

# **RITUAL WOMAN**

A story by Ugochukwu Kingsley Ani

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

## RITUAL WOMAN

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 Fidelia 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 Fidelia 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. Fidelia 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 Fidelia'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, Fidelia 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

stairs, and then she was in the main street where the sellers usually displayed their wares along the way to Balogun.

*What? What? What? What now?*

The thoughts were coming at her in a rush, filling her mind. Tears had clouded her vision, and she swiped at them angrily, her hair falling into her face. Then she seemed to sense something; there was a change in the atmosphere, a subtle shift in the psychic balance of the place. It was something many people would never have noticed, but Fidelia had always had an extraordinary sense of awareness that made her *aware* of things that other people took for granted.

She looked around, her eyes seeking through the semi-darkness. And that was when she saw her; she saw her daughter coming towards her, though the girl had not seen her and probably would not see her because she had her attention focused on the ice cream cone she was licking merrily. The girl was wearing a loose red gown that hung down to the ground, and, beside her, walking slowly and holding her hand, was *Nick*. He looked preoccupied, not attentive to the girl beside him, as if his mind was furiously preoccupied with some very important decision that needed urgent attention. His lips were compressed in a grim line, and he looked totally different from the man Fidelia knew and loved.

Fidelia was now crying, her palms covering her mouth. The other persons with her had come up behind her, and they all stood, watching the man and the girl that were wearing the exact same shade of blood red that reached down to the ground. They both looked like they were going to some blood sacrifice.

‘Bianca!’ Fidelia called.

Bianca stopped and looked, and then her eyes widened with recognition as she saw her mother. ‘Mother!’ she called, and then she let go of her father and rushed to her mother. She hugged Fidelia, her face pressed into the perfumed folds of her

mother's gown. 'Daddy told me you had gone away, that we are going somewhere too.'

Fidelia turned wide eyes of shock to her husband, and there he stood, stupefied, as if petrified by some invisible force. His mouth hung open, for he had never expected to see his wife here. Not here. . . never here.

'Fidelia . . .'

Fidelia stood there frozen with shock, unaware that her daughter was talking excitedly. The girl was saying that her daddy had told her to come out early after class and go and wait for him at the bus stop, that there was somewhere special they had to go, just the two of them.

Fidelia was no fool; she knew exactly where *they* were going. Her husband was going to use her daughter for some money rituals.

And then there was a babble of voices. She was dimly aware that her husband was talking, and that her companions were also all talking. Then she heard the sniffles that were coming from her husband, but she was lost, as she folded up like a deflated balloon and crumpled to the ground in a faint.

When she came to, she was aware of voices talking, of someone gently applying pressure on her forehead. She knew that she was in a car, and that the car was in swift motion, purring silently along the roads. Soon, they were on the grounds of the church, and she was being assisted down from the car. They were all heading into the church, and she was still crying, with the wife of the doctor holding her and talking soothingly to her. She could not even see her husband, but she was aware now of her daughter holding her by the side and looking bewildered at what was going on.

They entered, and to Fidelia's shock, the church was full to bursting point, with the entire pews occupied. There were many people standing, some squeezed into tight corners, all eyes turned to the doors of the huge church. When they entered, screams arose, and the people were all getting to their feet, clapping and screaming and calling

out names of praises to God for what He had done. It was then that she noticed her husband walking behind her, looking stunned and docile, as if something had sapped all his energy and left him empty and without life.

It was only later that she would learn that from the moment the Prayer Warriors had surrounded him, he had suddenly gone slack. He had been unable to utter a single syllable or to do anything, while they had led him like some zombie into Fidelia's car. Throughout the drive to the church, he had sat there in the car with them like someone in a trance, unable to say anything.

When the people started to scream, Fidelia held her daughter tighter to her side, her eyes lifting to the huge mounted clock. It was 10 P.M, and then she knew that these people had all assembled here tonight because of her.

'Here they come,' the Reverend Ebube Chukwu said through the microphone, and the people screamed harder. 'I told you that God has His plans, that this little girl here will return and you will witness it.'

Fidelia and all those with her had all gotten to the altar, and she looked at the Father and the man smiled at her. She felt some knowledge infuse into her: this man had known from the very moment she had seen her daughter there with her father, right before she swooned into a dead faint. That was why the man had insisted that the nurse and her doctor husband accompany them on their bizarre errand.

'Welcome, my daughter,' he told her in an undertone, and then he smiled and held out his hand to Bianca.

At the very moment the girl's fingers connected with his, Nick was jarred back into the present. The look of torpor fled from his face so fast, there was no expression left to cover up the ensuing utter blankness that suffused his face. He looked around, seeking his bearings, and then he caught sight of the crowd, along with the Reverend and his wife. His countenance changed, moving from the point of

bewilderment, to sheer, clear comprehension of the soup he was in, to utter and total terror at the prospect of having to face his wife and the entire assemblage down.

‘No!’ he shrieked, shrinking back from the other powerful man. He looked mad, his eyes bulging from his face, sweat trickling down his forehead.

‘Yes, my son; it is over for you,’ Reverend Ebube said, speaking loudly into the mic for the sake of the congregation. ‘Tell us\_ the people of God\_ what you wanted to do. Do not try to lie to us, for they all already know the story, and the angels of heaven are waiting for you to lie or make a wrong move so they can strike you down.’

Bested at his own game, shamed and terrified, Nick broke into tears. Loud, heart-wrenching sobs rose from him, and he even covered his face with the back of his left hand so the people there wouldn’t look at his face and see the disgrace he was facing. A microphone was thrust into his hand.

‘I command you to tell us everything!’ the Reverend ordered, his voice like a crack of thunder through a dark night.

‘I was a poor young man, trying to be the best I could be,’ the broken man began through his sobs, though he was able to maintain coherence. ‘My friends were all richer than I was, and I wanted to be like them; to drive the flashy cars they drove and eat the best foods and have sex with the most beautiful women around. That was why I told my friend Stephen to help me become rich. I had wanted to be like him, so that was how I joined their club. I never knew that I would use my own father for rituals so I could be rich.’

Fidelia felt an icy chill descend into the pit of her stomach. So, all the money she had been spending over the years was blood money, gotten because her husband’s ‘club’ had used the man for rituals so he could become one of the happening men in the town. And it was obvious too now that her husband had been going to use their daughter for rituals too.

‘They had told me that they would take him, but I had said no,’ Nick continued, his voice teary. ‘Then they had told me that the very moment I had stepped into their sanctuary, there was no going back. The choice had been stripped from me and should I refuse to use my father, then they would still get to him and also kill me afterwards. You see, they are a very powerful occult group.’

Cries and shouts of incredulity rose from the crowd, but the Reverend raised his hand for silence and the din subsided.

‘I became rich overnight,’ Nick continued. ‘After that fateful night, I received a call from home, with my kid brother telling me that our father had died, that he had been bleeding heavily through his mouth. I had killed my father without meaning to do so. That very night, as I lay on my bed crying, there appeared before me a huge coffin that was open, and there was money in it, money that was so big and in so many different currencies, more money than I had ever seen in my whole life before. I am a rich man, but it came at a great price. When I got married, my wife had her first miscarriage.

‘Even I thought that there was nothing to it except the issue of her genetics, but our Dibia appeared to me the evening of my wife’s miscarriage while I was in my home office and told me that he had been responsible for it, that the goddess we worshipped was in need of my offerings. He told me that I would have to be making offerings to them every year. I would go, sleep with the runs-girls from LASU and UNILAG, and then pay them huge amounts of money. What they never knew was that I had sacrificed their first two children to the goddess; they would have two miscarriages whenever they got pregnant. Then I also started to sleep with guys, penetrating them and paying them huge sums of cash, while at the same time, taking away their future wealth.’

The assemblage was now screaming, some of them calling on the blood of Jesus, some shaking their heads. Some young women were even crying and holding

on to each other as they listened to the horror story that was unfolding before them. The Reverend was nodding, displaying no emotion, his face calm and serene.

‘I was rich, but I had no peace,’ Nick continued, and this time, he was now crying. ‘Then the goddess became more demanding, asking for more sacrifices. I had to go to my fellow brothers for help, but they each had their own stories. Tobenna had sacrificed his first son, his mother, his first wife and her children\_ all to the goddess. Each of my brothers had something to give, and if you refuse to give, then the goddess would take it by force and then tax you double for it. If you don’t obey, you die, along with the entire members of your family. Then your wealth will revert back to the goddess.’

‘Ewooooo!’ one plump woman whose arms were a quivering mass of flesh screeched out from the front pew.

‘The goddess asked for my wife. I sent several accidents her way when she was out driving or travelling, but they all failed to get her. Once, when she was heading down to Onitsha to see her parents, she went by commercial transport. I fired off our *mkeponani*\_ our spiritual bomb\_ to the car. There was a severe head-on collision between her bus and a trailer along the Delta-Benin road. Everybody in the two cars died but my wife survived without a scratch on her body. She came back to Lagos looking as if she had visited a health spa, looking better than when she had left for her home.

‘The goddess was very happy for the blood that had been spilled from the accident, but she was furious that the ultimate sacrifice to her had returned unharmed. She had to have Fidelia, there was no two ways about it. But then, everything I tried to do to her either went to someone else or bounced off her as if it was nothing. Once, I had a meeting with the Brotherhood about her, about how to tackle her, and, to say the truth, we were all scared of her. Our best shots at her meant nothing to her, and she was never even aware of what was going on spiritually around her.’

‘And that is the awesome power of the Almighty God we serve,’ the Reverend broke in, eliciting bouts of applause from the congregation. ‘She serves the Living God and not anything else.’

‘We had to leave her alone, for she was proving to be too strong for us,’ Nick said, and this time, he gave his wife a terrified glance, as if she was his nemesis come to life. ‘I had to continue with the blood sacrifices, and each time, I waited for the goddess to tell me to try again on my wife. It never happened. When Fidelia gave birth to our daughter, the goddess appeared to me personally. In my entire life I have never seen such a being before. There I was, on my bed, while she appeared to me in a flash of dazzling light, looking so unbelievably beautiful, more than anything else I had ever seen before. Her hair hung down to her feet which were encased in gold sandals, a black cloud about and behind her, covering her breasts partially. I wanted her more than I ever wanted another woman. She congratulated me on the birth of my daughter, and then she had sex with me. It was better than anything I had ever had before, and then she spoke to me for some time and then vanished from my room.

‘When I told the Brotherhood what had happened, they began to respect me more because the goddess almost *never* appears to any of her followers. Our Dibia told me that even he had never seen her physically, that I must be really special to her. My spiritual powers grew to unbelievable proportions, and I could do anything; I could turn into any animal I wanted to be; I could see anything that was happening anywhere and with anybody at any point in time; I could cause thunderstorms and send down the rain from the skies; I could kill by merely wishing you dead . . . I was loaded with power.

‘I initiated many people into the Brotherhood, young men that were in need of money and power. It was so easy. Sometimes all I had to do was to have sex with them, and the moment my sperm went into them, they became members of the



Brotherhood. I would then tell them, and refusal to join meant instant death for the man, or madness, or a life of utter poverty. They just had to join. And now, the goddess asked for the blood of my daughter. I never thought it would happen; I had thought that since they had tried to get my wife and had failed to do so, that they would forget about my wife and her own, meaning, our daughter.

‘I begged her to allow me bring her the blood of as many people as she wanted, but she told me plainly\_ she appeared before me once again\_ that she would settle for nothing less than Bianca. And if I fail to do her bidding, then there would be dire consequences. I have seen what she has done to some members of the Brotherhood that had defied her wishes; they were destroyed totally.

‘So, I had to tow the line. I wept for days, but I knew that there was no other option.’

‘There is *always* an option,’ Reverend Ebube said, his voice ringing out clearly like bells, and the people began to scream and to clap for him, calling out praises and singing hymns. Then he raised his hand again, and a big hush descended on the crowd once again.

‘I have always been very close to my daughter,’ Nick continued, and there was a sad smile tugging at the corners of his mouth as he remembered the past times. It was as if he was talking to himself now, remembering the past in the wall of memories and reeling them off to his own self, not to an audience. ‘It was very easy for me to tell her what I wanted and to get her away from her school. Tonight was the night we had planned to kill her, and everything I had told my wife about making efforts to find Bianca was all a hoax. I knew where the girl was all along. She was to die tonight at the stroke of midnight; we were to bury her alive, all to the glory of Karashika, our goddess\_ the Queen of Darkness. My daughter was to have been the ultimate sacrifice I had to give to Karashika for the wealth she had given to me, and then I would have to start impregnating other women. Once they gave birth to my children, Karashika

would take them as blood sacrifices on their first birthday. I have already lined up four young women that would sire children for me, and they would have done it because of the money I was willing to be giving to them and their families.

‘Because of their greed, they have already agreed to become the mothers of my children, thinking that I will end up marrying them. Nigerian women love money more than they love their own lives, so even if I want hundred women to be giving me the children from my seed, I would have gotten them without blinking twice. It was all worked out already. If my wife had been getting pregnant, then I would have had to be using her pregnancies to further my wealth.

‘What happened as I was going with the girl to the venue, I can never tell. All of a sudden, I saw my wife, and she looked as if there were other persons dressed in white with her; that she was not alone. And then I can’t remember all what happened again, except that I suddenly had my eyes wiped and here I was, with all these people looking at me. I knew then that the game was up. A voice told me that it was over.’

‘The Lord arrested you,’ the Reverend said.

Fidelia turned around and stumbled from the church, heading for the Fathers’ Quarters, her tears blinding her. She was dimly aware of people touching her and clapping her shoulders, many of them telling her that she was strong in the Lord. It was all over now, she thought. Her daughter was with her now, safe and sound, without injuries; she had not even lost her life. The Lord had done it for her; He had shown her that truly, she had been serving a living God and not a dead god.

He was great.

And, how had she been living with a blood murderer and had absolutely no idea of it? How could her husband have been so evil, causing accidents and deaths for so many people just so that he could be rich?

She thought of all the money she had been spending, of how she had access to everything she needed that money could buy\_ all she ever had to do was to tell her husband what she wanted, and it was hers. She never had to sweat for anything ever.

And it had all come at *that* prize: ritual deaths so the money could be flowing and their status could be maintained. Her husband had been having sex with other men, young guys who had their futures stripped away from them simply because they had been desperately in need of money and had spread their ass cheeks for Nick to insert his penis into and then grab away their futures. Or else turn them into the members of his club so they could be making blood sacrifices to the goddess too.

Oh God.

Fidelia could never forget what had happened to her daughter, neither could she get it off her mind that her husband was a ritualist, one of those men that engaged in blood money rituals, and that he had tried severally over the years to kill her without success.

The Reverend had counseled her to forgive her husband, that the Devil was powerful, but that the Lord was stronger; that He had used her to make His mark and have many people see the light. And in her heart she knew that there was no way for her *not* to forgive him; the point was that even though he had nearly destroyed her and his actions had left her feeling so horrified and so shocked that she never knew if she could believe in the innocence of humans ever again, she knew that she could not bear grudges against him.

He was her husband, and her vows during the day of her marriage, made before God and men, was that she had married him for better or for worse. So she made the decision to stick with him, believing that all would be well.

She hoped in her heart that it would, and believed in the Heavens that it would be so. She wouldn't want anything to come in again to destroy her life for her. For she

had already suffered more than enough for her life, and there was nothing that could be done to her now that had not been done already. It was that simple, and that was the truth of the matter for her.

**OTHER BOOKS BY UGOCHUKWU KINGSLEY ANI**

LOVE THE ANGEL  
TRIAL OF ANGELS  
THE WEDDED WHORE  
SHADOWS OF EARTH (AN ANTHOLOGY)

AFFAIR WITH THE DANCER (AKA BEHIND CLOSED DOORS)

All of them are available where books are sold, at all your favorite retailers.

## **The Wedded Whore**

*The Wedded Whore* is the erotic saga from Nigerian author, Ugochukwu Kingsley Ani, which was published in 2015. A compelling, heart-twisting story, it is the devastating story of a stunning singer who had been trapped in the shadows of sex clubs during her struggles as an orphaned young teenager, and now, when she had risen to stardom, a man from her past, a billionaire extraordinaire, is here to claim her and everything she owned: from her body, to her twin kids, to her heart, and ultimately, the keys to her soul. And her own ultimate struggles with the demons of her heart, to escape the awful shadows cast on her by her past, and the mysterious, magical man in her life.

Read or for an excerpt of *The Wedded Whore*.

## PROLOGUE

The room was incredibly vast and outrageously packed with men. On a raised dais were live band players, and a girl was singing. Obinna had his back to the dais but he was strongly aware of the pop song that was being sung by the most sonorous voice he'd ever heard. The voice was a very feminine voice that had the tunes right on, and the entire patrons and the women of the crowded bar were all nodding their heads to the sound of the voice.

The singing stopped abruptly. And then the music changed, from the upbeat sounds that were being belted out by the sonorous voice to an exotic Eastern beat that was seductive. The lights had dimmed. Simultaneously, all the men held their breath. Astonished, Obinna glanced around wildly so he could understand why the men were acting so strangely, and when his eyes fell on the girl who'd emerged as if conjured up from a puff of smoke, he understood the reason for the instantaneous enchantment.

She stood there, her back turned to the room, her body draped from neck to toes in a veil of shiny tulle. There were jewels ringed on her arms, so long they almost formed a percussion band; there was a snake bracelet draped around her biceps, and she looked like something that had been conjured up from a dream. The veil covered her, and there was the sight of a long, glorious body hidden in the material she'd covered herself with. Her head was tilted back, and there was her hips moving and undulating in a slow, seductive rhythm that was as enchanting as it was exoteric.

It was like watching a very long snake move languidly through the room, and she could move; she seemed to flow, from one move to the other, and it was as if she

was oblivious to the people in the room. There was a mystery to her moves, as if she was performing a very slow, very sexy ritual only she was privy to.

She turned, and the light played on the jewels that were entwined in her long, glorious hair; it played on the heavy kohl that lined her eyes, and her body seemed to shimmer with reflected light in the semi-dark room. She was wonderfully tall, fair-complexioned; with full breasts that strained against the thin material of her dress, with the tulle veils straining against the luscious body that had been so carefully covered, and yet so artfully revealed; deliciously long legs that seemed endless, but it was her chiseled face that drew the most attention. It drew the eyes, and held it, causing uneasiness and even a shiver of shock to pass through the beholder of such beauty.

Her chiseled face was framed in long raven black hair that was like black satin against her fair complexion, a very straight, narrow nose, pouty, provocative lips that were outlined in a slash of red and high cheekbones that accentuated her stunning facial bone structure. She was astonishingly beautiful, and she seemed magical, like a sea nymph or a sylph that had come to the earth to wreck havoc on the male folk. Hers was the type of beauty that needed no physical enhancements for her maintain it

Mesmerized, Obinna leaned forward. ‘Wow!’ he exclaimed.

Seemingly oblivious to the shock she’d caused in the room, she continued to move, her bones twisting and turning with a languid flexibility that seemed a vision of its own. Then the first veil came down, and if a pin had dropped in the room, it would have sounded like a bomb\_ the room was so still and silent. The light-skinned body was revealed just a bit, and her bones were delicate, and beautiful, and there was a flawless perfection to the body that made her ravishing. Then came the second veil, and there was the red velvet gown that clung to the perfect body like a second skin; the outline of the perfect body was now visible, and when the final veil came down to her feet, the lights played on her.



She looked dazzling.

And she turned and twisted, still almost seemingly oblivious to the crowd, and the spectators were twisting in their chairs, all eyes straining to see her every move, her every body language. She looked like a sea goddess dancing to the tunes of some musical number, a tribute from her worshippers.

The girl suddenly stopped and swayed slightly on her feet as though drunk, and then she stood stock still. The men applauded, all of them drawn and entangled in her web of allure and seduction. Oblivious to the thunderous applause, the girl shook her beautiful head this way and that to the steady beat of the music while her long black hair swirled round her face like a cloud.

‘Wow!’ Obinna exclaimed to his companion, Richard, as they all watched this dancing flame of fire and epitome of beauty as she worked her art with a sexy grace that held the eyes unblinkingly to her face. ‘That girl is marvelous and great. Look at her! Just look at her!’

Richard nodded, his eye still glued to the dais. ‘Yeah. I know how marvelous she really is. She’s a singer, an agile dancer, and I hear that sometimes, though rarely, she doubles as a whore in order to earn some extra cash for herself. I really do not even know why a girl as beautiful as she is should stay here, performing a striptease for a bunch of leering men when she could go and be a model or a singer.’

The girl glanced around wildly, as though lost, or as though she had forgotten her surroundings, but to Obinna, she looked as though she were testing the air for a scent of prey she could pounce on. Her luminous eyes scanned the dense crowd of men, hovering over the man seated next to Obinna, and then rested on him with a mesmerizing intensity that made him gasp. She held him in her gaze, and to him it was like being stared down by a huge animal of prey which had come on down to devour him. And her fingers moved across her face, her lips parted, and the smile that was

revealed flashed blindingly white against the red paint of her lips. But never for once did her gaze waver from his face.

She looked at him and he looked at her; or rather, he was trapped in her gaze while she held him mesmerized in her grasp. It seemed as if the very universe had shifted, that this stunningly beautiful seductive dancer was the only thing that was now visible in his universe. The shock of her gaze held him entranced, and though she was still making her exotic dance moves with the fluidity of a snake, she seemed not to be moving of her own voluntary free will, that her body was controlling itself independently of her will.

That was when she took off her red velvet gown, or rather, the gown seemed to slip from her at some silent command from her, and she stood before the spell-bound audience dressed now in nothing but a red bra and a small red wrap that covered her from waist and then on past her buttocks. There was a collective gasp from the appreciative audience, for she had the kind of shape that would tempt even a Buddhist monk into giving up his vows and taking her right there and then.

There was the luscious curve of her hips, the type some women would kill for, and there was the curve of her full, firm, high breasts that stood out on her chest like sirens that beckoned for some attention. With the black hair, the stunning face and the bone structure, and the killer shape she had under the nothing thing she wore, she was the physical embodiment of every straight man's wet dream.

Totally unaccustomed to such intense stares, and such stunning, glorious beauty, with the accompanying performance and the snaky feel of it, Obinna stood up and headed for the door because her gaze had shocked him and had his heart thumping. Unfortunately, he couldn't seem to get out fast enough; his progress was painfully slow, and he could hear the cheers of the men as they screamed their encouragement at the girl\_ it seemed as though she'd come to the end of her shock act.

And then finally, he emerged on the wide corridor, and he heaved a sigh of relief. He had really enjoyed himself here at the Happy Day club which was surprising because it was situated at Ajegunle, one of the slums of Lagos State. And the only reason for that was because of the performance of this girl. Whoever the hell she was, she had the looks, she had the power and the magnetism, and she had the sensuality to trap any man she sunk her clutches into to do anything she wanted him to do for her.

He was breathing heavily, and he knew that the loud palpitation of his heart was due to the fact that the stunning dancer had worked some sort of invisible charm on him to make him lose half his senses and have him thinking about the dark rim of her almond-shaped eyes, and the curve of those kissable red lips, and the swell of that killer shape she had below her flat midriff which had given him an erection the very moment he'd laid his eyes on them.

Running his fingers through his blunt-cut hair, he heaved a big sigh as he thought to himself what a blessing it would be for him to flee from the sin this young exotic dancer was trying to lead him into and run back to his parents' house so he could enjoy a few days of quiet before he packed up his things and left the country for the continuation of his studies.

He turned, and then he felt his muscles freeze into rigidity as a shudder ran through him and the ice was dropped into his bowels. God, there was no escaping the sin that oozed from this place like the pus from a festering wound.

Leaning against the wall, smiling and staring at him with her mesmerizing, luminous eyes, was the girl. Her eyes seemed hard and very cold as she trapped him in her gaze once again.

'Hello, sugar,' she said. Her voice was low, and very sweet, like chocolate, and there was a glint in her eyes. She walked towards him with a measured sway of her

provocatively curvy hips. ‘See anything you like, my dear?’ she asked. She was smiling at him again, knowing that she had him in her grasp.

He was staring at her. There was something about her that was totally seductive, and could transfix any man with desire. Scowling with frustration at the welcome prospect of his body’s reaction to her, which he so did *not* wish to act upon, he forced a smile. She smiled right back, and he was immediately done in. ‘How much?’ he asked her.

‘For a man with a purse as deep as yours, I think 5000 NGN per hour will suffice as a reasonable price.’

‘I’ll pay you 8.’

Adamma stifled a gasp and then she spread her rosy lips in a smile of silent sexual victory over him. She had not spent two years in this nightclub without detecting the signs and strange aura of power and sureness of their superior status that emanated from men of blue blood who dabbled effortlessly in wealth.

As she had performed her on the stage\_ for her singing and dancing was her art\_ her hunter’s instincts had switched on of their own volition, and she’d pandered to it by scanning the dense crowd of men that worshipped at the altar of her beauty. And then there he was, standing out from the others like a wild rose in a field of plain white daisies. There was something that was completely innocent and enchanting about him, and then there was the wealth that he stank of; he was *the* perfect prey.

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## Read on for a sneak preview at *Affair with the Dancer*

*Affair with the Dancer*, is the heartbreaking, spellbinding, staggering saga of two men, trapped in the taboos imposed by their culture. Beaten, held down by the chains of the wealth he had inherited from his father, Henry Johnson wanted nothing more than to be freed from the clutches of the Society, to soar high and fall in love with the men that came his way. And then Phoenix came in, beautiful, dazzling, the embodiment of all that the Society hated\_ someone that chained Henry down with bonds stronger than iron bonds. . . someone that would prove to be his fatal attraction, like the beautiful flash of lightening that dazzles before it destroys. . .

The blood saga from Ugochukwu Kingsley Ani

A tale of a dysfunctional family that was the darling of the public but rotten  
inside . . .

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Intrigue . . . suspense . . . sex . . . murder . . .

Two men . . .

One love affair . . .

Secrets to be kept to the grave . . .

**Read on!**

## PROLOGUE

There are times when, upon the occurrence of a certain event, time itself will seem to stand still; it would seem to be suspended above the specter of space. That is the feeling I have in the pit of my stomach at that moment when I watched the life leave the body of a man, when the life seemed to seep from him. It was a big moment and I thought in mind: Oh my God, Phoenix what have you done?

And there was the guy himself, standing still and erect, and he looked beautiful; in the flash of the light the guy was a stunning beauty, and the Angel of death itself. In the stillness of the night Phoenix seemed to be the very embodiment of the things that was scary about the night. He was a murderer, one without a soul, and he had killed someone who loved him dearly. It was a man who had loved him enough to think to die for him. But the society would not have understood that kind of love, that love which existed between two men, one that may be pure and yet misunderstood in every way.

Phoenix, you are a murderer. I know what you did, and I think I will tell on you. But from the look on that stunning face which had been calculating enough to take the life of another person, there seemed to be nothing that the guy could not handle, no scandal he could not take and then turn to his own advantage and popularity, the love of the screens, the siren that drew all in and left nothing of you when he was done with you.

It takes a special kind of person to think to take the life of another person, and Phoenix was that kind of special person. He had the guts and the special kind of mercilessness to do it, and there was that look in his face, that cold dead look of triumph in his face that showed that the guy knew what he was doing. And what if he was caught? What would happen?

‘He was trying to forcefully have sex with me, and that was the reason why I had to defend myself,’ he would probably say to the screens as the throng of the masses that loved him and yet hated him would weave a massive demonstration in his favor.

But I know what you did, Phoenix, and though you may hide behind the mask of your beauty and your good show of yourself to the world, I know you, I know what *you* did.

## A Message from Ani Ugochukwu Kingsley

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