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**15th May**

**M**y blood bubbles. Goose bumps sprout like cocoyam leaves. I break out in sweat. Excitement runs through me. Tomorrow I turn eighteen. Tomorrow I participate in the maiden dance. Tomorrow I become a woman.

Every girl in Edibe dreams of this day. Tomorrow is the festival of fire. Mama says it is so called because long ago, Ekpe, the neighbouring village, waged constant war against us. They killed our men and raped our women at will. Then one night, when even the owls had slept, the men of Edibe set fire on Ekpe. The entire village was razed. Victory was ours at last. When our men came home, there was a celebration. And every 16th May following that one, the victory is celebrated.

Each year, new adults are initiated. The initiation is celebrated at the festival. This year I am one of the new adults. I hear also that a stranger is in town. Tall and handsome, they say. He is one of our sons, but he left a long time ago for the shores of America, now he has returned home to pick a wife.

Yesterday, while we practised for the maiden dance, the girls talked about him. Iquo said she had seen him. He smiled at her with perfect white teeth. Iquo, beautiful Iquo. He will probably pick her, and why not? She is young, beautiful and witty. All the young men were patiently waiting for her to turn eighteen. And now that she is, she only wants the stranger.

Mayen also wants him. She has been in the maiden's group for three years now. At twenty-one, being single in Edibe isn't a very good thing. Mayen claims she has seen him too but we all know it isn't true. Almost everything she says is untrue.

## 16th May

It is 6pm. In another hour, I will be at the arena. I will dance with a man. I will feel the flutter in my stomach and the tremor in my spine.

As my mother decorates me with beads, she tells me about her night. There she had met Papa. A few months later they were married and have remained happy since. I too want to be happy. I want my own home, a husband and two fine children. Like every girl, I want the best things in life. I often lie awake at night, hoping, dreaming.

Mama seems to read my mind. She tells me all will be well. She makes us pray. This always surprises me as I know the other gods she offers sacrifices to. Maybe it doesn't matter.

My father seems taken aback when he sees me. My attire is cut a bit too low. He makes to speak but Mama stops him. Her voice is soothing even to my ears. It is Mama's greatest weapon; she can make you do almost anything, just by asking.

We are all at Iquo's place. It is her mother's turn to host the maidens.

Most of the girls pale in beauty next to Iquo. Her mother fusses over us - smoothening someone's hair, touching up another's make-up and sharing funny, mildly ribald jokes that make us feel very adult yet slightly uncomfortable. In spite of her old age, her charm is unforced and even amongst us young adults, her beauty radiates.

We girls look each other up critically. Judging, competing.

*"Some of us have beauty in our eyes, some in our voices,  
Some in our hearts, some in the swing of our hips  
It all depends on where you are looking".*

We dance in circles, each trying to outdo the other. I feel the eyes on us. Watching, inspecting, some undressing us. I am nervous and confused, as I wonder what the eyes can see. I am no longer sure I want to be seen like this. My dance steps falter. I try harder. I must not let my clan down. Slowly, the men begin to fall into the circle, to make their choices. Mayen and I don't get picked. The tears well up in my eyes but Mayen doesn't seem to care, she keeps dancing, adding more verve to each step.

Mayen goes for him first. Her face lights up as she glides towards him. But he dances past her and makes towards me. Again, I can feel my blood bubble. I feel everything Mama must have felt and in my heart, I know that this is the one. As he takes my hand in his, all my dreams are realised, all my fantasies made real. In his eyes I see my true self, I feel the world revolve around me.

All the girls cast furtive glances at us. For once, I am the centre of attraction. The feeling overwhelms me and I can taste the flavour in my mouth, salty like the sweat that seeps

out of my pores.

Midnight There was always comfort in bed. In the pliant embrace of my pillow. Tonight, that peace eludes me. The tears flow freely. Guilt and shame tear at me. It would be easier to just die. There is a knock on my door, it must be Mama. Papa almost never visits my room. He is a man and I am a girl. That is the way things are in Edibe.

I won't let Mama in. I can't. She would take only one look at me and would know.

Mama, she sees everything.

I tried to stop him, the stranger, but I couldn't, his sweetness overwhelmed me as he whispered such beautiful things to me, things I had never been told before.

I can still feel the pain. And if this is what all women endure, then there must be something wrong with all of us.

#### **17th May**

There is a knock on my door. Mama has returned. Mama, dear Mama, what would I do without her?

As I let her in, she tells me I have a guest. It is the stranger. True to his words, he has come to ask for my hand in marriage. He is even more handsome than I thought. The dim light of last night did not reveal all his features. I wonder why some people have it all. After pleasantries, we leave the two men alone.

#### **25th May**

The stranger leaves tonight. The initial marriage rites have been performed. In six months, he will return to get me. Soon, America their America, shall become America my America.

#### **25th June**

Mama and I are at the farm. I haven't done much, yet I am very tired. I am always tired these days. I tell Mama I don't feel too good and have to leave. She looks at me hard but says nothing.

#### **26th June**

It is true. What I feared the most. I begin to cry. Fortunately, my parents are early risers. They must have left already. Nobody will hear the sound of my vomiting. My secret is safe. Back in my room, I find Mama on my bed. She was watching me all the while. She draws me close, telling me everything will be fine. Again, I weep.

"We will write the stranger," she says.

Sometimes, I think she isn't real. Her love knows no bounds.

### **5th August**

I have started to show. I never leave the house now. The whole village has heard, and most people mock my mother. My father doesn't speak to me anymore. I am sorry for what I have done to my family. But I cannot undo it. The letter Mama sent went unanswered. Someone must have changed the script; this isn't how the story of my life was initially written.

### **14th February**

I try to bear the pain but it gets worse with each minute. Finally, I let out a loud scream. Mama rushes into my room.

"You are about to bear a child," she says smiling. I haven't seen her smile in a long time. I find strength in her courage.

My father is back with the midwife. She spends hours with me. I must go to the hospital, she finally says. I may need surgery. Fear grips me. Mayen's mother did not survive surgery. I dread the same fate.

My father carries me to his bicycle and we cycle to the nearest town. There is no hospital in my village. Mama and the midwife trudge along.

It is dark, so I cannot see the people peeping from their windows. But I am sure they are there, watching. Nothing escapes the people of Edibe.

### **15th February**

I wake up to find Mama by my side. She is holding my hand and sobbing softly. My father is crouched at a corner. His tears fall freely, mixing with the sweat on his face.

I look up at the nurse who nods her head in answer to my silent question.

My baby is dead. I wish it were the stranger lying dead in my baby's place.

"Why is this happening to me? Why do they want to snatch my only daughter from me? Mama switches from sorrow to anger, hitting me as she speaks. "Why did you let him, despite everything I taught you?"

Papa pulls her outside, leaving only the nurse and me in the room. I feel like a frightened cat, afraid to ask. I look up at her but this time she doesn't respond. She doesn't need to. I can read it in her eyes. I have contracted the dreaded disease. I am HIV positive.

### **25th February**

Mama and I are going home. I want to wait till nightfall but Mama will not hear of it, she won't be caught sneaking around, not in her own village, she says.

The people avoid us. Mothers call their children inside their huts. Others point fingers, whispering loud enough for us to hear. "Look at how thin she has become, the disease

must have eaten deep into her,” I hear someone say and in spite of my situation, I smile. I gained a lot of weight during my pregnancy and couldn’t possibly have lost it all in a week.

### **5th March**

My home is breaking down. Even my mother’s courage has thinned. And Papa, I avoid him; there is always thunder in his eyes. Yesterday, Mama did not sell a thing at the market. Mama whose stall was always full of buyers. The people fear they would be infected with the virus if they buy her produce.

### **25th March**

I am off to the hospital. Today I am going in the broad daylight. I am not ashamed anymore. Everyone will learn to live with it the same way I have.

I like coming to the hospital. They give me drugs when they have and when they don’t, they give me hope.

Sister Theresa is particularly nice. She tells me stories of people who are living with the virus yet they lead very normal lives. Today she tells me about Nina, a twenty-three year old who married yesterday. She is living with HIV, her husband isn’t but he married her. I chew her words, I swallow them. I live on them.

### **16th May**

I can see them. Nubile young girls. The world is at their feet, at least so they believe. It is one year today since the stranger breezed in and out of my life. There has been no word from him. Sometimes I think it never happened. But the scars on my belly tell me differently.

My mother comes in to ask if I am ready, I point at my few belongings neatly tied up in a wrapper. I’ve tied it such that I can swing it around my shoulders. Papa insists we leave at night. We are moving away. Papa cannot stand the shame and ridicule anymore.

Our journey may take days, nights. We don’t know where we are going. Mama says she will know when we get there. Mama, she feels these things.

I keep thinking of my village, I remember the dreary nights, when the people of Ekpe where still slaughtering us. And then I remember the victory dance.

I too, I will have song, I will have a dance. I am alive.