Chika Unigwe

Hope

Maybe it was seeing the pictures of the Haitian earthquake on TV that caused something to snap in her. Perhaps it was particularly the image of a woman whose permed hair was matted in white dust and her face was empty. Her eyes looking out at the world were dead. It was easy to see that even though she had survived, it was not because she had willed it and that she did not care much what happened to her now. It was as if she was asking, I have survived, now what? That picture haunted Prosperous all through the night and made her feel sick so that she had to call Joke in the morning and tell her sorry, she could not come in to work. She sat in bed thinking of her dead father and wondering what the Haitian woman lost in the quake, what made her so unwilling to rejoice in her having been saved. She missed her father now with a new ache. If only he had been saved. She missed his voice.

They had seen the news together, she and Agu, her husband. But Agu coped with bad news better. He had shrugged the news, the picture of the woman, all the other images of the survived and the dead, off his capable shoulders and had cycled off to work. When he came back in the early morning, Prosperous was still – unusually – still in bed. She could not tell him what ailed her. She had no fever. No headache. Nothing she could easily identify.

"What is wrong?" he asked.

A general feeling of unease.

She saw the hope which lit up his eyes, heard the click he made in his mind as to what sort of illness she suffered from, but pretended not to notice. Instead of lying down to sleep, like he usually did after work, he let her lie in bed and went to the kitchen. She could hear him rattling pots and pans in the kitchen. Once, she heard a pot cover drop and she flinched. Agu was clumsy in the kitchen. She wondered what he was doing. He came back a few minutes later bearing a tray. "Tea for you," he said, placing the tray on the bedside table. He had sliced bread on her favourite trellis patterned plate , a big mug of tea and a jar of butter. Tears sprang to her eyes. She had forgotten how thoughtful he could be. You live here, she thought, and you get used to a lot of things: eating cornflakes in cold milk; missing your family; being followed around in shops. But the flip side of getting used to things is forgetting things you used to know. How could she have forgotten that Agu used to bring her breakfast in bed when they were newly married? Or that sometimes, when her backache became unbearable, he would give her a massage? Rubbing her waist with shea butter until she told him it was enough. Nowadays when he touched her, it was in anger. Even their lovemaking had become aggressive and she was always glad when it was over so that she could empty her sadness into rolls of tissue while sitting on the toilet. Of all the things she was told about Europe before

she came, nobody had thought to tell her that migration had the ability to change people and make them strangers even to those they were most intimate with.

He spread butter on a slice of bread, dipped it in tea to soften it and fed her, a bit at a time as if he were feeding a little bird. The same way her mother had fed her as a child whenever she was ill. It touched her now that he remembered. "Thank you," she whispered, tears choking her throat. How easy it was to forget, she thought again. How unfair I've been, she said to herself, as if the forgetting had been a conscious act on her part. As if Agu changing in the first place, had nothing to do with her forgetting what it had been like at the beginning, when they still lived in Nigeria , and had no idea that love was not always enough.

He sat beside her, feeding her until the four slices of bread were finished. Gently, he wiped her mouth with a paper tissue and asked her to lie down and rest. He would sleep on the sofa. She felt guilty. "No, sleep beside me," she said, feeling a tenderness she had not felt in a long time for her husband.

She did not know how long she slept or how many dreams she drifted in and out of because all the dreams were versions of one another. In all of her dreams, she saw rubbles of buildings and heard voices shouting from beneath the rubbles. She knew she was in Haiti, even before she saw the woman whose photograph had haunted her. But the last dream she had before she woke up, she saw a baby lying on the ruins of a house, surrounded by corpses and lifting a chubby, stubby hand to her.

Prosperous woke up crying and noticed for the first time that the radio was still on. The BBC was giving updates on the Haitian disaster. Thousands feared dead, a rescue here and there. People roaming the streets, too scared to go into houses. She wanted to switch off the radio but lacked the strength to get out of her bed and walk to where the radio stood on the floor in front of the clothes cupboard. The room was small; it had always seemed to her like she was sleeping in a shoe box but now she wanted the empty spaces filled. The empty space beside her on the bed, the standing room only space between the bed and the cupboard, the space between the bed and the door which led to a tiny corridor. She wanted all those spaces full, full, full.

The next day, she still felt unwell but she could no longer stand the guilt eating her up. Agu handling her like an egg, saying he could stay home if she wanted him to, and if he lost his job, there would be other ones. He would clean, he said and it pierced her heart. She knew how he felt about working as a cleaner. He used to say that he had not spent years at the University of Nigeria getting a degree in Finance only to end up cleaning. Europe might force him to do things he never thought he would – like work in a bread factory as a labourer – but not clean like a woman.

"I feel better already," she said. She willed some strength into her legs and got out of bed.

She called Joke and asked if she could come in and clean to make up for not coming in the day before? If she went early enough, she could still make it to her second cleaning job. "No problem," Joke said. She could come.

She went home after work and steeped herself into her normal routine. She cooked for Agu even though he asked her to take it easy, not to overwork herself, his eyes gleaming with a hope she refused to acknowledge. Could he not see that they could not raise children here? Where would they put a baby? In the bedside drawer? Could he not see that she too felt humiliated earning her keep cleaning out toilets and emptying dustbins with soiled tampons? She with her own university degree, and who had worked in a bank where she was called Madam?

On Sunday, he woke up as soon as she did and kept her company in the kitchen as she made him akara, his eyes following her every move as if he was soaking her in. While she fried the bean cake, he held her around her waist, a palm resting gently on her stomach. It was like they were starting their courtship all over again. She expected him to start serenading her again with her favourite blues tune like he had when they met. She hoped he would not because she did not think she could take it. The weight of the guilt would tip her over.

The house seemed empty, even when their friends came as they usually did on Sunday afternoon. They talked about the earthquake and the missing president and John made jokes about Nigeria being ruled by a ghost. "Where is he if he's alive then?" He shouted. "He is floating and ruling from beyond the grave, I tell you!"

"He spoke to the BBC," Emmanuel said. "Didn't you hear him on the radio?"

"I heard a voice on the radio," John said. "Who says the voice is who he claims to be? Did they show him actually talking? No. And that my friends, is suspicious. You know what my middle name is? Ahu ekwe. I'm not into believing without seeing! No fucking way!"

Agu was loud and effusive, darting from conversation to conversation, not really contributing to any. He was like an excited child at a birthday party. A few times, he called out to Prosperous to come and sit with the men in the sitting room. "No," Prosperous said. "The food in the kitchen won't cook itself if I sat with you here. There's still a lot to be done or else none of us will eat today." She avoided his eyes.

"Why are you acting like a newly married man?" John asked. "Leave the woman with her fellow women in the kitchen. I am sure they are gossiping about us." He laughed out long and loud.

In the kitchen, Anwuli complained that there was no room to lay the plates while she dished out the soup which was ready. There were plates of food on every available space. Akara from this morning when she had made too many, the rice she had made after the akara because she did not want to face Agu at the breakfast table, constantly asking how she was feeling and blinding her with the look in his eyes, and then the plantain she had fried just because. "Who's going to eat all this food? Are you having a party?" Anwuli asked. "Why make all this food?"

"I just felt like cooking," Prosperous answered. She did not tell her that she had been out all week, buying things to fill the house because she could suddenly not stand

to see it looking empty. She knew Anwuli wouldn't understand, nor would Oge whom she noticed now was observing the top of her fridge, her eyes reduced to slits.

On top of the fridge, the bowl of plastic fruit which had pride of place had been moved to create room for six miniature angels with red plastic hearts that popped out every fifteen minutes. The angels had rosy cheeks and long, blonde hair. They looked like little children with too long hair. Behind the plastic angels was a chandelier placed on its side. She had bought the angels and the chandeliers from a junk market she had stumbled upon. Nothing recommended them but their price (in the case of the angels) and their inherent ability to fill up spaces (in the case of the chandelier). The chandelier had glass drops shaped like diamonds and the drops hung over the fridge like magnified tear drops.

"What's that doing there?" Oge asked pointing to the chandelier.

"Oh, that. It's for the bedroom. Re-decorating."

She felt the word stand between her and Oge like a huge wall. It was not often that she lied to her friends. But how could she tell about the fire in her stomach which wore her out and the dreams she had and the sudden urge to fill up her house with things. She had thought that the more she filled the house, the milder the fire would become but nothing helped. The fire made her lethargic, so that even though she told Agu she was fine, he still constantly asked her how she felt and warned her to take things easy. Her legs felt heavy, as if they were retaining water and this made her steps sluggish.

"Maybe we should see a doctor?" Agu told her the next day, saying it like he was asking a question, the way he spoke when he was worried. His voice was gentle. It had lost the gruffness it had acquired from living here in Belgium, working in a bread factory all night, getting in only in the early hours of the morning to sleep, building up a new life on the ruins of the one that they had lost in Jos: their home, their careers blown up in the three days of religious riots that sent southerners scuttling back to the south of the country, and this new life constantly being reflected against the old and always, naturally, falling short. Returning was no option. ("To what?" Agu asked. "We lost our home, our jobs. Have we forgotten how much we paid the middleman to bring us here?" She had to agree that he had a point, but it did not stop the shouted arguments that once brought a neighbour at the door to ask could they please keep it down or he would have to call the police?)

"No," she shook her head. "There's nothing wrong with me. Nothing at all."

Again that hopeful look in his eyes. She avoided his eyes. Yes, she could see from the way he had been lately, that the old Agu, the Agu of Jos, was lurking behind the surly, given-to-fits-of temper man his life here had turned him to. But hope was not so easily rekindled. It would take a miracle and she did not have the temperament to believe in miracles. Not after everything that had happened to them. Not just yet. Besides, she had changed too.

Agu had to step over the basket in front of the door to get out. The basket was not the only new addition to the room. But Agu had not said a word about any of

them. It was almost as if he thought it was normal that she should cluster the house with the this and that's she bought almost every day. He indulged her even in this irrational buying spree. The arguments had stilled. There was a second-hand fan beside the bed, even though it was the middle of winter and it had snowed non-stop for a week. There was a rusting metal coat rack shaped like a man. From her bed at night, she imagined the coat rack was a human being and sometimes she spoke to it. She knew there was something incredibly sad about what she was doing, but she felt hopeless to stop it. She saw her life unspooling and she being unable to do anything at all about it. Maybe, she thought, this was how it felt to die. The unspooling was perhaps the prelude to something more tragic and final.

Her father had asked them to settle in Enugu, why move continents to start afresh? Enugu was far away enough, they could find new jobs. Moving to Europe had not been her choice. It had been Agu's, and she would never forgive him for that. Nigeria had failed him, he said. And his contact had assured him that in Belgium he could easily get a job, save up enough to return to Nigeria a wealthy man. "Do you not want to live abroad, Prosperous?" He had asked her when he saw the doubt in her eyes. Yes, she did. But... "No buts," he said. Now her father was dead and she had not been able to go for his burial, because of complications with their immigration status. That had hurt her as much as his death, the inability to take a final long look at him, to say her goodbyes. To compensate for not being there, her sister had sent her photographs from the burial: a colour photograph of her father lying in state in a satin lined coffin. The coffin looked comfortable, snug but her father looked like a distressed man. It did not look like he was at peace. His face looked drained. It had the dry look of smoked fish. She had smelt it expecting the smell she had not completely forgotten to waft back at her. It was a shock, seeing him like that. There was nothing left of the man who had taken his family to Sunday lunches at Hotel Presidential. Pancreatic cancer discovered late had not even given him enough time to seek any form of treatment. The day she and Agu left for Belgium, her father had hugged her and said "See you," as if she were not journeying to the other side of the world, but instead was just popping out to buy a can of tomatoes from Property's store across the road. Now, she would never see him again. The second photograph her sister sent her was of their mother in a widow's black outfit. Her scarf had slipped and it was easy to see that her hair was completely shaven as prescribed by tradition. She felt sorry for her mother who looked like a lost child in the photograph. How would it be for her if she lost the Agu she was newly regaining? The sadness of her father's death became new and followed her around now too.

While she dragged herself around Joke's dusting the pictures in the sitting room, Joke had the TV on and so when the news came on that a pregnant woman who had survived the earthquake but had been too weak to give birth had been delivered of a healthy baby boy after two hours of surgery, she saw it. When the baby was shown in close up, scrunched up eyes and a mouth which pouted as if he was

sucking teeth, his head perfectly, wonderfully round, it was like something warm and bright climbed into her and nestled in the place where the fire had been. Everything that was unspooling inside of her stopped and started reversing their movement. She knew instinctively that this was what it felt like to be hopeful. The new mother was shown, tired and destitute but with a smile that enveloped everything else. Her eyes shone like Agu's had started to. Oge thought that if that baby were hers she would have named him Hope. Hope. The one thing she never thought she would ever get back. And now she had, she remembered other things she had forgotten. Like how her grandmother always said that God chased away flies from the cow with no tail. And she remembered that long ago, she had wanted Agu's babies. They had made plans. But those plans had gone with the fire that ate up their home, marked out as a southern home. She remembered the names they had chosen for their unborn children, and the room they had marked out as the nursery. And once she remembered, that memory chased away the more recent memories that had robbed her of sleep.

She dragged the vacuum cleaner into the bathroom to clean it out. She emptied the blister of pink pills she carried with her down the tub. Then she scrubbed the tub with a renewed vigour as if The Pill left stains on tubs. When she got home, Agu was still sleeping. She stood and watched him for a while and then she dug out blisters and blisters of pills, like the ones she had thrown down the tub from a handbag at the back of her side of the cupboard, hidden under a barrage of lingerie. She carried them into the toilet and emptied them all in the sink. Then she grabbed a pair of scissors and snipped the empty packet into tiny pieces and threw them into the air like confetti at a wedding party.

In the morning when Agu came back from work, she went into the bedroom after him. This time when they made love, she knew that they both wished for the same thing, the fulfillment of which Agu was already sure was coming to pass. She knew this too: Hope was taking root and spreading its branches and she and Agu would recover what they had lost. And that maybe love was indeed enough.