

FICTION

Green Grass Green

Kasimma

What is Nwabu afraid of? Lack? Impoverishment? Loneliness? If only she would pay attention to the indecency of the bleeding sky outside. If only she would pay attention. If only she would *pay*. Outside, the Sky hail torrents of ice and the Earth do nothing but silently take them. She does not even utter a word, Earth, that is. The screams instead come from the aggressive claps of the Sky and of those in her way such as roofs and windows. Could she not see? Nwabu, that is. Can't she see that the forces that be are acting her life right outside her window, asking her to pay, not money, not gold, attention. That is all they ask for their show: *Pay Attention*.

But there she kneels, staring into nothing, her stomach churning as if stones stirred in them, knocking against each other, sounding off like teeth chewing teeth. Everything she ate is still travelling down the pipes, heading to where all flushed things end. Her insides feel scratched as if the mushy mess of food she puked—each vomit a darker shade of the former until a slippery substance as green as ugu leaves followed—scooped up layers of her stomach and gullet on their way out. She wants to call her husband, but she does not want to alarm him.

Her two-year-old daughter tugs at her pink silk skirt so hard that the loose rubber holding the skirt to her waste gives in to the girl's prowess, going south, exposing her chunky buttocks, the glorious colour of steaming moi-moi. Nwabu pulls up her skirt, flushes the toilet, and gargle water so carefully that not even a drop makes it close to her tonsils. She carries her daughter and wipes her tears. Poor little girl. She takes her to the kitchen and gives her two slices of bread coated with chocolate jam. She opens the blue deep freezer, her palm gunning for the bowl of blended tomatoes sitting at the top basket, only to be hit by the pong of the frozen fish lying like carcass in a casket. Carcass they indeed are because they are probably rotten inside, flakes of ice sprinkled around their sandy-coloured scales, smelling like unwashed over-harnessed asses. Nausea hits Nwabu. She snaps the lid shut and runs to the kitchen sink. Nothing comes out. It seems her stomach has nothing left

to disgorge. A big blue fly sings in her ears, sounding like a speeding motorcycle. She slaps her ear. Her head explodes in ache, but she hit the fly. It sprawls on the sink, wriggling for the life of it. She crushes it with her finger and does not stop even after it busts open and smears a dot of the place with its filth.

After two hours of siesta, Nwabu wakes up feeling stronger. Her daughter is still deep in sleep. Nwabu peels out of bed and goes to cook. She makes peppery local rice with smoked and dry fish from the pantry. She eats just a little as if to test her stomach and see if it would misbehave. Nothing happens. She would eat when her husband returns.

For dinner, she feeds her baby oatmeal and fried eggs. Then she put her to bed.

The persistent song in her dream wakes her. The light from her phone brightens the otherwise dark room. Power supply is out. The song of her ringtone drowns out that of the mosquitoes. It is her husband. She picks up.

He calls her babe, asks her if she is asleep—a stupid question considering that if she is asleep, she would not be answering the phone. A stupid question considering that if she sounds sleepy it simply means (to someone with common sense) that she *was* asleep! She mumbles something in the affirmative and yawns. Would she please bring out soup from the fridge and make semo for him; he is so hungry and has not eaten all day; yada-yada-yada. Anger, the kind powerful enough to part the Sea for the children of Israel, floods Nwabu. It circles her head, smoky, yet musty, oozing like the corpses of fish in her freezer.

He calls her babe, asks her if she is sleeping off again. The honk of a horn; the *vum* of a car speeding past; the voices of happy people on the stereo replaces her husband's voice.

He calls her babe, asks her to stay awake and answer him. At this point, Nwabu's head, even if she does not see it, is on blue flames. This flame long licked off her senses and their attending memories, hence her asking her husband to please explain to her how it is that he wakes her up from sleep just so that she can go and make semo for him. Could he please make it make sense to her?

He calls her babe; he asks her if anything is wrong with his asking her to make something for him to eat considering that he is tired and has not eaten all day. Yes! Everything is wrong with it. But that is not what she says. She tells him there is food in the pot and

abandons her phone somewhere, clutching her throbbing head and her aching stomach.

She wakes up to her daughter's shrieks and rushes to the room. Her husband is there. She has no idea when he came back. He leaves just before she enters the room. She gives her daughter water, takes her to the toilet to urinate, and puts her back to sleep. She peeps into her room. Her husband is lying stomach-down on the bed. She assumes he must have eaten. So much for waiting for him to come back before she eats. She thinks she might eat a little again. The kitchen is as clean as she left it. There is no dirty plate in the sink, no grain of rice stuck in the drain, no dried soapy lathers on the sink, no depression in the pot of rice. She returns to the room and rubs her husband's feet. He is not snoring, so he is not sleeping.

A mosquito sings in her ear, and she slaps the hell out of her ear. Her leg itches. A mosquito, as black and as big as a fly, perches on the bright blue wall. She slaps the living nightlight out of it. Deep red blood splotches on the wall. She wonders whose blood it is, but she hopes it is not her daughter's. She taps her husband again and asks him if he would eat. His response is very dismissive. His tone is unkind as if she deserves his cruelty. He whines like a someone who is irretrievably out of their God-bestowed mind. He calls her Nwabuife, asks her where she bought the disgusting effrontery to complain that he woke her from sleep to ask her to make semo for him.

Shock ceases Nwabu and rigidifies her into a statue. Splotches of black smears her vision. The mosquitoes buzz closer to her ears as if to commiserate with her. How dare he call her Nwabuife? Her mouth is filled, not with puke, no, with molten-orange-rage. In her darkness of her vision emerges the shadow of her kneeling mother, her aura dipped like a valley overpowered by mountains of marital abuse. Opposite her mother lay her father on his back, his hands behind his head, as if her mother was not kneeling there. Her mother begged her father to eat. Nwabu always found it ungraciously demeaning and hopelessly inhumane. But her mother always said, "If he is not eating my food, he might be tempted to eat another woman's food. That will not be good for me, for us." So when her father's breakfast and dinner grew cold on the dining table, Nwabu learned to also kneel beside his bed, hands joined clasped as if she was saying Our Lord's Prayer. And when he decided to eat, maybe after a week of incessant pleading, he would say to her, "Your mother is a bad

woman. She is my biggest mistake. She is lucky to have me as a husband because no man would tolerate her. You better not be like her when you go to your husband's house or he will kick you out. Did you hear me, Nwabuife?" She heard him loud and clear. What she also heard was the way her name, Nwabuife, dropped from his mouth like a lump of eba from one's grasp.

Quieted and reinvigorated by these oases of recollection, Nwabu goes to the kitchen and warms the full pot of rice. The hunger in her relocates. She is turning off the lights when she notices her husband's briefcase on the table. She unzips it. Money lay spray in it like leaves in autumn. She cleans it out with the rake of her fingers. She crawls into her daughter's bed.

Nothing is said between her husband and her for the next couple of days. He stops eating at home. Some nights, she lay on her bed, waiting for him to come back, hoping he is not in another woman's house eating rice and drinking vagina juice. She wears her eye mask and faces the wall the moment she hears the gate open, but she checks the time first. She would wait to hear the clicking of pots. All she'd hear is a very deep voice saying, "This. Is CNN." Night after night, this scene repeats itself until it turns to an expired tone, until Nwabu stops leaving him food altogether, washing her pots shinningly clean before going to bed, and threatening her body to go to sleep before he returns.

Weeks after weeks, a deep loathing empties itself into Nwabu's heart like Ow-erre-Ezukala waterfall that leaks water but never fills the land beneath it. Against her wish, she speaks to him, asking for money to refill the gas cylinder. His eyes are like spalls of burning glass, the same fire that consumed her heart in love, the same fire that hellishly spew out of his mouth in a rude, very rude, retort: I don't have money. If he had said those words to only her, she would not feel as bad. But he says them too to their daughter when she asks for bread. He stops buying their daughter things when he comes home at night. Chocolate jam disappears from the table; carton of biscuits turns to trash collector; plastic containers of cereal shine with emptiness. Nwabu loses her appetite, her weight, and her hair. Unable to maintain her mighty shrub of hair any longer, she carries herself to the barber's chair. Her face stays cupped in her hands the whole time the scissors chops her hair and the clipper licks what's left. She dyes her hair gold afterward to assure herself and

deceive everyone else that everything is fine. It all withers after two days and she is back to where she's always been: sad. Food taste bland. Water becomes mere necessity. Depression guzzles her and fills the space it creates with dizziness. Her grip becomes feathery. Her face turns gaunt, her skin, pale. Her eyelids swallow her eyes gulp by gulp every day. She watches her pot cook afraid that the blue flame might die off any minute. She does not allow any food to overcook for one second.

After dropping her daughter off in school—buying her snacks from the money she borrows from her sister—Nwabu decides to make lunch before catching a little nap. But the sight of her near empty pantry cages her like the frozen fish in her blue deep freezer. She is beside herself with shock that love can be so cruel. She sits on the half-empty bag of rice, and, for the first time since the night of the semo-incidence, she cries. Her hands vibrate like a phone. She holds her chest as if to stop it from exploding, bares her teeth like a charging German-Shepherd, squeezes her eyes shut, and weeps. It helped, the crying that is. It helped dispel the grim oil of anger in her heart. She emerges stronger. What in the name of common sense is she doing in this fucking marriage?

As if the forces of the Universe heard her, Thunder claps. Out of the blues, it rains. “It is raining cats and dogs” is an underestimation. What the Sky rains is tiger and wolves of the fighting brotherhood. Lightning slices the Sky and Thunder drums on it. If only Nwabu could pay attention to the show outside. But she sits there, looking inward, staring at nothing. One promise she made to herself before getting married is that she would never become her mother. She would never beg any man to eat her food. If she does the God-almighty-difficult job of cooking, she has done enough. If he decides not to eat, very good. If he decides to eat another woman's food, God bless the woman.

What is Nwabu afraid of? Lack? Impoverishment? Loneliness? But these are what she *has*. She lacks the love of the one person whose love she seeks and, in effect, lives in the illusion of lacking the love of others who genuinely love her. Their love is evergreen, but she does not *see*, does not *feel* loved, because her attention is stuck knocking on a closed door. She *is* impoverished emotionally. She has grown lean begging someone to eat her love and simply love her back. She *is* impoverished financially. Her savings have since depleted from 6 months of pinching from it to feed herself and her daughter. Depression has grown

fat, all thanks to her. She is lonely, isn't she? What then is she afraid of that she does not already have? Why is she looking outward for something that can only come from inward? If only she would pay attention to the indecency of the bleeding sky outside. If only she would pay attention. If only she would pay. If only she *would*.

The graceful scent of sand and water rises in majesty, beats the rain, and sips into the window net, curving its arms around Nwabu, calling her attention to the show outside. She breathes in, smiles slightly, and stands. She walks to her window if only to be closer to this scent.

Outside, the Sky hail torrents of ice and the Earth do nothing but silently take them. She does not even utter a word, Earth, that is. The screams instead come from the aggressive claps of the Sky and of those in her way such as roofs and windows. Could she not see? Nwabu, that is. Can't she see that the forces that be are acting her life right outside her window, asking her to pay, not money, not gold, attention. That is all they ask for their show: *Pay Attention*. She pays. She sees. She sees how she has been the Earth; her husband, the Sky; his abuses, the rain; his family, the roof; his friends, the windows. She sees how she has silently taken his abuses for 5 years; how the voices in her head that fills her with fear all belong to others, not her. He would cause trouble and would be the one to report to his family and his friend, her husband that is. And they would call, screaming as the roofs and windows are doing now, cursing and coercing her to take it. She sees how she parents the abuse she suffers by tolerating it.

Outside, the rain subsides. The pounding on the roofs become mere clatters. Nwabu smiles genuinely for the first time in half a year. This too shall pass. The Sun will shine. The Earth will dry. Without the rain, the Earth will never grow food. The rain keeps the green grass green. The rain seemingly plagues the Earth, but it only makes her stronger, only spurs her on to be her best self. This too shall pass. But first, she must gather herself, gather her things, her child, and walk out that front door: Nwabu, that is.