

GROWING MY HAIR AGAIN

I AM CROUCHING beside the bed, my palms flat on the deep red rug that swallows my sobs. The rug is warm. It is a mother's hand. My posture is – I hope – appropriate to the occasion. My mother-in-law is watching me, her eyes hawk-like even through her own tears. She sniffs and says, "You're not crying loud enough. Anyone would think you never loved him. *Bee akwa!*"

She never approved of me. I had an excess of everything. Education. Beauty. Relatives. Hair. Sure to bring any man down. At the thought of my hair, my palms go cold. By this time tomorrow, it will all be gone. I shall be taken to the backyard by a group of widows, probably all of them strangers. One of them, the oldest, will lather my hair with a new tablet of soap (which will be thrown away once it's been used on me), and then shave it all off with a razor blade. I shall be bathed in cold water. Strange women splashing water on me. Cleansing me to make my husband's passage easy on him: a ritual to make the break between us final so that he is not stuck halfway between this world and the next shouting himself hoarse calling for his wife to be at his side when he rejoins his ancestors.

"You should cry louder. You sound like you're mourning a family pet. You are a widow, *nwanyi a!* Cry as if you lost a husband! *Bee akwa. Cry!*"

In one word, she distils my life: widow. Even though Okpala has been dead for a while – three months to be precise – I am only officially now becoming a widow. Three months were needed to organize a befitting burial. To have the invitation cards printed. The cow ordered. The dancers reserved. Three months in which Okpala's body stayed in the only mortuary with a generator in Enugu and I gained a moratorium on widowhood. But all that is about to change. Tonight, I shall be given the badge of honor: a head so cleanshaven that sun rays will bounce off it. I wonder if she is observing me as I lift one palm and run it across my hair, the whole length of the thick mane of shiny black hair that grazes my shoulders. I suspect that Okpala's mother has always been

jealous of it, what with her downy hair like the feathers on the underside of a chicken and a receding hairline that gets worse by the day. Still, I must not be too hard on the woman. She did not invent the tradition of shaving widows' hair, did she?

"Is your hair more important than my son?" Her voice is hoarse.

Every time she came to visit Okpala and me in Enugu, she complained of the amount of time I spent grooming my hair.

"Nneka, the way you look after this your hair, one would think it was your entrance to heaven."

She complained so much that Okpala asked me not to go to the salon while she visited. "When she goes, you can continue." I listened. Okpala was not one to be disobeyed.

I spent the last three months visiting salons on an almost daily basis. Changing hairstyles every day. Experimenting with different styles. I was a perfect client: I surrendered my head to the hairdressers and said, "All yours. Do with it as you wish." I had *shuku* done: an intricate basket of braids. I had it plaited with broad black thread and standing up like nails protruding from my scalp. I had it permed and bobbed like a beret. All the time painfully aware that soon my choices would be limited. In the last three weeks, I tried to grow dreads and despaired when my hair refused to knot, resorting to thin braids that took seven hours to put in. My mother-in-law watched my changing hairstyles, her lips a spout of disapproval that got longer and longer. "Anyone would think you did not love him." I ignored her. I had them taken out yesterday. I poured palm kernel oil on it and wrapped it up in a scarf. And today, I tugged and combed until it was a shiny mass of blackness. I touch it again. I hear the old woman hiss.

I know that if she could, she would have turned me out of the house. And not just this humongous villa in Osumenyi with red and maroon carpeting in every room – Okpala had no sense of decoration – but the duplex in Enugu as well. Prime property that. A sprawling large house that my mother-in-law had brought a barefoot prophet to bless the day we moved in. *Daba daba da, Jehovah El Shaddai, Jehovah Yahweh, Bless this house of your humble servant, Okpala. Keep him safe from the evil eye. Surround his house with spiritual military forces. Yaba Dabba Dab.* I had walked out mid-prayer – the man's toes distressed me and that angered Okpala.

Okpala's anger was always a wild hurricane. It cleared everything in its path: family pictures, tables, chairs. Nothing was spared.

This morning, my mother-in-law caught me in the kitchen. Bored and hungry and sick of sitting on the bedroom floor to be besieged by crying relatives, I

had gone to raid the pantry. Nothing in it appealed to me. I opened the fridge and found the transparent bowl with my Christmas cake raisins soaking in brandy. I started soaking them a few days before Okpala died. Christmas is only a month-and-a-half away now. The raisins called me and I answered. I pulled out the bowl, dug my hands in and grabbed a handful. I threw them in my mouth and chewed quickly, the raisins exploding furiously, releasing the brandy trapped inside. I was like a madwoman. I grabbed some more, a trail of brown liquid seeping through my clenched fist and snaking down my hand. I was on my third helping when she walked in.

"So, this is where you are? The widow's food not enough for you?"

I wished I could talk back but years of habit are difficult to break.

"In some places, the only food a widow is allowed to eat for a year is yam and palm oil. And yet you think you're too good for *nni nwanji ajadu*."

I licked my lips, wiped my mouth with the back of my hand and tried not to think of the food that I have been served since yesterday. Tasteless grub: no salt, no pepper. Just plain white rice and even plainer tomato stew. For a widow must not be seen to enjoy food; all her meals for the one-year mourning period must be made without any salt or pepper. And I know I am lucky; it is a lot better than yam and unspiced palm oil. Plus, I get to eat with a spoon. In some villages, my mother-in-law drummed into me, a mourning widow only eats with two long sticks. Whatever food she drops belongs to the spirits; it's her husband's share.

"My son should never have married you. You're a witch, *amosu ka-ibu*. You cannot even cry for him."

I tasted raisin and brandy on my tongue. I ignored her. She has called me worse. 'Murderer.' I killed her son. I was the one who sent the four teenage armed robbers to his boutique on that Friday night while he was stocktaking. The police told us he was shot at close range, in his heart and in his head. He had probably refused to hand over the cash and tried to fight them; his table was overturned. I did not tell them that Okpala did not need to fight to overturn tables. All he needed was enough anger.

I married Okpala straight out of university with a brand new degree in sociology. He was a trader with a boutique on Ogui Road. I had gone there to look for a graduation dress; he was reputed to have the best at affordable prices. I saw something I liked, a short-sleeved dress the color of a fresh bruise on light skin. It was the most gorgeous thing I had ever seen but the price tag put it beyond me. Okpala convinced me to try it on, his hands tapping on the table behind which he was sitting. He insisted on giving it to me as a present if I invited him to my graduation party. Five weeks later, he had paid my bride price.

My mother liked him. She said he had busy hands: hands like his which could never keep still were the sort of hands that kept the devil at bay. The sort of hands that spun money. "Nneka, he's a good man. You're lucky to have snatched him, *eziokwu*."

At the wedding, Okpala's hands flailed and waved as he danced. At the high table, reserved for the groom and bride, he played with the spoons and the forks set out for the fried rice and the dried meat, tap tap tapping on the table like a restless child. My mother, resplendent in her white lace wrapper and blouse – paid for by Okpala – leaned over to me and whispered, "Busy hands. If you marry a lazy man, your suffering will be worse than Job's. *I ga-atakali Job n'afufu*."

Even when we had our first dance, his hands could not keep still. They went around my neck, around my waist, around my buttocks. My mother danced close to me and winked. "This man loves you very much," she whispered and danced away, waist shaking, her behind wobbling to the boom bam bang of Oliver de Coque and the Expo 76 Ogene Super Sounds.

The wedding tired me. The smiling and the eating and the dancing. A success, everyone said and therefore nobody left until really late. The DJ kept playing music and Okpala and I kept being asked to dance. Okpala loved dancing. It was his passion and so he did not need much encouragement. "*Bia gba egwu nwoke m*," and Okpala would be there, dragging me with him, my multilayered wedding dress getting heavier by the minute.

"No, Okpala. I'm tired. No more dancing. *Mba*," I tried to protest but his hand manacled my wrist and I had to get up, all the while smiling because it was my wedding day and because he was whispering furiously: Smile, smile, *muo amu*.

When we finally left and checked into the Royal Suite of the Presidential Hotel he had booked, all I wanted to do was sleep, wedding dress and all. Okpala would have none of it. "My wedding night and you want to sleep?" All the while his hands moved, tapping on the long thin mirror beside the bed, on the huge brown table opposite the bed. And when I said, "Okpala, darling, I am really tired. Whatever you have in mind can wait until I've had some rest," his busy hand connected with my face. I saw flashes of lightning as Okpala pummeled me. And when he dragged me naked to bed, all I could see was this huge darkness that had started to consume me.

"I hope that at least, when the guests start coming, you'll show a lot more emotion than now." She sounds guttural, like a masquerade. I almost feel sorry for her. I think of my son. It cannot be easy to lose a child.

Tomorrow, the first guests will begin to arrive. Okpala was a rich man,

so his funeral should reflect that: five days of receiving mourners. First, my townspeople, Okpala's in-laws. They will come, as is customary, with a dance group and some drinks. The following day is for Okpala's siblings' in-laws. After that his mother's people. Then members of the different associations he belonged to. Then the general public. They will all come with money, wads hidden in envelopes for me, but I shall see none of the money. His brothers will take it and give me what they think I need. But I don't care. I have enough money in my bank account, and the boutique is doing well.

In the out-kitchen behind the house, huge pots, *osite*, are being set up for cooking. Cassava. Rice. Meat. Four different varieties of soup. Truckloads of beer and soft drinks have been arriving for the past two days. There is a huge stock of palm wine. Cartons of wine. The St Stephen's Gospel Band has been hired to provide the music. Okpala's brother insisted on inscribing drinking glasses and beer mugs with Okpala's name and date of death, souvenirs to hand out to people. He also had key rings made with Okpala's picture. But he said the key rings were not for everyone. They would be given only to members of the traders' association to which Okpala belonged. Frankly, I find it all a bit vulgar, this recent trend to memorialize the dead in key rings and plastic trays and wall clocks. But what can I do? I have got no say in the matter. I am only his widow.

"Tomorrow, you'd better not show me up. You'd better cry well."

I know what I am expected to do. To scream and hurl angry words at death. *Onwu ooo, death, why have you taken my Lion? Why have you taken my man? Onwu, you are wicked. I joka*. To cry, my voice above everybody else's, the loyal wife's. To beg, when he is being put in the ground, to be allowed to go with him. *Chi m bia welu ndu m ooo, my God, take my own life too*. I shall struggle with Okpala's burly brothers who will try to stop me from crawling into his grave, pleading to be buried with my husband, the best man in the world, my son's father. They will tell me to think about my son. He needs a mother. He is still a child and has just lost his father; he does not need to lose his mother too. Think about him, they'll say. *Jide obi gi aka. Hold your heart in your hands firmly, so that it does not slip and splinter*.

I think about my son. Four years old. The reason Okpala's people have not kicked me out yet. Will not kick me out. I am the mother to Okpala's heir. If I had had a girl, his witch of a mother would have had me on the streets by now and then what? Who would marry a widow with a young daughter? But I have a son, so I get to keep the boutique. Afamefuna is my trump card. Too young to understand death, he is playing in his room, crashing toy cars and asking Enuma, the househelp, if his daddy was back from his trip. Afamefuna has

been asking that question since the night Okpala died and I told him his daddy had gone away and saw a light come on in his eyes.

"Five years of marriage, and all you could manage was one child. One. Good thing it was a boy. I warned Okpala that college destroys their wombs with all that knowledge. Too much knowledge is not good for a woman. It destroys their wombs. What does she need all that education for, eh? He should have married another woman. One that would have given him many more sons."

When Afamefuna was one-and-a-half years, I became pregnant again. I had, by then, become adept at avoiding Okpala's busy hands. Making sure his food was served on time. His clothes clean and ironed. The house tidied and welcoming. But in my eighth week of pregnancy, I slipped. I burnt his supper: *egusi* soup with snails he had ordered especially from Onitsha. The snails, charred, clung to the bottom of the pot, curled up like ears. Okpala liked *egusi* with snail and, as I realized within a week of living with him, it was akin to a mortal sin to serve it up less than perfect; the punishment smarted even after forgiveness had been granted. So, that evening, when I smelt the soup burning, I knew what was in stock for me. I tried to recuperate it, to scoop up the snails and with some water douse the burnt taste. Nothing worked and The Hand descended on me while Afamefuna watched from behind his bedroom door. Okpala upturned the bowl of soup, my burnt offering, on my head and the soup ran like tears down my cheeks and soiled the white blouse I had on in readiness for the Legion of Mary meeting at St. Christopher's. Of course, I could not go any more. The pepper in the *egusi* stung my eyes and the smell of burnt soup found its way into my nostrils and nestled there cozily. When I went to the toilet and released clots of blood, I knew that Okpala had martyred my baby, sent it back to its source before I even had the chance to cradle it in my arms. I knew I never wanted to give him another child, male or female.

The week Okpala was away, seeing to new supplies in Lagos, I went to the Riverside Private Hospital and had my tubes tied. The night he came back and called me to his bed, I touched the tiny scar that only I could see and felt it throbbing warm under my hand and I smiled. When he released his manhood inside me and spoke to his seeds, ordering them to give him a son – Okpala wanted another son desperately, to raise his status among his peers – I wanted to giggle out loud.

I lift my head and turn towards my mother-in-law. She is sitting on my bed. I look beyond her and see my new life stretch ahead of me: a multi-colored wrapper infused with the scent of fresh possibilities. No Okpala. My future secure in the fact that I have his son. An independent woman with my own boutique. I shall regrow my hair. Nurture it and delight in its growth. Maybe

in a year or two, another relationship. I am in no hurry, though. I shall savor my freedom first. My eyes meet those of my mother-in-law and I feel it coming. I do not even want to stop it: a laughter that comes from deep inside my belly and takes over my entire body.

Chika Unigwe was born in Enugu, Nigeria, and now lives in Turnhout, Belgium, with her husband and four children. Her novel *On Black Sisters' Street* will be published in July 2009 by Jonathan Cape in the UK and Random House in the US. A version of it was published in Dutch in 2007 by Meulenhoff/Manteau as *Fata Morgana* and will appear in Italian in November 2008 (Nerri Pozza). She was shortlisted for the 2004 Caine Prize and has won the Commonwealth Short Story Award.