

CRACKED

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The wall is cracked. The roof leaks. During the day, the sun shines through the leaked roof beautifying her otherwise ugly day. Today the raindrops trickling in from the roof have formed a pool. Eme sits in the puddle oblivious of the wetness slowly crawling up into her underpants. She lets it soak her hoping for some form of cleansing.

'Food' Her husband barks as he staggers in. The smell of alcohol reeking from his body. She does not respond, she can hear him opening pots in the kitchen. Soon, he will come for her and he does, throwing fist after fist at her. Blood drips from her face mixing with the pool of rainwater turning it into a shiny red.

Eme remembers the beginning, how he had begged for her hand in marriage. Her mother had encouraged the union. "It is one blessed in heaven", she would often say clasping her hands in excitement. Her decision was clearly informed by the glittering color of Okey's shoes, his crisply starched shirt, and the sweet smell of his perfume that filled the air each time he came around. He always walked tall with sparkles in his eyes. "Take this for the weekend Mama, feed my baby well for me." 'Ha, this is too much', Mama would respond making no attempt to give the neat notes back. "God bless you my son, May everything you touch turn to gold." And Okey would reply with a wide smile. He had a smile for everyone, Okey.

Eme can see him standing in church, looking more handsome than ever, smiling down at her, promising to love and to cherish her till death. He meant it then, Eme saw the truth when he looked at her, when he smiled at her or stroked her skin gently. But four years is a long time to keep a promise.

She remembers the first time Lulu, his sister visited. How she ate everything she found in the kitchen and then complained about its lack of taste. "I don't understand why some women can't cook, it just beats me." She had said while licking her fingers. Eme swallowed the anger inside her. She refused to rise to the bait. Eme had made *Ekpang nkukwuo*, a meal that took her almost three hours to prepare. First she had to grate the cocoyam and water yam, and mould it into a pulp, wrap it into fingerlike pieces and there were still periwinkles to be cut and parboiled. It was a meal she hated to prepare but her husband loved it and occasionally she would make it for him. It brought the shine back into his eyes. He would suck on the periwinkles like it was a

serious job. How she missed their happy days. Lulu finished the whole pot. Three hours of labour gone down into Lulu's tiny frame. She couldn't understand it, the girl was so slim, where did all the food go? But she didn't complain since it was Lulu's first visit.

Her husband lost everything in a flicker of a moment. He took a loan for a business she had never heard of. He mortgaged their house, their investments, everything. The business went wrong. The bank came calling.

A friend loaned them money to rent a room on the other side of town. His sister stopped coming. She didn't like visiting the other side where during the rainy season you would have to remove your shoes to wade through floods.

Okey tried to get back on his feet, pyramid schemes, door to door selling, he sold anything from insurance to ice cream, he even tried to be a preacher.

'Put your trust in the Lord, there's nothing too big for God to do.' He would stand in the garage screaming to the empty seats. The loud speaker reverberating into other people's homes. Eme could imagine the neighbors cursing him.

Who's the bastard making so much noise?

Eme had also complained about that loudspeaker.

'That's the only way to attract members, we don't have money for fliers or billboards or TV adverts, so we need the speakers, when passers by hear the unadulterated word of God coming from here, they will rush in. Everyone needs to hear a good sermon.'

'Are you sure about this? Aren't preachers called of God? Are you sure he has called you?'

'Woman, I need support from my wife. You don't think I am called? Must an angel appear to you before you believe? Look around you? Do you see all these preachers, some were called by God, some others by hunger.'

There were at least five churches on our street.

'I have been called, it doesn't matter by who or what but I have been called and I need you to stand by me.' Okey had growled beating his hands on his chests. Eme brought her mind back to the present forcing herself to concentrate on his practiced sermon.

'Ask him, He is waiting for you to ask him, is it a visa, you want to get out of this God-forsaken country? You want a new job, anything at all, God is willing to do it.'

After two months of preaching to only Eme the congregation finally increased. The garage owner joined in. He was a lonely man in a wheel chair and coming here Sundays and Wednesdays gave him something to do. He didn't charge for the use of his garage. It is a seed for the Lord, he said.

Finally Okey gave up. God couldn't have called him to preach to a two man congregation. The drinking started, slowly at first, a bottle a week, to a bottle a day, until it became an addiction; he always had to have his beer. Then the beatings would follow.

The first slap had hit her like a bomb, it exploded inside her head. The shock hurt her more than the pain.

'Okey' she whispered.

'I am the man of this house, I tell you what to do and not the other way round.'

She had only told him not to go out in the rain.

Her mother had told her to move out, but she couldn't leave Okey, not now when he needed her most. He had been a good husband and still was when he was sober.

Eme thought of their long walks, their late night talks, their hide and seek games etc. Once while they played hide and seek, Okey had gotten stuck in a wardrobe and couldn't get out. They had to call a carpenter to bring down the door. They stopped playing hide and seek after that but the memory lingered with them and often she would tease him about it. The memories made her defy her mother and stand by Okey, hoping that one day he would take her back to yesterday.

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Today she sits facing her mother in-law.

'I want to hear the cry of children' Did my son marry a man?

Eme only smiles. Her mother in-law is a good person at heart. She only has difficulties expressing the good. Her eyes are black from last night's beating yet her mother in-law asks her no questions. Only about children.

There will be no grandchildren, Eme replies.

'Okey is impotent. We have been to the doctor', Eme lies. She knows her mother in-law will never ask her son but will confide in someone in the village who will in turn confide in another. Okey will be the next new story. She smiles, it is her little way of punishing his cruel family.

'Anwolamoooo', her mother in-law exclaims in Igbo.

'This cannot be true. There is no history of impotence in the Anamelechi family.'

'Does Dibia Anukwuru still live? She may have the right herbs.'

"No, we must tell no one. Our family will be shamed if the story comes out. Among the three of us, we will find a solution. Maybe the two of us. Okey does not need to know.

It is exactly as she had thought. Her mother suggests she sleep with another man and pose the pregnancy as Okey's.

Can I have something to eat while we talk about this, my daughter. Her tone is nicer, gentler.

Will you drink garri? It is my mother that brings us foodstuff and she has not come in a long time. We also have palm wine, and kai kai, this is what Okey lives on. He says it runs in the family.

Her mother in-law ignores the jibe. The word impotent chimes in her ear.

I will come back to see you with foodstuff. We will talk about this..this thing that you say is wrong with Okey.

Eme does not see her to the door.

The next day as she is walking home from the market, she hears loud wailing coming from her house.

“We cannot tell this kind of story to the world” She can hear a woman saying.

This devil is a liarooooo, he will not succeed” another intones.

Eme walks slowly towards them, filled with apprehension, her legs getting weak with each step.

‘Okey is dead.’ Someone whispers to her. ‘He was drunk, fell on the road and a car ran him over.’

‘We hear he was impotent, now there will be no son to carry on his name.’ Another person adds.

It is a dramatic way to die, she thinks and walks away from the crowd who have come not really to sympathize but to get away from their own inconsequential lives, happy that another has it worse than they do.

Eme feels numb, the voices are too loud, too unreal. Okey cannot be dead.

Two days after the burial his uncles arrived. They have come to take their brother’s property. They inform her. She is shocked, his body is not even cold in the grave.

‘Your brother had nothing, absolutely nothing. Everything he had he sold to buy a few hot drinks. Everything here belongs to my mother,’ she screams at them.

They packed everything, including her mother’s precious earthen pot, including the cooking spoon that had been in her family for generations. It was a gift mothers give to their daughters in marriage.

She watched them as they carted everything out, four years of her life loaded in one truck.

