

RITUAL WOMAN

A story by Ugochukwu Kingsley Ani

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For Barkings, for making this possible. Thank you, always . . . and Nony . . .

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Fidelia stood there in the front of the headmistress's office, her eyes misted with tears, her looks dazed and thoroughly confused because of the fact that she was currently at a loss about what to do at that moment. Where had it all gone wrong? she wondered to herself for what felt like the hundredth time that afternoon.

Her only daughter, Bianca, was missing. And not only was the girl the only female child she had, the girl was the only child that God had blessed her with during the duration of her marriage to her husband of fourteen years.

She had rushed down from her law office because of the fact that she had the afternoon off due to the fact that the matter she had in court for that day had been adjourned to another day for the following week and so she had chosen to take the time to pick her daughter up from school so they could be together. It had been quite some time since the last time she and her daughter had the day with each other to gossip, and so she had chosen this day to make it up to the girl.

Now, the girl was nowhere to be found now. There was nobody too that could agree to know her whereabouts since the school time had long elapsed and the girl was supposed to be waiting for her driver to come and pick her up so she could go home and get ready for the private tutorial session she had every Friday evening to brush up on her English and Mathematics.

'Madam, we are still trying the very best we can to look for Bianca,' a voice said, jarring the bereaved woman back to the present time.

Fidelia turned around to look at the headmistress, a fair-skinned woman with a crown of neat Afro curls atop her head. The woman looked flustered and agitated, the long nails of her left fingers digging into the soft flesh of her right palm.

Fidelia nodded, at a loss of words too. She understood that the woman was finding it extremely difficult with the disappearance of her daughter because her

daughter was a girl that was personally acquainted with the headmistress due to the fact that she was one of the stars pupils of the school, having represented the school in many national academic competitions and had won them for the school.

‘I think it is time for us to call my husband and tell him about the fact that our daughter is missing from school and there is still no sign of her,’ Fidelia said wearily, struggling to keep the fear and terror she was feeling at that moment out of her voice and her face. She had to maintain her calm.

‘I will do that for you.’

Fidelia nodded, grateful to the other woman for being the one to break the news to her husband. She knew that the school kept a very comprehensive database of all the parents and guardians of the pupils of the school, so it would be easy for her to be able to reach Nick. And Fidelia felt with a sinking feeling of dread that she had failed her husband again. She had failed him first by giving him a girl, and then she had failed him secondly by not being able to get pregnant again even though it was eleven years since the birth of her daughter. She knew that there were pressure coming at Nick from all sides for him to get married to another woman but he had kept to her.

Oh my God! My daughter!

And it was then that the real enormity of what had happened to her struck her. She let out a wail of sheer anguish, her eyes glued to her watch as her mind churned out the numbers of the hours her daughter had vanished from the school. She was crying now, and she was almost unaware of hands steadying her, of voices coming together and setting up verbal queries as to what had transpired. She was in pain, and she could feel it in her bones that something bad had happened and something worse was about to happen to her only child.

‘It will be all right,’ the headmistress was saying, sounding soothing, like a mother.

Fidelia was shaking her head. 'No, it won't be all right,' she wailed, and then her sobs came harder. She doubled over, her fingers clutching at her breasts as all her maternal instincts rushed out to her daughter, wherever the girl might be at this moment in time. 'My daughter is in trouble.'

'Don't be so negative, Mama Bianca,' another woman chided her. 'Let us all pray that the girl is safe and will be found soon.'

But Fidelia was shaking her head, and then she burst out laughing. It was a near maniacal laughter that jarred the people around her, most of them mothers like she was who had dropped in to pick up their kids and take them home. But then they had stopped what they were doing to be a part of the pain of the woman. To her it was absurd for her to be thinking of her daughter being when she knew that the girl was seriously in trouble. What had happened to her only child transcended child's play—the girl was in serious *danger*.

She knew it deep within her bones. She could *feel* it.

Then her husband arrived, and when the news was relayed to him, he took his wife in his arms and started issuing orders into his phone. Call the police; notify all the other children that were in her class and those who were her friends to know if she had said something to any of them about where she was headed to before she had disappeared; get copies of her pictures so they could be circulated around the neighborhood with great speed; notify the neighborhood vigilante group so they could also help with the search for Bianca. And so on and so forth.

Fidelia had very stunning pictures of her daughter on her iPhone; she had them emailed to the school's mail address and, within moments, they had copies already being circulated around. Nick was by her side, holding her hand and talking speedily into his phone, dispensing information about their child to the powers that be. He had taken control, just like he always did in moments of trouble.

Fidelia felt very grateful that she had him there with her; she had never known what to do except to sit down and wail about the disappearance of her only child when she should have been taking steps to have her daughter found. She was ordinarily someone that was always in charge, but when it came to matters that were emotionally involved, she always became no more than an emotional wreck.

‘We’ve done the very best we can do at the moment,’ Nick said to her as he sat down beside her and held her. ‘I believe that we will find her very soon.’

Fidelia looked up at him with eyes that were filled with despair. ‘What if you’re wrong?’ she asked in a very strangled voice, as if she was terrified of speaking what she felt. ‘What if something bad has happened to her?’

‘Have some faith,’ Nick chided her, like the other woman had done several minutes ago. ‘Maybe she’s gone off somewhere on her own and had fallen asleep. She could be sleeping around here somewhere.’

Even though she really wanted to believe the words her darling husband was saying to her, she felt it deep within her that she was walking on egg shells and it could crack wide open at any time. And what if what her husband was saying was true_ that their daughter had gone off somewhere and had fallen asleep and forgotten that she had to get home and do her homework?

But then, it felt most unlikely, she reasoned. Bianca was never the kind of girl to wander off on her own when she had express instructions to the contrary about what she was expected to do. Bianca had always been a very quiet girl, always content to play with her dolls and read her books_ advanced books that girls of her own age would never understand_ and she would never go off on her own provided you’d given her a very tangible reason as to why she shouldn’t wander off.

Fidelia then decided to give up on her tears and her pessimism and hope for the very best. But when it turned to seven P.M and the girl was still nowhere to be found, real panic set into her. Going home while her husband went off on a search

with some men to find the girl was a very difficult thing to do, but she knew that she had to go home or else she would go crazy. Besides that, she felt that she would only be in the way of the men that were trying to find her daughter for her. For now, she could be nothing to them other than a liability.

When her iPhone rang, she sprang up from her chair to answer it, thinking that perhaps it was her husband calling with news of her daughter. But it turned out to be her younger sister, Ifedinma, who lived in Ikoyi with her husband, calling to get the real details of what had happened.

‘She just disappeared from the face of the earth and nobody seems to have any inkling about where she is currently,’ she wailed through her sniffs. ‘She just vanished, and there was nothing they could do about telling me where she could have gone to. Where can she be? And you know that this is Lagos and there are thieves and kidnappers_’

‘Take it easy, dear,’ Ifedinma interrupted calmly, her voice strong over the phone waves. She had the knack of being always calm and serene in very stressful situations, never breaking up into pieces. ‘It could be kidnappers.’

‘Oh, God forbid!’ Fidelia wailed into the phone. ‘What do they think I have that they will ever want from me? I am not rich.’

‘You are richer than you think you are,’ Ifedinma said calmly. ‘If it is kidnappers that want some kind of ransom, then at least we’ll know where to start from and what to do. But there is also the possibility that . . .’ her voice trailed off into uncertainty.

‘I know what you’re trying to tell me. Maybe she’s in the hands of some ritual killers who intend to use her for something evil.’

And as soon as these words were out of her mouth, Fidelia hung up, the implications of what she had said sinking into her mind. She knew that there was no way she could not consider that possibility; that her only child had fallen into the

hands of some ritual murderers. She had seen it a lot in the news lately, of men kidnapping and killing young boys and girls and then selling their body parts for money rituals. There was even the story of the man at Ikorodu who had grabbed the son of his neighbor and had then hacked her to pieces with a machete. As he was on his way out of the apartment building with the decapitated body in a suitcase, the yard dog had gotten to him, biting and hacking at the suitcase with scary ferocity. That was when the alarm had been sounded and then the people in the street had assembled, seeking to know what was in the bag that had nearly driven the dog mad. And that was the end for the young man; he was currently at the Kirikiri prison awaiting his death sentence.

And what if my only daughter has met the same fate? Fidelia wondered. Then she retrieved her rosary beads and began to pray the decades of the holy rosary, her tears flowing down her cheeks as she implored on the Holy Mother for help.

By the time she was done, she felt some peace within her, and it was as if there was a voice speaking within her, telling her that all would be well soon. She just had to try and believe it within her that the things she thought were hopeless weren't so hopeless like she had thought.

Nick returned late that night, and his eyes were red-rimmed, his expression glassy.

'I am sorry, honey, we couldn't find our daughter,' he told her.

Fidelia said nothing, she did nothing; she just sat there in the living room, the lights on, the TV turned on to Arise TV. She was staring out into space, in shock because she had lost the only thing that mattered more to her than her own life. She wished there had been the opportunity for her to have been there with her daughter, so that if it was murderers that had gotten to her, then she could have negotiated with them to trade her life for her daughter's. But she had been too busy in the office, speaking her British English and attending to foreign clients, earning money for the

firm where she worked as one of the rising stars of the firm, and her daughter had been in danger and she had been oblivious to it.

She sat there throughout the night, her pain like something physical she had to bear, her mind flogging her with guilt. But she was objective enough to know that there was nothing she could do at the moment: there were search parties still combing through the streets of Yaba, looking for Bianca; the police had already been notified; she had already emailed AIT and NTA the details of her daughter while Nick had phoned them and they had agreed to give their daughter's disappearance top priority over every other news they had for the day. She had done all she could do at the moment, so all she had to do was pray.

And pray she did, hard and fast and really furious. She prayed like she had never prayed before, asking God to save her baby, that the girl was all she had. She asked Him to forget that she existed and just save her daughter for her, that she would do anything that was necessary for Him.

Then she went and brushed her teeth, took her bath, did her makeup, and then she got dressed in a long flowing gown that swept the floor. She did it all mechanically, like someone in a state of near catatonia, and then she stepped into the living room.

Nick was seated on a settee, his head in his hands. He looked haggard and frightened, and he frowned when he saw that she was dressed up and ready to go out of the house.

'Honey, what are you doing?' he asked, bewildered.

'I am going to the salon and then I'll go to the prayer meeting at the church that I had told you about last week,' she replied, her smile serene, her face radiant as if from an inner light that had been switched on by the tragedy that had befallen her. 'I had been meaning to go though I never really told you about it.'

‘But honey, our daughter is missing!’ Nick exclaimed. ‘The neighbors are all aware of that and they are all looking for her. What will they think if you just looked like a fashion plate, ready to go out while we should be looking for her?’

She smiled, and the serenity was still maintained in her face. It was as if there was nothing wrong to upset the balance of her life at the moment. ‘I had promised myself two weeks ago that I must attend this crusade, so I must go there. Even though our daughter is missing, there’s nothing I can do to find her for the moment, so I might as well go to the church.’

Then she turned and left the mansion to her car. She was aware of the worried look on her husband’s face as she drove out of the vast, opulent grounds of the mansion, but she felt that this was something she had to do for herself. She had to go and praise the Lord, for it was there in the bible; that you shall praise the Lord in any situation you find yourself in.

Twenty minutes later, she was there at the Life Adoration Prayer Ministries at Bode Thomas Street, Surulere. The place was filled with many people, so there was barely standing room in the church, not to talk of chairs. She joined in the praises and worship songs, and soon, she was so enraptured by the songs that she temporarily forgot about the things that had gone awry in her life.

Before long, the prayers had begun, and even though the Father in charge_ a new visiting priest that had come to Lagos from Anambra State_ had given them the prayer point to focus on, she overlooked it and instead continued to sing to God, tears flowing from her eyes, cascading down her cheeks. She was oblivious to everything else that was happening around her. Then suddenly, the voice of the Reverend Father rang out clearly like bells pealing in the dead of the night.

‘There is a woman here that her child is missing,’ the Reverend said confidently, his voice booming into the microphone.

Fidelia stopped her singing and her eyes flew open. The vast prayer room was now as still and quiet like a graveyard, all ears primed to hear the man of God, for it was obvious to all there that something was going down. Her eyes were focused on the podium too, and the tall man looked ethereal to her, like some being from some higher plane of existence. She was listening to him intently, her heart thumping loudly in her chest.

‘I want that woman to step up here today, for the Lord has heard your cries and He will make an example of you to the unbelievers here,’ the man boomed. ‘For further clarification, that woman here is a lawyer, so come out now!’

In the deadly silence that ensued, Fidelia gingerly stepped up to the man on legs that had turned rubbery all of a sudden. A microphone was passed to her as all watched, and then she was looking at this man, this new Father she’d never seen before. She did not even know what to think of him, but she could feel the coolness of his gaze on her, feel the serenity that oozed off of him.

‘I am a lawyer, and yes, my daughter is missing,’ Fidelia said into the mike.

There were gasps and shakes of heads, and some of the women had even clutched their breasts in commiseration with the tortured woman there on the stage.

‘She disappeared from the school without a trace and up till now, the girl is yet to be found by anybody and nobody seems to know her whereabouts,’ the Father continued, and this time, in the silence that ensued, if a pin had dropped, then that pin would have sounded loud as a bomb and the assemblage would have wished it to oblivion with their hearts.

‘Yes,’ Fidelia said, her eyes glued to the man. There was something about him that was profoundly comforting to her, and he seemed to be giving her a sense of peace. She seemed to forget that she was in the midst of over a thousand other worshippers; it was as if the persons there had fallen off into some great chasm, and there was only she and the Father now.

‘I tell you that your girl did not *just* go missing,’ the Father said, and then he shook his head and laughed. ‘I want to tell you that the Lord will make an example of you, my child. If I may be so brazen to ask, where is your husband? Is he here?’

‘He was at home when I was on my way here to the crusade.’

‘And you know that your husband has been trying the best he can to find the little girl for you because that is the only child you have for him,’ the Father told her confidently, and he was smiling at her, willing her to answer him.

She nodded.

‘Let me tell you that your husband knows where your daughter is.’

There were gasps from the crowd, and someone in the Prayer Warriors’ tent even burst into prayers, speaking in tongues. When the din had subsided, the Father continued.

‘My daughter, you will find your little girl tonight. The Lord will lead you to her. I will not tell you exactly what has happened, or what is going to happen tonight, but the point is that it *will* happen tonight, and you shall be there to witness it with your two eyes. I will pray for you, and then, later on, some of my people will go with you to where you will find your daughter.’

Fidelia was swaying on her feet, and her tears were flowing anew with renewed strength. She felt her body going slack, and she struggled to gain control over herself, but it was proving to be too difficult a task for her. What was it the Reverend Father had said_ that her husband, her darling Nick, knew what had happened to her daughter? To their daughter? How could that be possible?

In a daze, she began to reach for her iPhone, her mind already calling up the key for his number which was on her speed-dial, but the voice of the Reverend halted her fingers.

‘You shall *not* call that man and let him know that the Lord has revealed his secrets, for there is nothing hidden under the sun. The Lord is ever-seeing, ever-present, and He shall show His magnificence to you today so you can believe in him.’

Fidelia was dazed and shocked, her fingers hovering indecisively over her waist, for her phone was tucked securely into the waistband of her gown. She still wanted to defy the man and call Nick, but somehow, something told her resolutely that her fingers were no longer under her control, that if she tried to call him, she couldn’t . . . that she would not even be able to lift her phone. *Something*— a gentle but persistent pressure on her fingers— was stopping her from reaching for that phone.

‘You *cannot* call him,’ the Reverend said, and he was looking at her steadily. She could feel this man in her mind, searching and probing. ‘I know you want to call him, but you cannot do that. The Lord of Hosts will not allow you to.’

And then Fidelia was crying openly now, her long nails raking through her hair, her anguish evident on her face. Some people— men and women— were even crying silent tears in the audience at the suffering they could see on her face. Some were singing praises, and others were praying, thanking God for His miracles.

‘There is a doctor here that just moved to Lekki from Abuja,’ the Reverend continued. ‘His wife is a nurse and she’s now assisting him in his new clinic here in Lagos. I want them to come out now.’

Within moments, a handsome couple was on the stage with the Reverend and Fidelia.

‘You two, along with two people from the congregation, and two members of the Prayer Warriors, shall be at the CMS bus stop at 8 P.M. tonight. There you shall see what the Lord will do. For the rest of the congregation, you shall all go home, sleep, eat, and do whatever it is you want to do. Return here by 10 P.M and you shall see for yourselves the handwork of the Lord.’

And then the Reverend was directing some members of his team to take Fidelity to the Fathers' Quarters where she would stay until the appointed time for her to leave. She sat on a chair, her mind far away, her senses numbed by the horrors of what she was experiencing. Hours passed and she sat there, immobile like some statue cast in bronze, refusing both food and the drink that was offered her by the steward.

The time seemed to fly, and then she was being summoned by one of the members of the Prayer Warriors. It was then that she checked her watch; it was 8 P.M, so she grabbed her car keys and left the house, heading for her car. The Doctor and his wife were already waiting for her, and there was also another man and a woman there with them. They all got into the car, with Fidelity at the wheel_ she had rejected the entreaty of the handsome doctor that he take over the wheel_ and then she drove off, heading for CMS, the bus stop at the Lagos Island where the Reverend had told her to go.

Within twenty minutes they were there, thanks to the scanty road traffic. Fidelity found a spot and parked the car and they all piled out of it. The air was cold, the wind blowing in from the marine nearby, lifting Fidelity's long gown. She shivered and hugged herself, her teeth chattering, her long hair blowing all around her face.

'Can I give you a sweater?' the nurse asked, concerned. You look like you're about to fall to the ground.'

Through the lights of the street, Fidelity smiled at the woman, and her companions all shrugged. She said nothing, her eyes wandering around the vast street, seeking out_ what? What exactly was she looking for here? _ her daughter. She remembered what the Reverend had told her before she had driven off.

'Trust in the Lord,' he had told her in a whisper meant only for her. 'He will lead you to Bianca.'

And she had stared at him in shock, for she knew with high clarity and certainty that she had not told this man the name of her daughter. So, she knew

within her that she had to trust in what he had told her. She stood there leaning against her car while the others were looking at the screen of her iPhone, memorizing the face of the pretty primary school pupil that was smiling up at them from the bright screen of the phone.

Almost an hour passed with nothing happening, and then Fidelia began to feel a long wand of despair sweeping through her. A voice in her head was screaming at her that she would never see her only child again, while another one, smaller and soothing, told her not to worry, that everything would be all right.

'It's getting late,' the doctor said, and his voice sounded shaky, for the air was getting chillier by the minute and they were not suitably dressed to brave the elements.

'Be patient!' Ademola, one of the Prayer Warriors, admonished the man in a calm, yet, firm voice.

Then Fidelia sensed something, her instincts screaming at her to move away from the car. She had always had very good instincts, and she had often trusted in the little voice at the back of her mind to ferry her away from many dangers. If her mind was telling her to get away, then she had to do it.

She turned away, her legs carrying her away from the car. They had parked at the CMS bus stop exactly, and she turned down the pedestrian walkway that had been constructed led towards the Balogun market, with the expressway spread out in the other direction for cars that were heading to Victoria Island and Ikoyi and those that were coming in to the Island and the Mainland.

'Wait; don't leave!' the doctor said.

But Fidelia was moving as if she was hurrying away from the scene of a crime, her legs moving silently but speedily away from them. She could hear them talking excitedly behind her, could hear the thump of their feet hurrying after her, but she didn't stop or had an inkling as to where she was headed to. She headed down the

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