

Short Story
Vagina Protest

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If anyone asks me what the worst trial of my life has been, I'll answer right away, "my vagina". My friends Smelly Smelly and Shitty Shitty will respond the same way. In our misery-dressed world, the names our parents gave us don't matter anymore. What matters is the tag naughty children place on our vaginas.

They call me Pissy Pissy because of the uncontrollable rush of urine from my bladder. They could as well have called me a fountain of urine, but that's asking too much of the illiterate children of illiterate parents, whose best shot at literacy was sitting under palm trees and listening to make-believe sages dish out proverbs, folktales, and tradition-coated lies. Tell these children or their parents to write, or even spell their names, and they feel you've insulted them.

Smelly Smelly is what they call one of my friends. She can't control her riotous bowel, and relentlessly roams the whole village with shit either gumming her clothes or trailing her footprints – or both. Children shut their nostrils and mothers hide their babies each time she passes by. Idle chatters proclaim that the smell oozing from her body is worse than the stench of a decade-old corpse and may be responsible for the alarming rise in child mortality in Ododa, my village.

Shitty Shitty is the name the children call my best friend. They have done her no favour as her name suggests anything but the gorgeous teenager with tall legs, long hair, smooth dark skin, firm conical breasts and fine stature that she truly is. The name rather suggests the shit that hysterically dribbles down her legs. But, unlike Smelly Smelly, she's scrupulous about her hygiene because she hates flies trailing her, especially those with human faces. With her hair relaxed as if fried with vegetable oil and her skin bleached with Dura soap till it became lightened and soft like overcooked pork, she is ready to take on the world, looking like an apparition of Wacko Jacko.

The three of us didn't cause the hell we now face. Our parents did. They forced us into marriage before we turned 14, not minding whether our bodies were ripe enough to bear the quakes of childbirth, or even the lunacy of lovemaking, especially with husbands whose

only idea of recreation is procreation, or sex, sex and sex. In Ododa, women are never meant to enjoy sex but to endure it. No foreplay but foul play all the way.

Now we're suffering first-hand the folly of such a foul play. Most Ododa people say we're witches and that's why the Great One is punishing us. But I don't mind them. Their skulls are too full of coconut water for them to reason that everything has its own time and its own strength. You don't ask a day-old baby to run, just as you don't ask a toddler to piggyback his mother, even if she is crippled. But our parents and our husbands wouldn't understand this. So, they asked too much of us at 14 or thereabouts, and we're now condemned to a lifetime of servitude. Though young, we're all now pale, grey and frail because of the cargo early marriage has thrust upon our unripe pelvis.

Follow Follow is the only friend I have who doesn't suffer any odd leakage in her body. At 12, she is four years younger than the rest of us. The children call her Follow Follow because of her attachment to us, the leaking sewage tank of Ododa. One child once said the only reason why a normal child like Follow Follow is attached to us is because we've brainwashed her with charms made with the water used in washing our misbehaving private parts. I dragged the child into his mother's hut and, right before her stunned eyes, beat him silly, until he confessed to have only uttered in public what his mother often proclaimed in the shadowy privacy of their hut. Ashamed, the mother, a teen like me, ran away, escaping the battering I had planned for her too because I already knew little children in this village to be only a mirror of their parents. They only think and say what their parents drill into their heads, by design or by accident.

Ododa doesn't have a clue about what to do with the three of us. There've been rumours that we'll all be taken to a faraway land and buried alive or locked up in my hut and burnt. Whatever happens, we are ready. We've suffered enough anguish that we're now one with it. What pains us most is that those who despise us are not strangers but men and women, boys and girls with whom we share similar language and ancestry.

Now, right here, as I sit in my hut rummaging through the busy suburbs of my mind, tears race to my eyes. I peep through the window and see children drumming and dancing as if possessed by drunken spirits – I mean, the spirits of unrepentant alcoholics who, while still alive, always began and ended their day in a beer parlour, even when they couldn't afford to buy the cheapest drink for themselves.

I keep on peeping through my hut's window. Nothing has changed. The rowdy atmosphere outside is in sharp contrast to the silence that has characterised my life since my first shot at labour, a failed attempt that brought this shame upon me. I was a few days shy of 14 then. Memories of that day still fill me with regret over what I should have done. Now I'm determined not to allow Follow Follow to make the same mistake.

"Good afternoon, aunty," a babyish voice echoes. I already recognise it. It's Follow Follow's.

"Come and sit by my side, my dear," I say, dusting my straw bed.

"Take your money," she says, stretching her hand to me while making herself comfortable on the bed. "Alhaji say e nid more yams."

"You be gud girl. Tanks."

Follow Follow helps my friends and me sell our yams in the market. If we go there ourselves, nobody will buy from us because of our condition.

“My aunty, *abeg*¹ read one poem for me sharp, sharp,” she requests, jamming her knuckles. “I nid fade from here before he go see me wit you.”

“Who he be?”

“You know. *Abeg*, hurry aunty!”

“Your husband, you mean *abi*²?” I quiz, trying to make her rethink her forthcoming marriage to my husband.

“He no be my husband, he be your own,” she protests.

“But he go soon be your husband too. Na just a few hours from now. Na tomoro.”

“Aunty, I no want to marry your husband but I have to, so poverty no go kill my parents and my brodas and my sistas. *Abi* you no understand? *Abeg* read poem for me!”

“No poem today, my dear. I go give you something better, something wey go save you from a sad life tomoro.”

“I no get choice, aunty. You know I must marry your *oga*³.”

“You get choice.”

“You no understand, aunty. My parents no get moni. Our farm don become desert. No food to chop. If I marry your husband, things go better for my family.”

But is it true? Is it true that if Follow Follow marries my husband her family’s fortunes will become better? I don’t know. I don’t know if my husband will give her father a rich farmland and cancel his huge debts, as he has pledged. But I know one thing about my husband: he rarely redeems his pledges. I scrutinise Follow Follow’s immature stature and wonder if her imminent marriage to my husband, a man four decades older than she is, is the right thing to do. Can her fragile body endure his child-making stick which is as long as a torch and as hard as an axe? I don’t think so. Follow Follow is too small everywhere: head, breasts, waist, hips, buttocks, stomach, hands, and legs. Shitty Shitty says Follow Follow’s vagina is too small too. And I believe her because Shitty Shitty once caught Follow Follow’s father using his snuff-covered fingers to do disgusting things to Follow Follow. As his crude fingers stung and bled the little girl, he assured her he was only preparing her for the future challenges of motherhood, a favour every good father does for his good daughter.

Follow Follow said she did not believe him. But she was tempted to believe something else the father told her that ungodly evening: that I didn’t want her to marry because the husband-to-be was my husband, and I was jealous of her.

The cruel chants of the naughty children drag us to the window just as I plan to read a poem to my little friend. I see children pelting Shitty Shitty with stones. They trail her, clapping, singing and jeering, as she enters the village square with shame tagged to the hem of her gown. Rage seeps through the pores of my weary body as I see some of the kids pointing at the excreta strolling down her long legs. I count about a dozen adults enjoying a good laugh. The fancy handbag Shitty Shitty is holding reminds me of the beauty queen she could have become had she lived in a different society. The pot of water on her head tells me she’s returning home from a faraway river. The chief has stopped us, the village sewage, from using the only well in the village for fear that we’ll contaminate it with our discharge and kill everybody.

Shitty Shitty lowers the pot to the ground, grabs her scarf from her waist and uses it to wipe the excreta from her legs. For a while, she fixes her gaze on the well and fear grips me. I hope she isn’t about to throw the scarf inside. The whole village will pounce on her and still

her breath. Not that being alive matters to her anyway! Shaking her head like an old woman still mulling over her century-long unpaid bride price, she buries the soiled scarf in her handbag, to my relief.

I look at her eyes. They're already red and full of tears. With her hand, she wipes the tears as they crawl down. The children have already encircled her, dancing and shaking their bums at her, while upping the tempo of their chant. She tries to break away from the circle, but the children won't let her. Feeling more helpless than a stray chick under a heavy downpour, she falls to the ground, crying and begging the Great One to take her life so she can sip the eternal drink of peace at last. But no response comes from above, except from the sleepy rays of the sun, which is looking sympathetically into her teary eyes, as if to say it's sorry for her plight.

Unable to bear the humiliation of my best friend anymore, I hurry to the scene. The circle of snorting children vanishes as the children see me coming. They're scared of me because, unlike my friends, I stop at nothing to catch and knock any kid that mocks me. I don't stop drilling my knuckles into their heads until bumps begin to grow on them. Many parents say I'm harsh on kids because I've never had the privilege of giving birth to a live child. They say I've eaten up all the children who have made it to my womb. Such an accusation doesn't affect me anymore. I leave them to live in their ignorance. But I would be a liar to say I've never contemplated suicide, which seems to be the easy way out of this eternal hell my friends and I face.

Since all the kids have now disappeared, I place my best friend's pot on my head and ask her to come with me to my hut. She signals with a finger for me to wait for a minute. I'm not in doubt over what she needs the minute for. I simply smile at her, and she returns the warmth, while I watch her mask the dry tears on her face with powder she just got from her handbag.

Just after we've entered my hut and sat down on either side of Follow Follow, Smelly Smelly walks in. She's wearing a long gown that covers her feet. Her 16-year-old face looks middle-aged because of the traumas and frowns often burrowing her brows and cheeks. Her dusty bushy hair and the dry saliva on the corners of her mouth both suggest that Smelly Smelly hasn't bathed for weeks. She looks so awful that everyone wants to laugh at her, but no one dares to even smile, for fear that we might annoy her and trigger her recurring mental breakdown.

Meanwhile, Shitty Shitty has a lot to say, so we listen to her. I'm glad to be finally gliding into the dim musings long locked inside her heart. We listen to her talk about the shame she suffers daily from kids and adults alike. She questions her reason for remaining alive when her life is worth less than maggots. I resist the urge to interrupt her speech and tell her how valuable her life is. There'll be enough time to say something later. I let her pour out her sorrow. The latest book I'm reading tells me that people in pain unburden their hearts when they speak, and what counsellors need to do is listen to them clean out their closets of grief. I pretend to be a counsellor. Ears wide open. Mouth shut.

Shitty Shitty rambles on. She decries the loneliness she has felt every night since her husband abandoned her for another woman. Her husband has taken a second wife. Smelly Smelly's husband has done the same. Mine is about to take Follow Follow as his third wife. The second wife, a girl of 13, died during childbirth three months ago. He hasn't made love

to me since the leakage in my vagina over a year ago. He hasn't even slept in the same hut with me, and I don't miss him at all. Instead, I feel relieved from his volcanic breathing that often robbed me of peaceful sleep. What pains me now is how a good part of my teenage life was stolen from me. I won't let the same thing happen to Follow Follow. She deserves a good life, even though she's from a home rattled by the tremors of poverty.

"Sisters, don't let anybody deceive you that you're cursed," I tell Smelly Smelly and Shitty Shitty as soon as her lamentation is over.

I explain to them that what we're experiencing is what *oyibos* – white people – call "pistula", or "fisula", or something like that, in a book I've read. It's caused by obstruction during labour. It's not our fault that we had the obstruction. It could have been avoided. It happened because we had a small pelvis and the baby's head couldn't pass easily.

I notice Shitty Shitty peeping through the window. She can't take her mind off that well. I wish I could enter her mind. I stop talking to win her attention. When her weary eyes meet mine, I smile.

I continue explaining to them that we aren't witches either. We didn't eat our children. They simply died because of undue stress during childbirth. Continuous stress on the pelvis normally stops the flow of blood to some parts of the urine bag, the shit sack, and the vagina, and then injures them. If it's the urine bag that gets affected like in my case, the woman experiences continuous leakage of urine. But if it's the shit sack like in their own case, the woman loses control over her bowel.

"Friends," I feast my eyes on Shitty Shitty and Smelly Smelly, "there's hope for us. Our problem can be solved by doctors in the city."

"Then why haven't you gone to meet them longtime ago?" asks Shitty Shitty, a secondary school dropout like me.

"I just got to know about that from the books a relief worker gave me during his last visit."

"So what are we waiting for now that we know there's a solution?" she queries.

"Money. That's why I want us to bring all our yams and sell them to make money."

"Those books are confusing you, I can see," shoots Shitty Shitty, "I won't take that risk. What if we sell everything, go to the city and realise nothing can be done to cure us?"

"Don't talk like that!" I shoot back.

"Why shouldn't I?" Shitty Shitty retorts. "I'm even tired of this talk about cure. I just want to die and have peace. I won't die in the city where no one knows me. It's better I die here in Ododa. Right inside that well over there. That way everybody will see me and say a few things about me. Negative or positive. I don't care. We can't do anything to better our situation, but we can choose how, when, and where to die."

Pensively, Shitty Shitty looks at her face in the mirror. Tiredness is written all over it – the kind of tiredness you see on the faces of those who have given up on life. Fetching an eye pencil from her handbag, she darkens her eyebrows and leaves the hut without her handbag and pot. Smelly Smelly gets up and runs after her.

Cold air sweeps into my hut, freezing the sensation boiling in my heart. Now placing my hand on Follow Follow's shoulder, I explain to her that if I had had somebody to advise me, I wouldn't have accepted marriage when I did. I was still in secondary school, and my dream of becoming a graduate died with the marriage, but not my dream of becoming a

writer though. With the books I have and my experience, I can still achieve my dream: Pissy Pissy, the writer from Ododa! No! The Nobel Laureate from Ododa!

I look up and see Smelly Smelly walking back in.

“Aunty, I’m scared I’ll end up like Smelly Smelly or Shitty Shitty, or even you, if I marry early,” says Follow Follow in a shivering tone, as Smelly Smelly makes herself comfortable on my bed.

“Then don’t marry early, my dear,” I advise her.

“Who will I run to if my parents disown me afterwards?”

“You can come with us to the city.”

As the conversation intensifies, Smelly Smelly exits the hut to know why a large crowd is gathering around the only well in Ododa. Before long, she returns, crying like one possessed by a legion of demons. I’m now used to her howling each time someone insults her about her condition. I’ve advised her to stay away from the crowd, but her knack for gossip won’t let her. Her curved tongue works at hearsay like a sickle on a field of grain. Somebody must have told her something ugly, and now I must play the role of her mother, a role I’ve played a thousand times before. Rather than asking her what the problem is this time, I simply urge her not to mind her adversaries because, before noon tomorrow, we’ll have left the village for them. But my words have failed to soothe her the way they’ve done in the past. Instead, they’re tightening her brows. What might be wrong this time? I wonder. As if reading my mind, she announces, amidst sobs, that Shitty Shitty has drowned herself.

My best friend has gone. Standing by the window, I struggle to catch a glimpse of the well through the mass of bodies surrounding it, but I fail. Now I know why Shitty Shitty couldn’t take her eyes off that well. Tears start filling my eyes. Vigour is trickling out of my veins. My legs are trembling. Hot liquid is flowing from underneath my wrap. I can’t believe I’ve lost my best friend. I look at Follow Follow. She’s as still as death. The only signs of life on her body are the tears moistening her eyeballs. Smelly Smelly’s grief pierces my ears, then my heart, and then my soul.

After a while, she calms down, and begins staring into the air. I can see exhaustion in her eyes. The same tiredness I saw in Shitty Shitty’s eyes before she left my hut some minutes ago. Hugging Smelly Smelly, I beg her to give life a chance and hold on a little longer. I don’t want to lose the only remaining person in this village that feels what I feel. We tighten our grip around each other’s backs, feeling the pulsation in our breasts, while searching each other’s eyes for strength.

With Shitty Shitty already drowned, I know this is our hardest time. Something must be done. Something must be said at least. But my tongue is glued to my teeth. My voice is lost in the grave silence that fills the hut. More tears crawl down our cheeks, but mere tears are an insult to the memory of Shitty Shitty. She’s lying in the belly of the well so that we may arise and be free.

The hour has come for us to take our place among the living. Pain is in our hearts but in these same hearts sleeps our freedom, which we must awaken now or never. We alone cannot end this chronicle of ridicule. But to wait for someone else is to wait forever in a world where we aren’t even guaranteed tomorrow. We must rise from our putrid pit of silence, where dreams are nightmares, weakness strength, and cowardice bravery.

I tell Smelly Smelly: “For a long time, we’ve been dead to these people, and indeed to ourselves. What has a corpse to fear? Not even death, because she is one with it. So, you see, we’ve got nothing to fear, except ourselves. In our hands is the freedom we seek. It’s either we grab it now or ignore it and be blown away by the whirlwind of regrets.”

Removing my damp wrap and putting on a clean gown, I caress Smelly Smelly’s shoulders, ignoring her self-styled odour which would have made me vomit if there had been any food left in my stomach. And holding her hand, we march to the well, with Follow Follow doing what she’s known for: following us closely. The crowd disperses as we approach the well. But they keep watching from a distance. I still can’t believe my best friend lies buried in the well. I can see her slippers floating on the water.

As I’m about to speak, my marrow starts beating wilder than my pulse. It’s as if everything is against me. Dogs are barking. The whirlwind is whining, lacing my eyes with dust. The freezing evening air is making my bones squeak, and hundreds of eyes are scrutinising us with helpless rage. What keeps me on my feet is that even fear itself seems to be against me too. Fear is afraid of me. So, I befriend courage to nudge me on in this hard time. I want to make a miniskirt-like speech: long enough to cover the essentials but short enough to be attractive. How do I do it?

Right before their bemused eyes, I free myself from the burden of any piece of cloth on my body. Smelly Smelly does the same, throwing her clothes into the well and drawing jeers from the crowd.

“Naked before you like beasts we’ve awoken from the comfort of our dreams to test the misty field of reality,” I roar, stark naked, suppressing the fear hundreds of searching eyes now stir within me. “We are not aliens. We breathe, feel pain, and have dreams just like you.”

Gazing at the well, I explode: “My friend, the one you call Shitty Shitty, has not died in vain. In death, she has proved that a miserable life is not worth living. Many women here today are living in misery, even though they may not admit it. Many of you were forced or deceived into a marriage that’s worse than life imprisonment. Shitty Shitty has shown us the way to freedom today. I don’t mean we should commit suicide. No! She has challenged us to come together and end our misery as women. Ododa is still the way *oyibos* met it 100 years ago. While other villages have changed, we have refused change.”

An explosive sound from Smelly Smelly shifts my gaze to her pathetic frame. Her bowel has broken loose, and excreta now crawl down her legs. Surprisingly, it hasn’t attracted any laughter or jeers from the crowd. I can see sympathy in their eyes instead. I’m glad the speech is melting icy hearts.

Looking into my eyes, Follow Follow steps forward. I wonder what she sees in them. I hope she sees the glitter. My tiny eyes still glitter in defiance of rejection, poverty and dejection. I believe she has seen the glitter. That’s why she has peeled off all her clothes too and is now using them to clean up Smelly Smelly. Her action energises the air with a volcanic round of applause, first from the eldest woman in the village and then from Follow Follow’s mother. I notice anguish on the face of Follow Follow’s father, but then, gradually, a false display of contrition nudges the anguish away as his eyes greet mine.

Seeing many other women applauding my little friend, more courage sneaks into me through the pores of my frail body, and I continue, louder and firmer: “Don’t wait until what

has happened to us happens to you or your children before you fight it. It's only a fool that tests the depth of the river with both feet. It's the calm water that drowns a person. One of us just got drowned. We can't afford the luxury of calmness anymore. We shouldn't bother about the consequences of our speaking out. When the hen is drunk, it doesn't care about the hawk."

I pause and listen to birds sing sorrowfully into my ears from the withered tree near the well as if to sympathise for the death that probably awaits me after this speech which has enraged our elders. Perhaps it's even my stark nakedness that has infuriated the elders the most because our culture expects women to cover every part of their bodies, except the face, whenever they're in public. But here I am stark naked, a protesting vagina. Fearing nothing anymore, I fix my eyes on the birds, returning their dirge with indifference, as my fate I'm ready to accept.

With this resolve, I challenge every woman worthy of the name to bare her entire body as a sign of respect for our deceased sister and as a way of denouncing the forced marriage of our underage sisters and daughters.

"Our mothers," I shrill, "if you make this move, the entire village will celebrate you as household names whenever the story of this day is told. And my fellow teenage girls of today, if you join us, you'll have the privilege of telling this story to your children and children's children, and they'll hail you as they sit by you listening to your glorious tale."

A sudden hush envelops the crowd. There are many Shitty Shitties in our village, I've always known. Rather than speak out, they choose to suffer in silence and soothe their souls with the chirping of the crickets of self-pity. This is their opportunity to smash those crickets, and I'm glad they're taking it. Women, young and old, in their hundreds, shed their clothes one after the other. Even some of those kids who had mocked Shitty Shitty are now standing naked. Shock, or perhaps disgust, or both, can be seen on the faces of the village elders, as they make their way out of the village square through a crowd of mainly naked women and children. Watching all of them walk away led by my husband, I become convinced that those who dare to conquer their fears can indeed turn their worst trials into their best weapons.

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NOTES

¹ In Nigerian pidgin, "*abeg*" means "I beg of you" or "please".

² "*Abi*" means "right?" or "isn't it?"

³ "*Oga*", meaning "boss", is also used for "husband", as in this dialogue.