

ANOTHER DAY IN MY LIFE

A Short story

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As I lie on my mat in the still of the night, with only the intermittent sound of a laughing hyena in the far distance, I wonder what tomorrow will bring. The baby in my belly begins to kick as though reminding me that the little porridge that I had apportioned myself for supper was not enough for both of us. Since my husband left two months ago to live with his new wife, life has been even more difficult than before. At least when he was here I did not have to till the land on my own. But now I have to till the land, pound the corn, cook the meals – assuming there is something to cook, and take care of my three other children. And with a growing belly, doing household chores gets more and more difficult by the day. I'm thankful that I only have two more months to go before the baby comes. Then I can at least do the housework more comfortably while my mother tends to the baby.

I turn over to lie on my left side now. I can hear the sound of the laughing hyena becoming more and fainter. The elders always say that the further away the sound of a hyena, the closer he is. It's fortunate that we at least have a hut that keeps us safe from wild animals and the cold of the night. I close my eyes and try to sleep but sleep doesn't come. During the day when I am so taken up with the household chores, I have little time to ponder over my problems. But each time I lie down to sleep, thoughts pervade my mind. I think of my daughter, about seven years of age now, who has been vomiting live worms for two weeks now. The elderly woman who lives at the end of the road advised me to buy some medication at the store, which she could take for just one day to get rid of all the worms in her stomach. I was keeping the last of my savings to buy a blanket for the new baby as the one that I had used for the other three was now too worn out. But I wonder now if my daughter's need for medication is perhaps more urgent.

I often feel guilty when I think of how much burden this baby will only bring to my family and me. How can I think of my own child as a burden?

Yet how can I not when I have three other mouths to feed and no man to help me? If only he had not found those pills I had picked up from the hospital – pills that were supposed to keep me from getting pregnant. I can still remember the experience I had the evening he had found them, the beating I had to endure from him, and the shame I faced when my sister's husband was urging him to stop as people stood outside their huts to look on. Life is indeed very difficult for a woman in these parts. I feel fortunate that I have only one daughter. It hurts to think that Tendai might have to go through the same kind of suffering that I have had to go through. There is always talk in the village of how school can better one's life. I was hoping that she could try out school and perhaps better herself so that she doesn't have to suffer so much. But often times I have to make her miss school to help me out in the garden, especially since her father left. I'm so glad that as a girl she's the oldest of my children because she's a big help around the house. I still feel bad about having to make her miss school though because she seems to like being in school even though she says that it would be easier to concentrate in class if her stomach weren't rumbling all the time because it's so empty. Tendai is quite a character. What difference should it make whether your stomach is empty or full when all you have to do is sit and listen to someone talking in front and scribbling on a board? But then what would I know. I never had the opportunity to go to school myself.

I do have dreams though of Tendai at least completing elementary school. The family that live on the other side of the village where we sometimes go to ask for a few buckets of water when the village trough runs out have a daughter who even went to high school. She appears quite sophisticated in her speech and her mannerisms even when speaking to villagers like us. But her family has always been wealthy, owning a car and a big house.

As I hear the cockcrow I realize it is time to get up and begin the day. I wonder how I'll manage through the day without having slept the whole night. This happens so often that I'm now used to it even though towards the end of the day my body complains with aches and pains and I'm about ready to collapse onto my mat. Yet, each time, as soon as I lie on my mat, sleep just doesn't come but what takes over in mind are thoughts of what tomorrow will bring for me and my children.

I hurriedly get up and put on my clothes. There is much to be done before the day is over. As I step out of the house I notice my older son Chiko throwing stones at the mango tree right next to our hut. "Chiko! Chiko! Stop that at once. How many times do I have to tell you to leave those mangoes alone and let them ripen? We can make money off those mangoes at the market once they ripen and buy some food".

Before I complete my sentence he dashes off around the hut. Poor boy! Perhaps if he had enough food to eat he wouldn't be trying to get at unripe mangoes. I walk over to the tree and pick up the hoe where we normally place it, right against the tree. I place it on my shoulder and head off towards the garden. I walk slowly with my head bent down trying to ignore the tight pain that's coming from my belly. As the sun's rays streak on my neck I look up so as to allow the sun shine on my face. Coming towards me I see Tendai with a bucket on her head and Thoko my youngest little boy running along behind her, with a stick in his hand, as he tries to keep up with her big paces. "I hope that's your final trip from fetching water. You don't want to be late for school," I say to her. "It is. I've already filled the large drum. I woke up even earlier than you did mother," she responds. I smile as they pass me and walk in the opposite direction to the hut.

As I approach the garden, I feel the tight pain in my belly again. It can't possibly be labor pains. I'm only in my seventh month and besides, I have to do as much as I can in the garden before the sun becomes too hot to work. I bend over and begin weeding the maize garden with the hoe, trying to ignore the pain, which seems to be getting worse. As I approach the end of the row, I notice some blood trickling down my leg. Perhaps I really ought to go to the hospital. But then, isn't it too early if these really are labor pains? So does this mean that the baby is going to be born premature? And what effect is this going to have in terms of finances and having to stay longer in the hospital? By now my back has also started to ache very severely. I place my hoe on the ground and begin to walk as fast as I can towards my mother's hut which is right next to ours. "Mother, mother", I call out. "I think it's time for me". She comes out of the hut with a broom in her hand. At the sight of the blood that is now draining down my legs, she runs to the closest hut near us where her friend, another village elder lives. They both come carrying a small sachet, which I assume has the essentials that I'll be needing in the hospital. "We'll have to go to the hospital", the other woman says. "I don't think I should deliver you. The baby's come too early". We begin the journey to the hospital. After walking a mile, the two older women urge me along as I reduce my pace because of the pain, which is now becoming almost unbearable. As the hospital building comes into sight it somehow becomes a little easier to walk despite the growing pain, as I know that we're almost there. We walk into the nurse's office and my mother announces that I'm in labor. The nurse immediately ushers me into the delivery room as she tells my mother and her friend to wait outside. My mother places the sachet on my shoulder as I walk through the door. As I walk into the room I notice that all the beds are occupied. "You might have to deliver on the floor", she tells me. I slowly walk to the end of the room. Reaching into the sachet I find a cloth that looks

like what my mother's friend usually wears to formal occasions. My heart aches at her kindness in giving me her best cloth for my own use. I lay it on the floor before lying down. Instinctively I open my legs to begin pushing. I can feel that it's now definitely the time. The nurse who was sitting at the desk hears me screaming and comes rushing to my aid. In a few minutes a tiny little person comes forth and is placed on my now receded belly. "It's a girl", the nurse announces emphatically. Her announcement rings like a curse. As she cuts the cord to separate us she states, "I'm going to have to take her away. Her breathing is labored". The nurse hurriedly wipes the baby up, wraps her in a white tattered cloth and walks off.

Another nurse comes in shortly afterward to deliver the placenta. I close my eyes as I lie on the hard floor, many thoughts crossing through my mind. I didn't expect that it I would have another girl. In fact I was hoping and was almost certain that it would be a boy. Who wants to bring another Tendai into this world to bear the brunt of raising children and carrying out endless household chores? By now the nurse has finished with me and I'm still lying on my back gazing at the ceiling and wondering about many things. Will I ever have to go through this again now that he's gone? But then this isn't the first time he has left, only to return and make me pregnant yet again.

The nurse who helped me deliver walks in. From the solemn look on her face I can tell that she brings bad news. "I'm sorry. She didn't live for very long. She was very small." I continue to gaze at the ceiling. I don't know whether to laugh or to cry. My heart becomes heavy and aches from the thought that I carried a life for seven months only to give birth to a child that would die. I sigh deeply as I think to myself, "Well, this is just another day in my life."