CHIELOZONA EZE

Plaiting My Mother's Hair

My mother sighed with relief when the radio announced that Amina Lawal, the Muslim woman condemned for adultery in the North would no longer be stoned. "Glory be to God almighty," she said and promptly turned off the radio as though she were afraid the news would be taken back. "Now, my hair," she said without turning her gaze to me. I wanted to hear more about the news which had troubled us quite a lot since the woman confessed her guilt and the man his innocence. I wanted to hear more about the role the international women's organization and the Amnesty International played in saving the woman. Nonetheless, I respected my mother's instinct. I too was happy about the news. Hopefully the imams in the North would not rescind their wise judgment.

Responding to my mother's announcement, I got ready the instruments for hair plaiting: three-fingered wooden comb, fine black thread, (*eri-ishi*) Kletten Root Hair Oil (made in Germany), and a hand mirror. You needed no more than these to plait hair.

Our neighbour, Mama-Edwin, was cooking jollof-rice and the smell of curry and onions wafted into our house. We too had eaten rice. But not jollof-rice. I had cooked rice-n-beans with tomato sauce. There was hardly a household in our neighbourhood that

didn't cook rice on Sunday. Children loved it. Moreover, it was about the easiest meal to get done after church services which sometimes lasted long.

When I had put together the plaiting utensils, my mother pulled our green leather sofa to her favourite corner beside the window that faced south onto our small garden where she grew vegetables all year round. She loved to watch the dipping sun and listen to the songbirds. But it was not yet evening; it was just a few minutes past two o'clock. That was the first hair plaiting I was doing for my mother after my father's death six months ago. Her first hair plaiting since the death.

So, she lowered herself to the sofa uttering her typical sigh that blended with the light creaking sound of the leather. A hen with two chicks clucked its way into our parlour pecking at some grains of rice I hadn't swept off. My mother shooed, "*Fssst, fssst.*" But the hen stood for a while as if to know whether the *fssst* was for it or for another strange bird. "Drive it away before it shits on the floor," she said. I drove the hen away taking care not to frighten it lest it dropped its mess. Birds do that often when in fright.

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Plaiting hair is not easy at all. Some hairs are too short, too strong and hard to manage. Regardless of the texture of the hair, however, the key to a successful plaiting lies in the

first spot at the centre of the head, continue with the line to join the forehead. That is the first assignment. You have split the hair into two equal parts. In other words, you have a simple line, a road. An Igbo proverb says: *Nwanyi bu uzo*, a woman is a road.

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Hardly had I created a road on my mother's head when she called my name and at the same time shook her head almost resignedly.

"Ei, Mama, stop shaking your head like this," I cautioned, fearing she would disorganise the road I had created.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"Sometimes, you just behave like a very old woman," I said.

"Tell me."

"Mhh, I tell you."

"Your daughter will one day tell you the same."

"And if I don't marry?"

"Oho," she said and laughed, "I see you becoming a nun."

"Don't you know that modern women don't care much about marriage?"

"Modern nonsense, a woman is a woman."

It was fun to be with my mother especially whenever we exchanged words like these. But then Remi, my elder brother, trudged into our parlour, shuffling his feet. My mother ground her teeth. I could hear her breathe with difficulty. She was uncomfortable whenever Remi was around. His Down's syndrome reminded her of her father's bad wishes on her and thereby of her father whom she didn't like.

But Remi didn't stay for long in the parlour; he went into the room he shared with John, my younger brother. My mother didn't speak any more till long after Remi had left. That gave me time to work on her hair. I took my comb back to the point where I had started and split the right half of the head by drawing another line across the road. I did the same to the left half. The line touched the two ears. I stood out in front of my mother and looked at her head. The road became a cross. On my mother's head was a cross. The Igbo don't have a proverb about women and a cross.

My mother pulled herself together with time. Remi was now out of sight. "Chioma," she called again. I loved to hear her call that name. For some reasons I didn't like my baptismal name: Monica, and thank goodness, she began calling me Chioma from childhood so that people have almost forgotten I was once called Monica. When I had answered my mother she said, "You are twenty-three years old now."

"I don't want to hear that, Mama."

household chores suddenly become your landlords because they have inherited the landed properties. You couldn't inherit any because you are a woman. Suddenly you become a

woman never beat you up however strong she was. And his wife was strong. At least she looked so.

"Have you ever seen a woman who doesn't need a man?" my mother asked.

"Nuns."

"They belong to God."

"There are women who live with fellow women," I said and promptly bit my lower lip.

"What? Don't say that."

I kept silent, unsure whether to go on with what had slipped out of my mouth. "But it's true, Mama," I said, feeling a compulsion to justify what I had said.

"Forget about them."

"But that is their life."

I took my hands off her head, cleared my throat. At the same time, Edwin, a ten year-old boy, ran into our compound, calling my mother's name. "Mama-Remi, my mother wants Maggi cubes from you."

"Do we have Maggi?" she asked me.

I was happy to be able to leave her for the moment. I didn't want to reveal my experience at Holy Rosary College, a girls' Catholic high school; that I had been touched by a woman and that I liked it. I got three cubes of Maggi and tucked them in Edwin's hand. "Thank-ma," he said to my mother and sped off.

"I heard that that is the cause of AIDS," my mother said, obviously not wanting us to lose track of our discussion. Some radio evangelists had traced the origin of AIDS to homosexual lifestyle, warning Nigerians not to be as promiscuous as Americans and Europeans who have lost the true fear of God.

I felt a split of allegiance. I wanted to explain that AIDS had nothing to do with homosexual lifestyle while the other part of me waual 9e0(whi6)4.6(m c7t-10ge)-1 Cs' C-52(s' n tuc)4.6ctuc

perceived heresy and explained how science has unravelled the secret of nature. But the explanation made no sense to her. If the earth moved, why don't human beings feel it? No, it was the sun that moved, she argued. For some seconds I thought she was right.

I sought for an immediate example to drive home the idea. "You know that the white people of Europe used to say that we Africans were not human beings," I said, happy for this inspiration.

"They are fools," she said.

"Ah, Mama. Thou shall not call any person fool," I said and laughed.

"But if a person says that you're not a human being, what is he if not a fool?"

I was thrilled by her indignation. "Hitler said he would build a zoo to put us Africans in after he had killed all the Jews in the whole world."

"Wasn't he mad?"

"Many Germans believed him."

"He must be a big fool."

"Well, things change because we gain new knowledge," I said, happy for the fine conclusion.

"But that doesn't mean that a woman would sleep with another woman, how can it happen? How can they do it?" she asked.

"I don't know," I said and took my hands off her head.

"What happens if every person begins to live like that?"

"But every person is never going to be like them."

She had no argument. Then she made a sound with her tongue that reminded me of Miriam Makeba's tongue-twang. *Tok, tok.* Whenever my mother had no more argument

she gave such signs that indicated she kept to her opinion despite how faulty it was. And to complement her tongue-twang sign of finality she said: "Whether you like it or not, the place of a woman is in a husband's home."

"Ah, Mama."

"Doctor or no doctor, a woman is always under."

"Not always, Mama!" I said.

"Can a woman make herself pregnant?" she said.

"Can a man?"

She smiled and then began to laugh. I had to rest a while, for her body shook whenever she laughed and sometimes she laughed in such a way when I had cornered her in an argument. Her laughter made me laugh.

"You remember what I told you sometime about cloning? Men can be useless now," I said with some hints of pride trailing in my voice.

"Don't say that," she said. "And moreover no one knows whether it will succeed."

"Whatever succeeded in other animals can succeed in us. We are also animals."

"I am not an animal," she protested.

"Bend your head," I told her. I wanted to divide the other angle at the left side in the back.

"My neck," she said. "Can't you stoop low yourself?" she suggested.

"No, you have to lean your head a little."

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Some women love to elongate their hair so that the braids cascade on their shoulders. Some even weave in pearls the way Venus and Serena Williams did in their first appearance at Wimbledon.

When I asked my mother two years ago whether she wanted to lengthen her hair, she made that tongue twanging Makeba-sound. *Tok, tok.* "Another woman's hairs on mine?" she said. "God forbid. Why should I be carrying dead white women's hairs? Do they carry ours?"

"It's not dead white women's hair."

"It is," she insisted. "Do we have white hair?"

"But they are synthetic, wigs, Mama."

"Whatever it is, I don't want to carry anything other than my own hair."

My village people began to have the idea that those extensions were the hair of dead white women when Gregory, one of our townsmen, came back from Europe and began a business selling wigs, some of which looked like blond hair. Our people said he ha s8l inex6dTc-0.09 3ner6 T-20.001c-0.1 TwhaID-jTT4 1 Tf1.22 0 TD-0.0005 6 T-2 Tc5nge i(")-711 s10.7

braids of the first half of the head. At the same time, I called on John and asked him to prepare *foo-foo*. We had divided the housekeeping jobs equally among us. He would prepare *foo-foo* or yam while I cooked the accompanying gumbo. If I washed our clothes, he ironed them. He didn't like me for that. Boys in other families did nothing, he had once complained.

We took supper with half my mother's hair plaited. It was night. Remi and John

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My mother took a deep breath, looked me in the face and smiled rather shyly. “But you know why I didn’t allow them to circumcise you,” she whispered, taking up a mirror. “You know.”

The paraffin lamp appeared not bright enough for her to see herself. She went out to the front yard, with her back to the moon, holding the mirror in front of her face. The moonshine wasn’t strong enough either. She came back into the parlour and sat back on her sofa. Our eyes met. She was beautiful. The braids sat well on her face. I didn’t have her two delicious dimples that showed in her smiles. But she was not smiling. Her eyes swelled with tears. “I didn’t want you to be like me,” she said in a sorrow-stricken voice.

I knelt by her side, held her, and said nothing. Sharp rays of the moon glimmered on her face. It was silent everywhere. Not even the owl hooted. I was grateful to her for not wanting me to be like her. But I thought I was like her; we were alike. Women are all alike. In many ways.