

TEETH

The husband was home when the pains came. It was a drizzling fall evening. The doctor had told them to start coming to the hospital when the contractions became regular. They called a cab and she cried all the way to the hospital. He thought she was in a lot of pain but she told him later that she had cried because back home when a woman was to have a baby the men sat outside drinking *ogogoro*, the local gin, while the woman was surrounded by local midwives and aunts and cousins and grandmothers who had had many children themselves and knew how to flip the baby in the womb if it chose to come feet first instead of head first.

It was the wife's idea that they should have a baby while in America. He was not very enthusiastic about the idea; he was here to study, he told her. And, besides, babies cried a lot and one of the things that was said about white people when he was growing up in Nigeria was that they did not like noise, the other two being that 1) they did not tell lies, and 2) they were completely fearless. Since they came to America he had added reason to agree with the fact that white people did not like noise. The tiny apartment where they lived was always deathly quiet. They had a long argument, keeping their voices down. He could not tell the wife that his classes were not going so well. He could hardly follow the speech of the professors. Their language was very idiomatic; they and the students had common terms of reference that he lacked. Sometimes in class, the professor and everyone else would be laughing. He would have his head buried in his notebook not even knowing a joke had been made.

"Every child born on American soil is an American citizen," she told him. The husband did not know that citizenship was automatic. He thought it was something the child got after living for a certain number of years on American soil and meeting certain eligibility requirements. "And any child born here can become the president of this country." Can you imagine that, their child a president of the most powerful country in the world? He could imagine it, himself, seeing his grandmother and all his relations from Nigeria with colorful loincloths around their waists lounging on the beautiful green lawn of the White House. She told him about the Kenyan whose father had been an international student just like him when he had had him. She told him he was now a Senator and that his Kenyan relatives told the *New York*



*Times* that they had danced through the night when they heard the news that he had been elected a Senator.

“But that is not even the best part, the best part is that when our son is eighteen he can file for a green card for us his parents to join him here in America, and you know what that means, it means we can get to spend our old age in this beautiful country.”

He did not know that either. He sometimes wondered about all the things she knew about the country. The country puzzled him by the day. None of his assumptions held. He was constantly in a state of bewilderment and would open his mouth to gulp in air each time he was shocked or surprised. Since he was puzzled all the time, his mouth was perpetually open.

What he did not tell the wife was that love-making was not on top of his list anymore. He had tried to reason through it, why it no longer meant anything to him, but he couldn't be sure. He sometimes reasoned it was the half-naked girls that he saw on campus every day. It had shocked him at first but after some time he had gotten used to them. He sometimes told himself it was the cold. The winter in upstate New York that year had been the worst in ten years. He would come in from campus after walking one and a half miles in the snow with his eyes red, his face frozen, even the snot in his nostrils frozen stiff.

He would stay in the sitting room pretending to be reading while the wife got ready for bed. She would look at him and go to bed while he sat in the sitting room reading the same line a hundred times and would sleep on the couch when he got tired.

Sometimes the wife told him she had learnt some new things about love-making from the shows she watched on television. This bit of news perked him up and made him leave the couch and go to the bedroom. She was right; she had indeed learned new things.

He did not believe her when she said she was pregnant. He still imagined that it had to be done in a certain position for at least a dozen times. He took her to the university health center. The nurse who smiled all the time ran a test for her and within five minutes confirmed that she was indeed pregnant. She also told them that in a few months time they could have a sonogram to determine the sex of the baby, like most couples did in America. But his wife, who otherwise embraced everything American, objected to that.

“We don't do that in Africa,” she told the nurse.

She then went into a long analogy about how babies were like parcels that had been handed to us and sonograms were like peeking at the parcel on the



way home to find out what its contents were instead of waiting to get home to find out what it contained in the privacy of your house.

“It is your decision and I respect it,” the nurse practitioner had told them. This was one of those American expressions that baffled him—he encountered them everyday and they transformed conversations into legal expressions that frightened him.

The wife saw it differently; she was happy. She thought the nurse practitioner was a nice person and had a lot of respect for Africans. She added it to the list of things that made America such a strange country. She added it to the list of things she told her mother on the phone each time she made those long distance calls she made to her mum back home. Those conversations that always began, . . . “Hmm these people are very strange you know; can you imagine that criminals must be read their rights and told to remain silent while being arrested, you know, unlike our own policemen that would let you say incriminating things about yourself that would put you in even more trouble. Hmm do you know that if your husband lays his hands on you here, you could have him arrested? Our uncle Zanza who beats his wife on the 30th of every month when he collects and drinks away his wages should come here. Hmm do you know there are couples here who chose not to have babies so that they can enjoy each other more?”

She would hear her mother’s angry hiss from the other end of the telephone line.

“And they call that life?” her mother would ask.

The nurse had also told them to announce it to their friends that they were having a baby, which was yet another strange American practice. In their part of the world you did not need to tell people. You waited till they could see it with their eyes that you were pregnant. Little wonder there were many proverbs about pregnancy, one of which was that it was like smoke, and could not be hidden. Another proverb had it that pregnancy was Nature’s way of telling the world not to trust women with secrets.

The pregnancy gave her something to do. She now had doctor’s appointments and lab appointments and was able to leave the house, unlike before, when she spent all her time indoors. The doctor gave her a note to the county office and she was given coupons for milk and tuna and carrots.

“See, we are already reaping the rewards of an American baby,” she told her husband as she brandished the coupons.

They debated what she should do in case the pains started while he was away on campus. He gave her twenty dollars and told her to keep it some-



where and to call a cab if the pains began while he was not there. She told him that American men held their wives' hands while they had their babies. He smiled and told her to watch less television.

Now he sat on a chair by the labor room and thought about death. He was more worried about the fact that she could die while having the baby than anything else. The school made international students take out an insurance policy for themselves and their spouses that would cover the cost of taking their bodies home in case they died.

He heard his wife's cry and then the cry of the baby and a brief silence and then only the cry of the baby. He walked to the door and waited. The doctor came out and beckoned to him; he was frowning slightly.

"What is wrong, is she dead?" he asked

"Mother and baby are fine. Please come in, we want you to take a look at something."

He walked in, his feet feeling as if his shoes were made of heavy steel. He saw his wife was alive; she looked at him and smiled.

"He is very dark just like you," she said smiling wanly. What had she expected, that the baby would be white, because they lived among many white people?

"It is very unusual, just take a look at this," the doctor said lifting the new baby's upper lip.

He peered into the little mouth; the baby had a full set of teeth. He grabbed the doctor's hands; the nurses and attendants were looking up to him like he held the answer and all he needed do was open his mouth and give them a logical explanation. The father was frightened.

Back in Nigeria, the Elders would have consulted the oracle so they could know what this meant. He did not imagine this kind of thing would happen here. He would have been less shocked if the baby had been a curly blond or was born an albino. He turned to the doctor.

"How did this happen?" he asked.

The doctor gently removed his hands from the father's and assumed a professional manner.

"Otherwise he is a perfect baby and very long for a child, too. You just might have a basketball player in the family."

He looked at the doctor and looked at the surgical knives stained with blood surrounding them and began to weep. His wife too, as if she had been waiting for this cue, began to cry.



“There are options, I mean. We have run a battery of tests and all that, and we still plan to do more but I just thought I should ask you since you people are not from the United States and all, is this common where you come from? We were wondering whether it was cultural. No doubt it is a medical mystery. I have heard that in some parts of the world people are born with only two toes; at the university hospital up the hill, an African woman had this lovely baby with six fingers and six toes. I do not mean to embarrass you; I feel you may be able to offer some kind of explanation.”

He trailed off.

He had hardly heard what the doctor said. His mouth felt dry and he gulped in air, feeling suffocated. The nursing aides began to clean up. One of the nurses was talking to his wife about breast-feeding. It appeared everything had once again returned to normal.

The hospital staff were furtive in their dealings with the husband and wife, they could hear people whispering in the large hallway about the strange African baby. The husband was afraid he told the wife that he had heard on television that the government took away strange babies to secret government laboratories in the desert where they put them in glass boxes like tropical butterflies and studied them. While they were talking a woman with a camera came in. She was smiling.

“Hello mum and dad. Can I take a picture of the baby?”

“Are you from the newspaper?” the woman asked, clutching the baby tightly to her chest.

“No, actually I work for the hospital. We need the baby’s photograph for our records and our web site.”

“Do we have to pay?” the man asked, regaining his voice.

“No, it is absolutely free,” the female photographer said, and repeated the word.

“What is the baby’s name?” she asked.

“He has no name yet,” the husband said. “In our part of Africa you don’t give a new baby a name until the seventh day.”

“How neat,” the female photographer said and began to position her camera. She touched the baby’s cheeks to get a smile. The baby smiled showing his teeth, the photographer’s face reddened and she very nearly dropped the camera.

“Oh my goodness, I never saw oh my goodness,” she said again and began to snap away feverishly, the popping flashbulb brightening the room and temporarily blinding the husband and wife.



“You’ve got a long one there too,” she said as she detached the flashbulb from her camera and started putting it away.

The husband shared the food the hospital provided for the wife. The wife urged him to eat. “You know I am not home and there is no one to make your food.”

The husband urged her to eat, telling her that she needed to eat well in order to be able to breast-feed the baby. The baby began to cry; the woman picked him up and began to breast-feed him.

“Thank God it is producing milk; the nurse told me that for some women it took a couple of days before they began to produce milk.”

“Is he biting you?” the man asked.

“No he is just sucking away, I don’t feel anything. He must be very hungry.”

“Come and take a look,” she said, raising his blanket and pointing at his stomach. Half a dozen fine lines ran from one side of the tiny stomach to the other.

“Remember the doctor said he was going to be a basketball player, see the lines must have come from his curling himself up so tightly in that little space.”

“What are we going to do with that?” the husband said, pointing at the drooping bit of navel from the umbilical cord.

“Don’t worry it will fall off in a couple of weeks.”

“I mean where are we going to bury it when it falls off. Or do you mean you don’t know that in our culture you are buried wherever that bit of navel is buried?”

“Oh yes that, when it falls off I will keep it at the bottom of my box where I keep my clothes and preserve it with camphor. We can take it back with us whenever we are going back home.”

The husband did not respond to this. His head fell back on the hospital chair and his mind went back to his childhood.

He was sitting by his grandmother’s feet and she was telling him a story; it was something that happened in the land of Idunoba. The inhabitants of Idunoba were dying of thirst. They woke up one morning and discovered that a black python had taken over the well which was the community’s only source of water. All the brave hunters who went to the well to kill the python ended up being strangled by it. Then a woman who had been pregnant for seven years began to feel birth pangs. The baby came into the world feet first. When he opened his mouth, he had a complete set of teeth and he used this to bite off his umbilical cord. While everyone in Idunoba watched, he began to grow.



His arms became stout and his feet grew sturdy and he stood at over seven feet and he began to speak and command the villagers to take him to the well. When he got to the well, he used his bare hands to drag out the python and choked it to death. Everyone was happy including the king. He gave the boy his daughter to marry and they had seven brave sons and lived happily ever after.

Now, the wife was shaking the husband and asking him to wake up so he could go home. She had assumed he was sleeping. He rubbed his face, picked up his bag, and left for home.

When he got home he assembled the new crib that he bought for the baby from K-Mart and hung up a balloon on the doorway that said *Congratulations*.

The next morning he went to the hospital to bring the baby and mother back home. The wife had called him that night to tell him that the doctor had confirmed that all the tests were negative and that she was free to go home. The doctor told her to clean the baby's teeth with cotton wool and warm water.

There was a bit of a situation when they were about to leave the hospital. The state law required all newborn babies to be transported in an infant car seat. They did not have a car so they didn't have a car seat. The hospital loaned them one and they took a taxi back home.

The wife was happy on seeing the balloon when they entered their apartment and thanked him. She was happy because he was becoming American in his ways. She put the baby in the crib and he continued the sleep he started from the hospital. The woman told him she was tired and went to bed and slept off. He read for a while and also slept off. The baby woke up twice in the night and was suckled by the wife.

The child continued to grow and when he was a few months old, they bought him a toothbrush. Just because he had teeth they gave him meat to chew on occasion, but he always spat it out.

The hospital sent a social worker to visit them to find out if they needed any assistance. The wife became friendly with the social worker and it was the social worker who told her that here in America, people believed in something called the tooth fairy.

"You'll see when your son grows up and starts school, he will learn about the tooth fairy."



The wife was happy to hear this little piece of news and when the husband came back from school, she shared it with him.

“This means they are not so different from us,” the wife said.

“Yes, they are not so different,” the man agreed.

“I told my mother about it,” the wife said.

“I thought we agreed you were not going to tell her,” he said.

“I could not bear it anymore; I had to tell her.”

“And what did she say?” he asked.

“She said it is a sign of greatness, she said her grandson is going to be a great man.”

“For once I agree with your mother,” the husband said, and looked at the wife with mischief lurking at the corners of his mouth.

They both began to laugh. Their laughter woke up the baby, who was taking a nap, and he began to cry.

