?*

Yes, I was glad that Ma Chidiogo had had a new baby. New babies meant crying and feeding and nappy-changing and work, and Chidiogo would be expected to help out.

“Only their close relatives knew that she was pregnant—after so many miscarriages, they didn’t want to invite any evil wishers—until last month when they came back to the village with the child to see Vincent’s parents. The baby is doing well.”

“What’s the child’s name?” asked Mum.

“Nwakego.”

Mum smiled, repeating the name to herself. Nwakego: *Nwa ka ego. A child is better than money.* “Thank God.” Mum slipped into a reverent silence.

Grandma laughed. “*Obele, obele*, small by small, this little village of ours is growing!” it was the kind of declaration that said nothing and everything all at the same time, a declaration voicing unspoken expectations—no, stronger than that, obligations—in a way that neither imposed nor left room for free debate, leaving you implicated without your consent. “So when will it be your turn? When are you going to give us another child?”

“Ma, you’re not serious. At my age?” Mum looked at Grandma and laughed a laugh that was polite but firm. “I’ve done all that: morning sickness, waking up at night, changing nappies. *No o.* No, thank you. Two are enough. If it’s children you want, then we can find you your own husband. Leave me and my own alone.”

“*Mtchew.* You’re laughing? See how good children are. They make even the old young, and your children need siblings. Amara, Ngozi, don’t you want a little brother?”

Amara had the sense to smile. I said no without considering the implications of honesty, and Grandma slapped me before the single syllable could leave my mouth. “*Ta! Meche onu.*”. The slap had a light, playful quality. It was both a joke and

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a warning, and we all laughed as I blinked away the tears to keep the atmosphere blithe. Soon the topic was dropped and the conversation moved to Dad's new job in Lagos, to the new house and to our imminent return to the country we had left eight years before.

Lying side by side in the dark later that night on our shared Vitafoam mattress, Amara told me that she hated children and would never have any. "This is how it starts," she said in English, "do they think that life is all about having children and cooking? When I'm older, I want to live in New York and get a dog. A golden retriever called Sammy."

Of all my memories of Grandma, of our summers at Ontisha before Mum had Chibu, we left London and life took on different colour, it is this one that sticks with me most. I do not know why. On days when I do not want to get up, when the child inside me plays too violently and I feel sick, I think of Grandma. I have a sort of rhythm: I think of Grandma, about how much she loved children and then about how much I loved her, how I loved her without knowing her.

I do not understand why she insisted that we cook only with the palm oil she brought us when palm oil cost less than ₦200 in the market for a big bottle. The bright red oil was always heavy with her sweat, from the hours she spent pounding away at the palm fruit she grew herself. I do not understand the small things that she did, her secret rituals. The way she refused to wear weave-ons or extensions, even to weddings and big events. The way she slept with a dimly lit kerosene lamp outside her door at night. The way she insisted on doing her weekly laundry by hand in large basins, even though we had a washing machine, until that summer after the move, when she and Dad had fought and he had called her backward.

I look at Ukamaka and Ihedinaha, I feel the child growing inside of me, and my heart fills, like hers must have done. It makes me feel that I am full of her, like somehow our people were right, like somehow *ilo uwa*—reincarnation—is true and she will come back to me. I am so full I think I might burst; still, I miss her.