

“Daughters, By Our Hands”

Ekemini Pius

I.

Eme began to panic five months before her daughter, Aniema’s eighteenth birthday. She had seen signs that confirmed that her daughter had firmly started her journey to womanhood; her monthly period began when she was fourteen, her ruler-straight body had rounded out and now curved and sloped in the relevant places, she now walked with the self-consciousness of a girl who knew she was on her way to becoming a woman. But Eme was not satisfied. She held Aniema’s wrists in an almost vice-like grip to examine her hands. She would pore over the paths on the girl’s palms as if they were backstreets leading to a wide stretch of asphalt roads brimming with promise. Then she would suddenly flip over Aniema’s hand and stare sadly at the tips of her fingers, at the vacant spaces where nails should have grown and calcified by now, at the possibility that if nails did not grow in those shells and wedge themselves against those cuticles in the next five months, Aniema would not become a breeder.

Eme was a short, plump woman who walked like she had hot coals under her feet, like she would break into a run at any moment. Her eyes were so big they stood out as though in protest, and her nose lay flat on her face in total surrender. Her umber skin glowed whenever light spangled on it, and she spoke with a voice that belied her small frame – a booming voice that swelled in rooms and hushed other voices, that solidified her presence and increased her height by several cubits in the minds of all those who heard her. But when she had a reason to worry, she looked shrunken, an even smaller version of her already small self. She would prance about with a minatory demeanour, looking for people to safekeep some of her worries, each woman receiving a fair share of it, with no

promise that she would ever take them back on, until her body was light enough to hunker down and be at peace.

II.

Tonight, Eme held her daughter's wrists again, worry drawn into the lines of her forehead. They were having waffle burgers at a pastry shop. Cold air, huffing from the huge standing air conditioner serenaded them and made Aniema slip into her motley coat. The shop was redolent with the piquant aroma of meat pies. The low chatter of customers hunched over tables melded with the clacking of cutlery against white, silver-rimmed plates. Waiters sauntered across tables in white shirts and black trousers, bobbing their heads and serving food and clearing out plates. Outside, in the morass of traffic, cars hooted impatiently at each other for the right of way. Street lights stood sentry at the edge of the road, engulfing the asphalt in a dull yellow glow.

Aniema shifted uneasily in her chair and looked down at her burger to avoid her mother's gaze, which drilled into her forehead. Her rich black afro fanned out like a thick veldt of vegetation on her head, framing her oval face. Her caramel skin glistened under the soft yellow light of the lone chandelier that dangled from the ceiling.

"Four months to your eighteenth birthday, and yet no nails," Eme said, staring at the vacant spaces at the top of Aniema's fingers.

Aniema bit her lip, unsure of what to reply her mother. "Maybe I was not born to be a breeder," she said in a barely audible voice, almost conspiratorial.

Eme tightened her grip on the girl's wrists and furrowed her brows. "I come from a family of mothers and sisters who impregnated themselves with their own nails and gave

birth to their own children. There is no way you are going to be an exception. You have good blood flowing through your veins.”

“But most of my friends who are breeders had nails at fifteen or sixteen. I don’t want you to be disappointed, Mama,” Aniema said.

“It does not always come that early,” Eme snapped. “All we know is that if you don’t have it by the time you turn eighteen, you will never have it. But it can come as late as the eve of your eighteenth birthday.”

Aniema knew the edge in her mother’s voice was coming from a place of desperation. Her mother had bragged to all who cared to listen that her daughter would be a breeder, and while at it, she had made clear her distaste for non-breeders, calling them ‘Almost Women.’ Aniema knew that if she ended up not growing nails, her mother would shrink under the weight of the jeers she would receive. And, more than anything, her mother hated being proven wrong.

“Alright, Mama. But assuming I eventually have nails, I don’t think I want to impregnate myself until I’m at least twenty-five. I don’t feel quite ready right now.” Aniema wiped the edges of her mouth with a napkin to remove the flecks of salad that gathered there.

Eme glared at her, irritation floating in her eyes. “You are too negative. Too negative for someone who has me as her mother. What are you assuming? And why do you want to wait till you are twenty-five? I want to carry my granddaughter as soon as possible!” She pushed back her chair, producing a short, scraping sound over the tiled floor, and motioned a waiter to bring the bill, all the while looking at her daughter out of the corner of her eye. She squeezed crumpled notes into the waitress’s hand and tramped out of the shop, leaving her daughter to scramble out of her chair in an attempt to keep up with her long strides.

III.

When Aniema woke up one morning – a month before her birthday – to the sight of nails on her fingers, she flung her bedcover aside and raced to her mother’s room. She pushed the door open, startling her mother into dropping her bible, and shoved her fingers in front of Eme’s face, who had to step back to avoid a finger poking her eye. Eme’s face flushed with relief. She collected her daughter in a tight embrace, rubbing her right hand forcefully along the length of the girl’s back, like sandpaper along a rough, wooden surface. She released the girl from her embrace and gripped her shoulders, smiling to reveal jagged, tobacco-stained teeth.

“I know you have good blood running in your veins. I have told you several times that all the women in our lineage grew nails, impregnated themselves and had their own children. Why did you think you would be an exception?” She laughed into the girl’s face – who scrunched up her nose at her mother’s stale breath – and shook her shoulders violently.

The morning breeze swept into Eme’s room, billowing her oversized nightgown, rippling her cotton window blinds, blowing her wispy hair into her face. Portraits of her mother, Aniema’s grandmother, hung from nails dinned into the wall, bearing different postures of a plump woman in her prime. She led Aniema to sit on her bed.

Holding out her daughter’s hands, she cooed over the pale pink nails that now gleamed under the ashen light of the lone bulb in the room. Tears warmed her throat, the one you cry when a last-gasp intervention happens.

She looked up at her daughter and cupped the girl’s cheeks in her calloused palms.

“Aniema, we have to start planning now. I know you have said you are not ready to have children, but at least we can start planning now.”

Aniema looked away from her mother's pleading eyes and stared at the mirror hanging from the wall, grime dulling its shine. "O," she said softly.

Eme's eyes lit up and she blinked rapidly in disbelief. She had not expected her daughter to agree to have this discussion any time soon. She seized her chance and the words flew out of her mouth like arrows out of a quiver. "How many girls would you have?"

"Just one girl."

"Why? But you have ten fingernails. Why do you want to have just one girl when you can have four or five?" Eme asked, her eyes narrowed into slits.

"But you had only me," Aniema said, turning away from the mirror to look at her mother.

"Back then, times were hard, so I could only raise one child. But things are different now. You will study medicine. You will be a well-paid doctor. You will be able to care for at least four girls." Eme gave her daughter's shoulders a gentle squeeze.

"OK, I will consider it," Aniema said in a tone laced with disinterest. She pulled away from her mother, making Eme's hands fall from her shoulders and plop on the bed. She rose from the bed, leaving behind a hollow where her buttocks had dug into the bed. She stretched her lanky frame and shuffled her feet into her flip flops.

Eme trudged over to the window to raise the blinds. Birds tweeted cacophonously as they fluttered over the ixora flowers dotting her compound. The plaintive cry of an evangelist urging the just-awoken neighbourhood to change their ways and return to the Lord punctuated the cool of the morning.

"What would you do with the rest of your nails after you have decided on the number of girls you want?" Eme asked, hands folded against her breasts.

“I will keep them,” Aniema said firmly, bunching her fists to signify her resolve. “I will keep them.”

Eme widened her eyes in shock and craned her neck forward. “What is wrong with you? Do you know how much you can make from selling your nails to non-breeders, those Almost Women?”

“Mama, there are not ‘almost women’. Is it their fault that nails don’t grow on their fingers?” Aniema rolled her eyes.

“Whatever. But do you know how much I made from selling my remaining nine nails? Enough to buy this house and set up a good business in this city,” Eme said, raising her hands to show her daughter the vacant spaces where nails once grew.

“You cheated them because they were desperate, and you know that the holy book frowns at cheating,” Aniema said, her voice tinged with mild anger.

Eme wiped down her window netting to shake off the cluster of dirt that had caked into its pores. She smiled wryly. “What do you know about cheating? All they have to do is glue your nails to their fingers, and you want it to be cheap? What then is our reward for being the carriers of life? You don’t reason like someone who came from my body.” She tapped her abdomen for emphasis.

Aniema sighed and rolled her eyes. Of course, she knew how it worked: the woman would glue a nail to her own finger and within three weeks, your genetic information would be replaced with hers, and once she inserted the finger into her vagina, it would swim to fertilize her eggs and she would become pregnant with a girl. She sighed again and ambled out of her mother’s room to prepare for work, her oversized flip flops squishing over the tiles and slapping hard against her soles, her mind worn out by her mother’s goading.

As Aniema lit the stove to boil her bathwater, a pang of guilt thumped against her chest for lying to her mother. But she knew that telling her mother she would give birth to one daughter was the only way to stop Eme from breathing down her neck, hunting her down for a positive answer. She felt her life was a burden that needed to be perpetually unpacked, and she did not feel her shoulders could heft the additional burden of raising a daughter. If anything, she felt like she was the atonement for her mother's greed. She secretly vowed to give out her nails to poor women who, unlike her, would cherish the opportunity to give raise their own daughters. The kettle hissed and brought her back from her reverie.

IV.

Aniema's transformation shocked everyone at *Mama Cynthia Fashion World* where she worked as a tailoring apprentice. The shop was a spacious room with ten Singer sewing machines lined up against the walls, five on each side. A giant shelf stood ensconced against the wall, laden with bags of sewn fabric and stacks of glossy fashion magazines. Eclectic pieces of cut, unwanted fabric lay sprawled on the ground. Two big dressing mirrors hung from the wall, where customers checked the fitting of their dresses. Her fellow apprentices had held hushed conversations behind her back in the months leading to her eighteenth birthday, eager to see if the daughter of the almighty Madam Eme would end up being a non-breeder like most of them. Eyes riveted on her fingers whenever she walked into the shop, and upon confirming that her nails had not come, the eyes glinted and winked at other eyes. When Aniema walked into the shop that morning flaunting her nails, the cackles of sewing machines and the excited chatter of the girls stopped and gave way to gasps and muffled screams. Even some customers trying on their dresses cast admiring glances at her, angling to get her number on their way out.

Aniema could sense a shift in the atmosphere already; the hostility had thawed and faces now beamed at her.

Mama Cynthia, the owner of the shop, who started and stoked gossip about Aniema, who made a public show of her dislike for the girl, even to the extent of apportioning her an unfair load of work to the delight of the other girls, now smiled sheepishly at her. She was a non-breeder who wanted a girl so bad but had so far been priced out of nails. She whined interminably about how her income from the shop was not enough to afford the high prices that had been sounded out to her. She was a wide-hipped woman with an aquiline nose and thin lips, who hulked around the shop, barking out orders and inspecting dresses with a censorious air. She dragged a wooden stool and sat beside Aniema, beads of sweat clustering her neck in spite of the three ceiling fans whirling above.

“Ah, Aniema. You are a true daughter of your mother. These your nails are so beautiful,” she said, her mouth pooling with desire.

“Thank you,” Aniema said tersely, drilling her eyes into the taffeta fabric she was cutting on a table and marking out with a chalk, careful not to make eye contact.

“You don’t have to make any more dresses when you are done with this one. I can share your remaining jobs among the girls,” Mama Cynthia said, looking over her shoulder to ensure no one heard her.

“Don’t worry. I will finish all my jobs for today.” Aniema snapped her scissors, her voice bearing accreting anger.

Mama Cynthia raised her hands in resignation. “No problem, my darling. I just thought you could use a less hectic workday.” She glanced at Aniema’s nails, pushed her stool

closer to the table, cleared her throat, and whispered: “How much would it cost to get one of those?”

“I’m not selling.”

“*Haba*. Don’t behave like this, please. There’s no way you want to birth ten girls. You surely want to sell the nails you won’t be using.” Mama Cynthia’s voice was now as soft as a pudding, pliant, like it could be mashed into any shape or form. Aniema looked at the mean boss now turned meek woman and was surprised by how quickly neediness could break a body and impose humility on it.

“I said I’m not selling.”

“Aniema, please. I really want to have my own girl. Please.”

Aniema’s eyes crinkled at the edges in a mischievous smile. “OK. Two hundred thousand. I will give you one for two hundred thousand.”

Mama Cynthia jerked her stool backwards with such force that it produced a loud, grating sound. The other apprentices turned to look and Mama Cynthia stared them down. They returned to their sewing.

“Two hundred thousand naira? That’s outrageous and you know it. Where am I supposed to get the money from?”

Pleasure swelled Aniema’s heart and she stifled a giggle. It felt good to get one over this woman, to refuse her something she desperately wanted. She cleared her throat loudly and looked at her. “200 thousand or nothing.”

The wobbly stool creaked in relief as Mama Cynthia rose, heaved, and smoothed the pleats of her skirt. She realised that Aniema would not change her mind no matter the coaxing, that the girl was bent on repaying her for past times. She noticed that the pace of

sewing in the shop had stalled; needles no longer clamped down along the length of fabric at a cacophonous speed. The girls turned the fabric inside out, pretending to arrange them, swinging their legs on the foot pedals, angling their bodies, ears primed to pick up tiny bits of the conversation. Mama Cynthia walked over to the nearest machine and pulled the ear of the girl who sat at it. “What are you straining your rabbit ears to hear? Did your mother not teach you any manners?” she cried.

Immediately, feet began to work the pedals vigorously. Needles chomped on fabric, producing neat lines of thread, like a file of soldier ants. Mama Cynthia released the girl’s ear, glowered at Aniema, and tramped out of the shop.

As soon as she exited, the sewing pace slowed again and the girls cast awkward glances at Aniema, wondering how she would survive at the shop after publicly turning down a woman who could not stomach rejection. The last breeder who priced Mama Cynthia out of nails was fired immediately. When the girl’s mother came over to ask why her daughter was dismissed, Mama Cynthia said she was caught trying to steal expensive fabric. The girl cried, denied it, but Mama Cynthia kept a straight face and looked at all her apprentices – who were scandalized – silently daring them to say anything to the contrary. They simply nodded like lizards as the girl’s mother, teary-eyed, led her daughter away.

Mama Cynthia returned to the shop sucking a toothpick and holding a can of Heineken. She strode toward Aniema’s sewing machine and found the girl packing her bag.

Aniema smiled and said, “Don’t bother sacking me. I quit.”

As Aniema sashayed out of the shop, her sandaled feet crunching unwanted buttons and pieces of fabric, Mama Cynthia’s face flushed red in anger. She took special delight in firing her staff, in watching their calm faces jerk into wide-eyed shock, in watching them grovel and beg and cry. But not only had this girl denied her request for nails, she had

also quit before she could be sacked. Her lips shook as the beer dribbled down her chin and soiled her chiffon blouse. The power went out and the fans whirled lazily to a halt. The sweltering afternoon heat gripped the room and sweat soon seeped out of bodies – wet patches were spreading under Mama Cynthia’s armpits. She picked up a fashion magazine and fanned herself furiously. Then she turned to her apprentices and shouted, “All of you, go and wait outside. This heat is coming from your bodies. You won’t kill me in my own shop.”

V.

Eme would not know how much madness she was capable of until Aniema returned from the market one evening without three of the nails on her right hand. Eme flung the shopping bag on the kitchen island, spilling seasoning cubes and onions, and squared up to her daughter, her burgundy boubou floating at her sides like wings. Steam rose from the pot of meat boiling on the cooker and melded with the tension in the air.

“Where are those nails?” Her voice still bore surprise. “I am asking you a question. Where are they?”

“I gave them out,” Aniema replied. If she was ruffled by her mother’s fit of rage, she didn’t show it.

“Gave them out to who?”

“To the bus conductor on my way home from the market.”

“I don’t still understand you. Better start making sense or I’d shove these pumpkins down your throat,” she screamed, pointing at the bundle of fresh pumpkins lying on the island.

“I met a kind bus conductor, a non-breeder, who waived my bus fare after I lost my purse in the struggle to board the bus. So, I gave her three of my nails to show my appreciation.”

Eme grabbed her own breasts and shoved them at her daughter. “Why do you always behave like you never sucked these breasts, like you suckled a dog’s teats instead? Why didn’t you just tell the conductor woman thank you? What happened to simply saying thank you? Do you know what you have done?”

“She said she was almost reaching menopause. Maybe one or two years away. Her job as a bus conductor isn’t enough to see her through the month, let alone allow her save to buy nails to birth her own girls. So, I gave her three nails so she can have triplets at once and beat menopause.”

Eme pressed her palms tightly against her ears, as though to prevent impurities from seeping in. “You are a foolish child. You come from a lineage of wise women but you have chosen to be foolish. You think you can save the world. If I wanted to save the world, how do you think I would have built this house? By giving out my nails for free? Foolish child.”

Aniema stared long and hard into her mother’s eyes, spun around on her heels, and walked away. She expected her mother to follow her with curses and fists.

But Eme stood fixed to the spot. Her Aniema would never walk out on her like that. This was a new woman, one she didn’t recognise, and because new things are unpredictable, it was unwise to follow this woman with curses and fists.

VI.

The doorbell chimed and Aniema opened the door to the sight of a woman and three little girls. The woman was dressed in a floral boubou, her wrists adorned with silver bangles, her face caked with makeup that was melting under the scorching sun. The girls were identical, about two years old, dressed in little gowns sewn out of the same fabric. They clung to her boubou as if hanging on for dear life, looking at Aniema suspiciously.

Aniema smiled to make them feel at ease.

“How may I help you, Ma?” Aniema asked, her fingers tapping the door behind her.

The woman smiled and then laughed softly, exposing an immaculate dentition. “You don’t remember me? Look well.”

Aniema squinted. The high cheekbones reminded her of her friend Bassey, but Bassey was short and stout while this woman was tall and slender. “I’m sorry, I’m not sure I remember. Please remind me.”

“The bus conductor you gave your nails to three years ago. These are my daughters, and I brought them to greet you.” She nudged the girls forward; “Anefiok, Uwem, Usiere, go and greet your aunty.”

Aniema stepped back. She pressed her palm over her mouth, muffling a scream. She held the girls in a tight, crushing embrace. The girls resembled their mother, but Aniema was awed by the fact that she was the root source of their lives. Then she shouted for her mother to come out of her room and see.

About the Author:

Ekemini Pius is an alumnus of the Wawa Literary Fellowship. His writing has been shortlisted for the Kendeka Prize for African Literature and the Awele Creative Trust Short Story Prize. He loves short stories and hopes they will be kind enough to love him back one day.