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Two stories by Jill Okpalugo-Nwajiaku
The Pretty Pink Box

“You never know what you can do until someone pushes you to a corner,” Mama often said on bad days. And always, Adaure, my younger sister had replied, tall, arms akimbo, legs slightly apart, “And why would you let someone boss you around?”

Today, as I got change for a twenty and paid the taxi driver, I saw Adaure, angry, on her doorstep. She untied her neatly-ironed apron with one hand, and fought to keep the front door open with the other. I understood Mama’s words differently.

“You came.” She hugged me, bunched my bags together, and carried them in a hand. She let out a stingy smile and closed the door behind me.

Tension hung in the air like thick smoke, without bothering to settle. The calm tick tock of the wall clock was a noisy whimper. “You cooked Okra soup.” I started out light, easy. There was too much to say, too little to leave out. “You remembered my favorite soup, thank you.”

“Who told you the news?” Nonchalance was in her eyes, diplomacy in her smile.

“About Emeka’s secret family?” I could not get the story out of my head after Mama Oby, a woman in Mama’s prayer group, came on a rainy Tuesday and said her niece, Grace, had stumbled on the hidden family by divine providence.

“We were braiding our hair. The boy looked so much like Emeka,” Grace had said with solid conviction.

“So?” Mama hit her fist impatiently on her giant Bible on the side stool.

Grace looked us square in the face. “I researched their origin, and discovered that they were Emeka’s second family in Lagos.”

News of Emeka’s infidelity broke right away.

“They had two boys, and three girls. And I did not know?” Adaure walked up and down the small space she occupied. She stopped by the window that faced west and she stood there with her back to me.

I sat on the sofa. “I fear a conversation like ours cannot be successfully discussed without someone slumping. Sit, please.” Although a distance away, I saw her face. I could tell she was miserable.

“Grace said the other woman is nothing like you,” I said like it mattered, as if beauty was the winning lottery ticket one played against infidelity. “She said her skin lacked luster like those who retired early from using bleaching creams.”

Adaure’s laughter was hypocritical. It reminded me of a bottle voided of its contents. “Emeka said that I can leave if I want to.” She paused and twisted her long permed hair playfully the way she often did when we were little girls. Time and again we played in the village square

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as long as it was light, even if it meant just twisting our braids. "He said that she gave him something that I could not give him, but he lied."

With a quick twist of the head, I studied my sister well. "What a sorry excuse," I said. Then I looked away and wondered if Adaure was still with her mind. As far as we all knew, she was childless.

Adaure breezed past me and returned with a pretty pink box. She sat beside me with it on her lap. It took forever, but she finally opened the case.

"Do you know what these are?" She sounded like a bad telephone connection.

I looked inside. They were aged but unmistakable. The whites of it were yellowed from time yet the double lines stood solid, like a firm line ruled on paper. "Pregnancy test kits," I said subdued. "You had miscarriages." I began to cry. "Three times." I was confused. "You never told me, us." I must stop talking. I probably sounded like the baffled workers at Babel.

Adaure closed the pretty pink box and held my hand. I wished I could, but I would not stop shaking. "You shiver as if from malaria fever." Her voice carried a different emotion, strength. "I told you, once, and I regretted it. It was the most difficult part of my mourning. Having to tell everyone that my conceive child was dead. That I was pregnant, and one day, puff, it vanished into thin air."

"What will you do now?" I asked my feelings at boiling point. Adaure was emotionally blank. I did not like it. People who act like that kill themselves later. Or they just go mad.

"We both did the same thing, conceive. She was fortunate that hers lived."

"So? Won't you leave him?" I looked Adaure in the eye as I asked the defining question of the day.

"For someone else who will do the same thing in a different style? I am comfortable here. Let me suffer in ease."

It was the wrong answer but I had nothing more to say.

"Let me get you food." Adaure pretended happiness for a moment.

I picked a private spot by the big potted flower, and I cried some more, without shame. This time, for Adaure's unborn children.

Disclosure

Responding to my tap on her shoulder, Auntie Ogechukwu, with a quick twist of her head read my face immediately I entered the parlor. "Your sister, Nneka lied." She walked to the painting near the huge wall clock and watched it forever. "Your mother is not here with you, and I had come all the way from the village to see her."

From where I stood, I could tell that she was disappointed. That crease on her forehead. The forceful way she had crossed her arms. "Nnoo." I greeted her sincerely but she did not budge. I moved her luggage aside and locked her in an embrace that we basked in its warmth for a longtime. I raised my voice. "Welcome home." Her husband had been a carpenter. Perhaps overfamiliarity with the hammer, and all those nails, had left her hearing poor.

"What does the painting say?" She ran unpolished fingers over the artwork.

I admired the poor fit of her skirt and blouse. Then I stepped back and watched the picture too. "Humankind." I rubbed my palms. "I chose it because the word 'mankind' on the other one I had liked better seems to slight women."

Pride slowly filled her face. "Tell my dead husband, Gabe, that."

I cleared my throat. "How did he die?" It was the right question. "I mean, I have heard long whispered talks that you both never got along, but nothing more."

She sneaked me a look. "I thought I will tell you this story blind, on a wheelchair." Her voice sounded different when she spoke. It reminded me of a bottle of vinegar voided of its contents.

She sat on the sofa beside the side stool. Perhaps she feared that she couldn't tell the story upright. "After days of procrastination, I was on the way to the tailor's house to pick up my gown. Our daughter, Uzoamaka had persuaded me to go." Dread was in her eyes, diplomacy in her smile. "I looked back and our house was in flames. Bombed." Auntie Ogechukwu sat upright in her seat. Grief left her feelings at boiling point. "Gabe and Uzoamaka, were home when it began. It was October, 1968. The Nigerian Civil War was at its peak. When the shelling rained on zinc roofs, he ran to the front of the house. She escaped through the backyard."

I could not get the story out of my head. It was the wrong time to interrupt a narrative, but I took the tale from there mostly because our ideas seemed to square as one at the moment. "She lived. He died. How do you live with that?"

Auntie Ogechukwu looked me square in the face. "The same way you live with the inevitable." She rubbed her face and wiped the oiliness on her palm on her maroon skirt. "The exact way you've made peace with the paying of taxes."