

## Faces of Luck

~~~ Blessing Ezinne Okah

Uwaoma is a luck-magnet. The day her late mother, Nwanyidiya, had her, the whole village was indoors. The day started with a strange rain in mid okochi, the season of dryness, winds and cold breeze and shortly after Ekeano festival. It was midday before the raindrops abated, letting in a different sound- the groaning of a woman in labour. One after another, the women came out of their huts, hurrying towards the voice. They knew it was Nwanyidiya, the only woman duly pregnant in the neighbourhood. It was both habitual and obligatory for women to lay aside their usual squabbles whenever it had to do with welcoming a new one. Even as it still drizzled, all hands were on deck until the cry of a baby was heard. Another female was born to Mazi Nzenna. The first, Akuoma, born about seven rain seasons ago, was happy to have a second. The drizzling ceased and ushered in a mild sun upon the kingdom, so tender. People remarked the baby had a bright destiny, was a luck magnet. Nzenna thus named his baby-daughter Uwaoma, meaning 'the lucky one'. Of course since her arrival, their fireplace never lacked fish for Nwanyidiya's omugho.

"Omugho period is really when a mother regains the energy and blood she lost during child delivery, Nnam." Says Nwanyidiya. "You have satisfied me with fish. This omugho should continue till next season." Nzenna laughs, grabs her by the waist and says: "You lie. This is the last moon. Haven't I done wonderfully? Seeing how my beloved glows." "You have Nnam. I'm the envy of Amaehuhu land, this fireplace bears witness" she says twirling to face her husband who lifts her face by the chin. She says: "I can have some meat, Dinta. You fish but also kill games. Some meat, please!" Nzenna looks hypnotized, he seems to be noticing the dimples on Nwanyidiya's face for the first time. He directs both index fingers to them, driving them round, tenderly, looking into her eyes, admiring her. Nwanyidiya returns his gaze for as long as she can, but she is soon to yield to his male presence and her eyes fall, she is totally subdued. "I will get you meat, Nwanyim. This fireplace shall further bear witness." He says, smiling as Nwanyidiya dances to his admiration.

"Are we set? Just a moment", Nzenna says to a hunting gang, all gathered in his courtyard. He runs to Nwanyidiya's separate hut where she is giving the baby a bath. "Let me see the face of the lucky one to guarantee me this phase of luck," he says taking the baby from Nwanyidiya. He kisses the little one and holds her out to Nwanyidiya, but she folds her hands behind and makes a facial revolt, "There are two faces of luck here and you kiss only one?" Nzenna smiles "You know I don't have the time, the men wait." Nwanyidiya insists he oblige her. So Nzenna resigns, lays the baby down and lifts her face in his usual stylish way, kissing her all over the face. Nwanyidiya laughs: "Uwa m oo!"

Arriving Alanta, the isolated bushes where wild animals live, each hunter takes his chosen direction. Soon, Nzenna aims at one. It groans noisily and begins to reel away. He must get this one, so has to fit another arrow on his bow. Stooped to take an arrow from his hunting bag, he hears the huge animal fall noisily. Nzenna approaches carefully and confirms it dead. He pulls out his arrow thrust through its trunk. Placing it on the ground, he also puts down his bag, gazing at the blood pumping from the open wound and he thinks: 'This is good luck for me and bad luck for this poor creature.' He shakes his head at the sight and squats, begins to secure each nock and to notch another arrow on his bowstring. Suddenly, he hears an angry growl. He jerks up, whirling around to face a brawny and scary creature charging at him, standing on its hind limbs, displaying an underpart with the colour of faded uhuie, its other parts having the colour of wall earth mixed with burnt wood. He thinks he has only heard in folktales of animals like it; not as fearsome as agu, not as cowardly as odu, he rates. It goes down on all four limbs, bearing down on him. A thought stronger than his fright comes to him: 'This is more meat for your wife'. A bow in one hand and an arrow in another, he thinks: 'It will not take me till this creature gets here to fit this arrow and pull the string'. Focused on aligning for a good shot, he does not see the beast drawn close enough to attack him. It stands on its hind limbs and lunges at this rival. Bravely, Nzenna jumps up losing hold of the weapons; he intercepts the sharp claws of the creature and locks them with his fingers, like in a man to man battle. All in a quick succession of reflex actions, he tries to bear down on it as his engaged fingers gush with blood, as the creature fights, tearing the flesh off his thighs with its hind claws.

“Nzenna!” Ezeala cries from afar. “Nze-nna!” the beast jumps off with a grunt. Ezeala’s shout assembles the whole crew at the scenario. They meet Nzenna lying unconscious, the deer and the beast alike. The death wound of Ezeala's arrow brought it down. The crew carries Nzenna and all the meat into the village.

Nwanyidiya wails unstopably. “What is the need for meat without my husband? What face of luck is this?” She cries, rolling on the ground, completely forgetting her baby. The women entrust Uwaoma into the care of her neighbour, Nwanyingele as her new phase of omugho begins, nursing her wounded husband.

Every morning, the Ezemmuo comes to consult the oracle concerning Nzenna’s state of health. He will perform some rituals amidst incantations, give her some new herbs for her husband and leave without a word to her. She bothered little about his usual silence seeing her husband: “He’s healing fast”, she would say to Nwanyingele, who always comes to have the baby suckled. He could sit by himself the second moon, could feed himself. So Nwanyingele brings home their baby, prepared for reunion, the little one is given to her father who takes her into his embrace saying: “This one has found grace to always be wherever the good face of luck is turned”. That night, he lays her by his side on his mud bed. Akuoma and her mother lay on the mat.

Akuoma wakes up to pass water. She looks at her mother lying by her side, sleeping soundly. Just then the baby makes a sound, she finds her throwing her little fingers in scattered directions, squirming and babbling from the inner side of the ugbo. She climbs over Nzenna’s body to her. They play so noisily on their father’s body that Nwanyidiya wakes up. “Akuoma, you will wake your father up, why did you go there?” she reprimands, rises to go over to the bed. A cock crows noisily, flapping its wings. She brings Akuoma down from the bed first and is about to pick the baby when her body brushes against her husband’s cold body. “Nzenna is dead!” she screams hysterically, waking the neighbourhood. Neighbours troop into their hut to find Nzenna stone dead and Nwanyidiya lifting and hitting herself on the floor and against the walls like an ogbanje. It took three dimkpa to stop her from killing herself instantly. Day after day, she continued demanding to be told what good there was in her luck. “Uwa m ee, ndaa oma gi? You rotate so, oh face of luck! On these other creatures that borrow life from Chi you turn the beautiful? To the peril of my beloved?” But no one had the answers she sought. After a moon she starts behaving in another strange way, she will call for her children who have been sent again to Nwanyingele’s house and feed them properly then sit quietly where she usually sat with Nzenna under the moon light. She lived like this for six moons, shunning every effort to restore her to normalcy and died by the usekwu leaving the two girls orphaned.

~~~ *Blessing Ezinne Okah is an academic staff at Alex Ekwueme Federal University, Ndufu Alike Ebonyi State, Nigeria.*