

THE WAR WIFE

BLESSING OKWONG

Grandma woke up with a broken soul.

She couldn't hide the tears as we had jumped on her sickbay to wish her a happy birthday. We all knew she was broken but she had tried hiding it—as grandmothers do— whenever grandchildren, snuck into her room for stories. The love for her true life stories and all she has passed through, made us brave enough to defy our parents' warning to leave her alone. Each tale was a brick building us into strong and confident fortresses ready to fight to keep our grandma alive. But Grandma's fighting spirit was downcast on the morning of October 1, and it shredded our confidence to see her that way.

We sang a happy birthday song to her through tears. She laid helpless before us, a shadow of her former self, a prisoner to the sickbay she had been confined to for years now. Grandma cried uncontrollably and a panic attack set in. We cleared the sad cobwebs from our heads and rushed her to the hospital. Among the buzz of the emergency room I prayed and whispered every scripture I could recall while the red ambulance lights and a soft wind brought flashbacks from so far away.

One could say the large green estate my grandmother had built with her own hands was a metaphor for the woman. It started as a humble little garden tended with her bare hands until it was sprawling and beautiful, attracting so many far and wide. Exploiters came to steal, hoodlums to destroy and enemies to kill. But Grandma had witnessed so many wars, so enemies were a common thing. What would have made other ordinary human being shell-shocked, only made her stronger. She had courage watered by war. Even though she had seen her fair share of life's unfairness, Grandma, a proud black woman, never believed in the white flag of surrender. She was the war wife.

The ride to the hospital was the longest ride of my life, even though it was just a few yards from home. When time is short, distance is not. I held her hands, hardened by the beautiful things she had created in the world as the tears freed themselves. The scars on her hands, and every other part—each had a story and a meaning. She told us that they were like milestone along her family's journey; how we were born, the struggle to survive and to provide for her home.

"Don't see them as scars," she had said. "They are the map of how I have lived and survived"

We all waited at the emergency ward, the family tree spreading its branches in the waiting area as everyone arrived; all of Grandma's children and grandchildren. We all waited for the doctor to walk out of the emergency ward smiling. How we hoped. How we silently prayed, each in his or her own way like it was Pentecost.

As the hours dragged on, the prayers turned into poison, injected into our family gathering after a nurse with tired eyes had said over her shoulder almost as if to herself, "She has broken bones and has lost a lot of blood. We will need a miracle for her healings".

Suddenly, Grandma's condition had brought up each person's own maladies; how each family member was perhaps broken and hurt and in need of repair in his or her own way. I wondered if from where she lay, she could hear us beginning to bicker. My cousin, who had been unusually quiet all day, threw the first verbal punch, at himself.

"Maybe it's my fault sha. Maybe I would have been a doctor today and treated Grandma but school is not about starting, it is about finishing. But how can I when it's been eight months of leaving school because of the strike".

The second insult was aimed at my father by one of my Uncles, who came in from the bathroom where he had locked himself in, with eyes red.

"Well, perhaps if the cheques to this hospital would be paper and not rubber, Mama would be out of here sooner!"

"Look, I'm doing my best... I am trying," my father spoke up, but wearily.

"The hospital contacted the bank about the bounced cheque. I can't afford these hospital bills!"

"I wish I could help." My youngest aunt said. "But It's been years after finishing school, yet no job opportunity. I have been living from hand to mouth and I have children to take care of."

Well, that triggered a war of words. Everyone started lobbing insults and putting up defences in the waiting area. Everyone talking, none listening. Heavy hearts came out in quick angry words, like a bow that had been pulled back for too long and now needed release. My eldest Uncle threw his woes into the melee.

"I have trouble too! It grieves me to see my poor son rot in jail over a crime he did not commit. Will bribery, corruption and false judgment on the poor cease?"

I watched as everyone tried to be heard. This was how my extended family was on every other day. Family was what you saw on the surface, but there were cracks below. We were torn apart by class and creed. Religion, tribal discrimination, and political affiliation. How could one family have so many enemies in it? Perhaps things never really fell apart. Perhaps we were never together in the first place.

In the crosstalk and the bitterness, my mind drifted off to Grandma. She would sing a song for us and make us promise her to keep to it. How we loved to sing with her. It started as a hum in me. Then, careful to not add to the noise in an already violated silent zone, the song rose off my tongue and broke through the murmurs.

"Arise, my children, arise," I began, as my Grandmother would have.

Ekong, my younger brother who would usually run to the piano and make a sound to make us all laugh, joined in:

"Your Grandma calls today

To stay by her, together in love, strength and faith.

Don't let my past labours be in vain.

Let our family be bound forever in freedom,

peace and unity."

Begrudgingly, and perhaps out of forceful memory and muscled tunes to the singing of this uniting song, other family members joined in, one by one.

"We promise you, Grandma

To always be faithful, loyal and honest

We will stay by your side with all strength

We will defend our togetherness

We will uphold the honor and glory of our home.

So help us God.

A song can trigger a barrage of memories. In the silent shame that followed the song a story came through as vivid as if it was yesterday. It's one of those Grandma told us smiling through pain and weakness. "If you all promise to be quiet, I'll tell you a story", she had said.

"Is it about the Queen Elizabeth, the Tudors or the war with the cousins? ", one of the children had asked.

"No dear. This is a story about a beautiful black girl", Grandma had replied smiling.

There was something about her smile, it had an inexplicable peacefulness. 'Perhaps this equanimity is only available after many years and tears' I told myself at the time. The children chorused their delight. We sat hushed with our ears tuned in to Grandma's story.

"This beautiful black girl, she had lived right from the creation of the world, when God created the first man and woman.

She was graceful to behold.

She had a dream and a purpose.

She was strong, brave, hardworking and blessed with talents and gifts the world knew would make her great.

Even though small, she would be mightier than giants. She got married and gave birth to beautiful children.

Children she was so proud of and would do anything for them.

With her children growing and her family becoming larger, she began tending a beautiful garden.

Soon, the garden took root and flowing with milk and honey and she had great harvest from her toils.

Mightier than ten men she was. But 'happily ever after', they say is 'but a fairy-tale'.

How did she not know that the strangers she had received with open arms would only seek her downfall?

How could she be so naive and had trusted them so easily?

Their smiles were daggers in disguise. Their laughter, a nuclear bomb waiting to explode.

All they brought with them were lies and they reaped where they did not sow.

Soon, they invaded her land, one she had tended with her bare hands, in the sun, in the rain.

Didn't the scriptures say 'Ye that toiled in tears would reap in joy'?

Was she excluded from this promise? The strangers invaded and with lies as their weapons they stole the garden.

A garden which represents the roots of her family. So they seized it and poisoned the minds of her children and made them war against themselves. Brothers sold brothers, sisters killed sisters.

They looted her fine estate and left it in the trenches. They took with them her children and made them slaves to build their estates as well. She was shattered beyond pieces, like a hen whose chicks were stolen by a hawk, like the Biblical Rachel whose sound was heard in Ramah, the sound of bitter weeping, she cried and refused to be comforted."

Grandma smiled as she watched the faces of her grandchildren, the tears welling up in their eyes. We, her pride, her hope, her future.

"She didn't give up, you know. Can a woman tender's care cease towards the child she bears? She had to fight for her children, the remnants of what was taken away from her.

From the scratch again, she started rebuilding. The strength of a woman lies in building her home.

She strives for ownership, not to be a stranger nor a slave in her own home. Yes, she did!

She gained her home and fought for her independence.

How can a woman keep her home clean when strangers are giving her orders?

After three years of wars, her home was hers again. My children, I tell you, a woman who knows how to think? There is absolutely nothing she cannot do. I have known what it feels to be lost.

That war took almost everything but it gave us our freedom and peace.

This is a world where you can only buy peace through war. I have tasted hunger and know the bitter, throat-tightening it brings.

But our freedom was not freedom. Maybe I was too concerned with fighting the strangers, not knowing that when one fish is infected with a maggot, it spreads to the whole school.

The Book of Proverbs says: 'foolish children bring their mothers grief'.

There is no pain as deep as the one caused by one's child. Nothing can remedy this."

I could see the ocean of tears well up in her eyes.

How I wished she wouldn't hold back. How I wished that letting it flow would ease her pain.

After what seemed like forever, the door of the emergency ward opened. The doctor came out. We all stood up, our hearts in our throats like massive drums. His face was expressionless. Maybe there was a special course in school on how doctors should keep their faces while approaching loved ones. He walked towards us. I counted his steps. How could each step seem to take an hour ?

"You are for the patient in the emergency ward?"

"Yes!", we chorused, impatient and expectant.

"She is our mother", my Dad spoke out.

"It was a struggle, but...she is alive."

We all gasped like we had not taken a full breath in weeks. The hugs came naturally as if to physically pass around the joy we felt in that moment.

"You can see her now, but in smaller groups, and not with all the noise you were creating earlier.", the doctor said as he strode away.

Grandma laid still on the bay with a faded smile on her lips. The bay was dressed in green and she had white covering. The sickening smell of the hospital made me nauseous but the bright green and white made me think of Grandma as a garden, withering and blossoming again when watered by a battle. Now we would nourish her with love.

How deep were her roots in the soil and that of love! Sometimes a family's branches can become tangled but at the roots we are still together. The thought brought a mixture of peace and hope, like rain breaking a drought. Even while broken, while powerless, a powerful song and stories from the War Wife brought peace to a feuding family. Just as we had promised her, we will strive to live in togetherness, in peace, and in love. So help us God!