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Possessing the Secret of Joy

Chika Unigwe

As she listened to the man beside her snore like an airplane revving its engine for take off, she thought that she should never have allowed her mother to blackmail her into marrying him. She should have plugged her ears with her fingers or stuffed them with pieces of cloth when her mother – headscarf going awry on her head – had told her in a pained voice, 'Chief Okeke is our only hope. Don't you want to see me in nice clothes? And you, don't you want to be a madam? Have a driver? A big house? Servants? Don't you want to enjoy your life, *nwa m*?'

'But I don't love him, Mother. How can I marry a man I do not love? I can't.' Her voice was sharp. Confident. Daring her mother to contradict her.

But her mother had contradicted her. 'Love does not matter, my daughter. There are things more important than love.' The older woman's voice was firmer. Solid. It knocked the confidence of hers.

As Chief's snore enveloped the entire room and kept her from sleeping, she whispered, 'Love does matter, Mother. You are so very wrong. It really does matter.' Her voice was weightless, floating like a ghost. Hovering above her head. She would not have known she was crying if she had not felt the tears scarificate her face.

Her mother had been persistent. She had been at it day after day, sometimes crying even, until she had eaten into Uju's reserves, corroding her confidence like acid on paper. Until there was nothing left but consent. A heavy heart. A slight nod of the head. And a voice as still as the night. 'Yes. I will marry Chief. I will marry him.'

Chief.

Uju had just turned seventeen. Chief said he was forty-six. He looked older, closer to sixty. His stomach wobbled and preceded him whenever he walked into a room. It was like that of a woman on the verge of delivering quadruplets, but without the firmness of a pregnant stomach. The hair on his head was sparse, and white, like cotton wool that had been haphazardly glued on by a child. His lips were huge and drooped as if they were implanted with lead that weighed them down. And when he spoke, he tended to send a saliva shower on those closest to him.

People said Chief never married because he was too ugly to find a wife.

She and her friends had made fun of Chief, laughing at his hair. His lips. His stomach. And now she was going to be Chief's wife. What fate could possibly be worse than that?

She wished she could die. She desired, more than anything else, to just lie down and never wake up. To disappear. Vanish. Dissolve. Like salt in water.

Her mother threw herself into the wedding preparations with a ferocity that was not commensurate with her skinny frame. She whirled around the town, organising the caterers, the music band, her daughter's wedding dress. She settled herself in one of Chief's cars and sat in the owner's corner at the back while the driver called her 'Madam' and asked where she needed to be taken to.

Tonson's Supermarket.

Fanny's Bridal Shop.

Kenyatta market.

Love is Blind Bakery.

Your One Stop Tiara Shop.

Wedding Specialz

Mau's Cakes and More.

She always came back, a huge smile on her face, her eyes shiny with new found wealth and her mouth full of praises for her daughter who had made the right choice. 'Uju. You are a daughter to be proud of. You do not know what a relief it is that you are marrying a man as rich as Chief.

Poverty is not something to be proud of. *Afufu ajoka*!'

Uju knew all about poverty. She did not need to be told.

She was the only child of her widowed mother. Her father had died when she was seven and all she remembered of him was a man as skinny as an *izaga* masquerade, dragging a battered brown briefcase out of the house every morning. When she tried to remember his face, she found that she could not. He was like an old Polaroid picture. Defaced. Effaced. Without a face.

She tried to recollect his voice but no matter how tight she

shut her eyes and searched the crevices of her mind, she could not call up a voice.

Her mother told her that he had been a quiet man.

When he died in a car accident – the bus he was traveling in had been driving too fast and had hit a pothole causing it to turn over and kill every passenger in it – his family had blamed his widow for killing their brother.

'A prophet told us that he saw you in a vision, chasing Papa Uju with a sharp knife,' his older sister announced.

How could she have had a hand in it? The widow protested crying. The roads were full of potholes which she did not create. Eye witnesses said the driver had been going too fast. How was she responsible for that? Her voice was weak and hoarse from crying. But her protests could not stand up to the prophet's believed infallibility.

Supervised by Uju's uncle, her father's oldest brother, Uju and her mother had been sent sprawling out of their modest three bedroom flat in New Lay Out, to a less modest one room face-me-I-face-you flat on Obiagu Road, their property trailing behind them like unwanted children. The only things that the widow had been allowed to take out of the house were her clothes, Uju's clothes and the deceased's battered suitcase which had been discovered at the site of the accident, the lone survivor of the tragedy. Sometimes, Uju took down the suitcase from her mother's wardrobe and smelt it to catch a whiff of her father. But it just had that peculiar odour of old leather.

Uju knew how her mother had to borrow money from a women's cooperative to start a petty business, selling *Dandy* chewing gum and sachets of milk and *Omo* detergent in her kiosk which was not actually a kiosk, but a wooden table set up in front of the house, right before the gutter which stank of urine and dying lives. Godfrey, the bachelor carpenter who lived in the same compound as they did had knocked the table up for her at a really cheap rate. 'Neighbourly rate', he had said, showing off his buck teeth as he smiled, his eyes taking in Uju's developing body, resting on her breasts until Uju's mother had asked him in a voice as cold as a harmattan morning if the rates included ogling the neighbour's daughter.

Uju remembered the days when all her mother could afford to give her for lunch was *abacha*, slices of cassava, soaked in water, salted and on lucky days, eaten with some coconut.

She could never forget the day her mother told her she had to quit school as she could no longer pay her school fees. She had to help her mother out at her added business of selling *akara* and fried yam beside her kiosk.

As Uju wrapped up the food straight off the pan for customers, she knew that at the back of her mother's mind, lurked the hope that one day, one of their richer clients would notice her daughter and ask for her hand in marriage. So she knew that Chief's proposal was an answer to her mother's constant prayer. She almost hated her mother.

No matter how much Chief gave her, Uju could never forget being poor. It was inscribed on her, like ichi marks on an elder's face in her village, Osumenyi. Marks to remind them of their status. No matter how low they fell, they could never rub off the *ichi*.

She sat in her new house which reeked of luxury, but the smell of poverty never left her nostrils. And she knew that her new wealth would never make her happy.

Her mother told her she prayed for her to have sons for Chief. 'A wife with male children has her position secured. Nothing can shake that. If I had had a son, your father's family would never have thrown me out of our home. We would not have used our eyes to see the kind of suffering that we saw, *nwa m*. But there is a God. And he has brought Chief into our lives. So, I pray that that same God will bless you with *umu nwoke*, many sons. I pray that those who laughed at our misfortune will see us blessed. You shall have sons for Chief and our joy will be complete.'

Uju prayed fiercely in her mind as her mother spoke. She prayed that she never had a son for Chief. She did not want her position crystallised. She wanted it to be shaky.

She wanted Chief to find her wanting and set her free. Then her mother would not blame her for leaving her matrimonial home.

On her wedding day, as Chief sat beside her, looking fit to burst in his three piece suit, she kept thinking, 'This man is an elephant.' When Chief slid a twenty-four karat gold ring on her finger, the ring burnt her and she was tempted to pull it off right there, with everybody watching. She was sure that the skin under the ring was welting. She cried throughout the ceremony, sniffing into a white lace handkerchief that Chief had bought her especially for the day, and her mother told her they were tears of joy. Uju did not tell her that the tears were gritty, like *garri*. She did not tell her mother that they rubbed into her skin, like a beauty scrub, breaking open her pores.

At the wedding reception later on in the day, her mother danced to the music being played by the live band. She glowed in her new George lappa, singing Alleluia with a halo of wealth around her mighty, starched, silk scarf.

She wriggled her buttocks to the music and came close to the new bride and enveloped her in an embrace that was so tight that it hurt the younger woman's ribs. Then she hugged Chief, her hands not making it around his enormous waist.

That night, when the new groom undressed and rested his weight on top of his wife she could hardly breathe and pushed her nose to the side to escape the assault of his breath. He heaved into her ears and called her name in many diverse ways. Uju m. Ju-ju. Ujay. He parted her legs and thrust his manhood into her. In. Out. In. Out. In. Then he let it stay there. Layers and layers of pain seared through her and when she thought that there could be no pain stronger than that, she felt his manhood bulge and explode into a million different types of pain between her thighs. And she felt sure that this was what it was like to be dying. Then she heard him sigh and go limp.

She turned her head into the pillow and he held her and told her she was young and she would learn. And it would get better with practice. 'The first time is always painful.'

Her mother had told her that she would fly. 'When your husband holds you for the first time, when he makes you a woman, *nwa m*, you will gain wings and fly and fly and fly. You will soar and never want to come down.' She had winked at her daughter as she imparted this piece of information.

But she had not flown. The pain between her legs made walking a chore. When she gathered the stained sheets to wash, she was aware even then that inside her a stain was spreading that that she could not get to.

And as her pregnancy grew and others noticed it too, she began to wish that she could reach into her womb and fling the baby out. She could not imagine having a baby that looked like Chief. A baby that would be one half of him. She wanted nothing of him. And definitely not a part of his flesh.

With her stomach getting rounder and firmer, her mother's frequent visits became even more so. Often, she would stay for days at a stretch. She always found something to compliment. The leather sofa that swallowed her buttocks. The television set that she said was as huge as a cinema screen. The taps inside the house that answered to her command. The kitchen that was as big as their entire flat in Obiagu had been. The guest bedroom that was the size of their master bedroom in New Lay Out. The house helps that ran around dusting, cleaning, cooking.

'You are a lucky girl, Uju,' she told her daughter. 'All these, for you.'

When she said this, Uju grunted a reply that was swallowed up by the whirring of the air conditioner that the older woman had just switched on.

'*Negodu*, just look,' she exclaimed giggling, 'the heat of outside does not touch you at all. White man's magic in my own daughter's house. God is great.' She stuck close to Uju like a shadow telling her what to eat and what to avoid.

'Don't eat okra soup at all. It will make your child drool like an imbecile.'

'Don't eat kola nut. It will make the baby hot-tempered.'

'Don't eat *nsala* soup. It can cause a miscarriage.'

'Don't eat *abacha*. It will give the baby too much body hair.'

Uju listened and furtively ate okra soup and *nsala* soup and kola-nut. She waited with bated breath for the cramps that would expel the foetus in clots of blood, but they never came. Instead, her stomach grew and her skin shone and her husband remarked that she seemed to be getting more and more beautiful each day. 'My *mammy-water*,' he called her. 'My own mermaid.' He rubbed her stomach.

Her mother and a driver took her to the private hospital on Independence Lay Out the day her water broke. Chief was away in Abuja on a business trip, but his name was enough to gain her entrance into one of the best hospitals in Enugu. Nurses kow-towed to her asking, 'Are you okay, Ma?' 'Is the bed comfortable, Ma?' 'Do you need anything, Ma?' Uju ignored them and her mother sailed on the attention they got, talking for the silent woman.

Get us a big room.

Nurse! Let her have some water.

Nurse! This water is not cold enough. Does the fridge not work?

Nurse! How does this remote control work?

Nurse! Take this cup away.

Her labour was long and hard. As the contractions squeezed her insides like a multitude of pincers, Uju opened her mouth and let loose a torrent of words. She shouted curses on the man who was responsible for all the pain. She cursed the baby who was dragging her to the very depths of hell. She cursed the poverty that made her marry Chief.

Her mother who sat beside her on her hospital bed tried to cover her daughter's mouth with her palm, as if she was trying to stuff the words back, to stop new ones from spewing out.

'Shh, *nwa m*. Don't say these things my daughter. It will soon be over. Swallow your words, *noda fa*.'

The gynecologist came in and smiled at her. She inserted a gloved hand into her and said in a loud voice, 'eight centimeters dilated. We should get you into the delivery room right away.' Her mother looked at the doctor and exclaimed at the miracle that made her daughter to be attended to by the most reputable gynecologist that side of the Niger. She knew of women who gave birth at home, or in hospital corridors because there were no doctors to attend to them. Why, just three months ago, Mama Chinedu, their neighbour in Obiagu Road, had died from complications while giving birth in her bedroom. She had not gone to the hospital because the government hospital was on strike and she could not afford the exorbitant fees charged by the private hospitals. And here was her Uju, with a retinue of medical staff at her behest. 'God is good. *Chukwu ebuka*,' the older woman exclaimed as she followed the bed being rolled into the delivery room.

When the baby came it looked like an angry geriatric. It was bald. And wrinkled. He let out a yell when the doctor, dangling him in one hand, spanked him on his scrawny old man's buttocks. The doctor laughed and said, 'This one is full of life! Hear him cry!' and handed him to the new mother. 'Here, hold him for a minute before we take him off to be cleaned.'

Uju held the baby close to her breasts. She felt its heart beat *tat tat tat*, like a tam-tam being beaten by a practiced hand. She brought her face down to meet the baby's and then she felt something else.

It started from the middle of her stomach like a tiny dot of warmth. And then it fanned out like an angel's wings spread vertically and touched her chest. She felt it flutter in her chest before it settled down. She closed her eyes and savoured the feeling. Of being there. Of smelling her baby. And then she knew that this was love.

She handed the baby over to the midwife to be cleaned and she thought, 'This is mine. He is mine. All mine. I, Uju, I possess the secret of joy.' She almost laughed out loud. Her legs twitched and itched to fly.

When the doctor asked if she had any names for him, she said the one name that came to her.

'Ifunanya.' Love. As she waited, counting the seconds until he was given back to her, she repeated his name, her voice soft and reverential. 'Ifunanya.'

It was as if she was saying a prayer.