

MYRA TRUDEA OKUMU

Invisible Things

First published by Tapatsidwa Writers Program 2025

Copyright © 2025 by Myra Trudea Okumu

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise without written permission from the publisher. It is illegal to copy this book, post it to a website, or distribute it by any other means without permission.

This novel is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is entirely coincidental.

Myra Trudea Okumu asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

Myra Trudea Okumu has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party Internet Websites referred to in this publication and does not guarantee that any content on such Websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Designations used by companies to distinguish their products are often claimed as trademarks. All brand names and product names used in this book and on its cover are trade names, service marks, trademarks and registered trademarks of their respective owners. The publishers and the book are not associated with any product or vendor mentioned in this book. None of the companies referenced within the book have endorsed the book.

First edition

This book was professionally typeset on Reedsy.

Find out more at reedsy.com

*To the Shakespeares who scrubbed floors instead of writing sonnets,
and the Galileos who folded laundry instead of charting stars, all
because they had the misfortune of being born women.*

Contents

The woman who...	1
Carried the world.	8
Was already gone.	12
Remembered her name.	14
<i>About the Author</i>	19

The woman who...

She never understood being a woman.

All she knew was that she hated it and all it entailed.

Her name was lost in a sea of other general names, like 'wife' and 'mother'. So much so, she could hardly remember her name on some days. It started with an 'S', she thought and she could feel it on the tip of her tongue but it quickly got lost.

She had disappeared, simply put. Probably died slowly over the years. It had brought pain. Emotional, psychological and in times, physical.

A pain she did not understand and one that was frequently misunderstood by her friends.

"At least you have your children."

"You should be more grateful for what you have."

Yes, she felt a lot of things but grateful just didn't make the cut.

She sighed as she wobbled home. Left, right, left.

The soft breeze soothing her skin but doing absolutely nothing for the anger and frustration that burned inside her. She walked slowly and deliberately, urging her swollen feet forward. The ground was uneven but she barely noticed. Her mind had wandered back and she got lost in the rhythm of her wobble.

What was her name again? Sarah? Sandra? She couldn't

remember and it didn't seem so important now. Maybe she could think about it another time. Maybe when her husband was snoring his lungs out, or when the children were off to school during the day.

She didn't have to think about where she was going. She knew the streets like the back of her hand. She barely acknowledged the lives that seemed to go on around her.

Ten years.

She had been married for ten years but that seemed like a lifetime ago. Who was she before her marriage? Sheila? Samantha?

Surely, she could remember her own name.

It didn't matter anymore.

She was someone's wife now and would only be addressed by his name. It began shortly after they got married.

"You don't have to work. What will *people* say when they see you running around in an office."

People.

People seemed to have a hold and say on their lives.

"I also want to make my own money," she had insisted in the conversation that spanned days and later got family members involved.

"A married woman like you should stay and look after the home," his mother had said, tutting and shaking her head like the thought of having a daughter-in-law with a career disgusted her.

What would the *people* at her church say? Again, the *people*. The faceless, nameless and invisible jury.

"Your husband and home should always come first."

And where did she come in? Somewhere in the middle? Or lost in the background of shadows that basked where dreams

should have thrived?

Her husband had resigned to not talking to her. He wanted her to change her mind by imprisoning her in her solitude. She had remained adamant and kept her job, although she later quit after her first child. He couldn't have been more happy. He didn't say it with words, but rather a subtle smile he couldn't suppress even if he was paid to.

He had won. Or at least, that's what it felt like to her.

Who would she have been if she had chosen herself sooner? It's not that she *hated* her life but she just wished that things could be...different...somehow. Not drastically different, perhaps, but just enough that she could recognize herself in the mirror or remember her name without straining her brain again. Just enough that she could remember what it felt like to dream without guilt.

She was a professional day dreamer, that she was sure of.

"Mama," a child's voice broke through her thoughts. A whirlwind of black curls came hurtling words her, beaming a smile that could blind the sun.

She didn't hate *all* of her life, she thought as she picked up her six year old and hugged her. Love flowed through her every vein.

"Where is your sister?"

"She is making porridge in the kitchen."

The woman's heart constricted a little. Mary, her oldest, should have been out playing with friends but she was stuck in a kitchen assuming the role of the eldest daughter in an African household like the job was meant for her. The expectation was unspoken.

Of course, she never complained. That was not what was expected of her but her mother saw through it all.

She saw the sadness in Mary's eyes whenever her friends

called out to her from the front gate. The way her movements had become slower, and the smile on her face less frequent.

The woman entered the kitchen and dropped the small grocery bag that dangled from the crook of her arm.

“Mary, go play outside.”

She hesitated as she placed a lid over the pot of porridge. Relief dropped her shoulders but she shook her head, banishing the thought of being any where but helping at home.

“I’m making porridge, Ma,” she answered calmly.

“No. Out.”

It wasn’t her job to take care of the household. She could help every now and then, but she was a child and she needed to play and make friends.

Mary darted out of the door, momentarily forgetting her slippers before running back and picking them up. She didn’t even bother to put them on.

She wobbled to the stove and turned the dial to medium heat. She rested one hand on the small of her back where the weight of her belly tagged her body forward.

Baby number 3.

She glanced at the sink full of dishes and the floor that begged for cleaning.

Maybe she could rest a while as the porridge simmered, and while the children ate, she could get a few chores done.

Left, right, left, she wobbled into the living room and sank into the couch. Between the fatigue of the day and the strain of growing another human in her stomach, her eyes drooped and she fell asleep.

What was her name again? Salma? No, that wasn’t it. Or maybe she got the letter wrong and she was someone named Brenda. Or Priscilla? Charity, maybe. No, they all sounded

wrong and did not fit her skin. It didn't matter. Not then it didn't.

The sound of the door slamming jolted her from her brief moment of rest and her husband trudged in. She mustered a weary smile, but he didn't look at her.

What time was it? Had she been asleep for long. The porridge!

"Honey, could you please check on the porridge for me?"

He ignored her remark.

"I'm starving," he announced as he lowered himself onto the couch. His voice carried that clipped tone she had come to dread. "What's for dinner?"

She straightened and winced as her back protested, and explained softly, "I'm just making porridge for the children first. Then—"

He cut her off with a sigh. She knew that sigh too well. He didn't have time for her explanations and her 'theatrics' as he called them. He worked all day to keep a roof above their heads and food in their bellies while she lazed away at home looking after their home and their children. She could physically feel her stomach tighten from the dread that followed such moments.

Where did the time go?

"I will make you tea," she said quickly. She struggled to her feet, gripping the table for balance as the room seemed to tilt briefly with her fatigue.

He didn't even look at her or offer any support. He simply leaned back and tuned on the TV, before peeling off his shoes and discarding them on the floor next to him.

The woman's eyes narrowed as she watched this display. Couldn't he at least put his items into the washing basket?

Swallowing the sudden burst of anger that blocked her throat, she wobbled to the kitchen and grabbed the first pot she could

find. The porridge hadn't burned so she hadn't been asleep for long. She set the pot on the other plate and turned the heat on.

She was awake, tired but awake. She cleaned the dishes slowly, her gaze focused on the small crack on the window.

His voice used to be warm and so full of love.

"You won't have to do anything. You won't ever have to lift a finger," he had promised her when their love was new, barely used.

Back then, he had paraded her around with pride, his beautiful, intelligent wife who lit up every room she entered. She was his entire world, the center of everything he did. His life revolved around her and the home they would build together. He went out of his way to please her, showering her with attention and care.

They married, she had their children and she quit her job.

And that is where the danger was. That was the beginning of her slow death. The suffocation, the micro-aggression and the weaponized incompetence.

She wanted to blame his mother for not raising him right but then she would be part of the people. The people who always blamed a woman for a man's shortcomings.

"She should have taught him to look after himself." True.

"Boys will be boys." False.

Her husband was a grown man and all accountability for his actions should have rested on his head but it didn't. It first rested on hers.

They used to be married but now they just lived together.

Hell, he couldn't even notice her vanishing right in front of his eyes. She had become part of the furniture.

He barely looked at her. He didn't invite her to his office functions anymore, and when he was home, he was only

a shadow. She could hardly remember the last time they had laughed together, or when he had touched her without impatience.

Even her anger had waned and was replaced by a dull ache that felt like resignation. Maybe numbness.

There was no time to linger in sadness. There was always something to be done, and someone to be cared for. She poured the tea into a chipped mug and carried it to him.

“Here,” she said quietly, setting the cup down on the table near him. The effort was great seeing as her stomach extended so far she had not seen her feet in months.

He didn’t thank her. He didn’t even look up. She stood there for a moment longer, as if waiting for something. Some recognition, maybe, or a kind word. When none came, she turned away, and returned to the stove where the children’s porridge waited to be stirred.

Carried the world.

The heavy silence in the house amplified the ticking of the clock, and her own labored breathing.

She leaned against the kitchen counter, one hand gripping the edge as another contraction ripped through her. It stole her breath, bent her over, but she clenched her jaw and forced herself to straighten. There was too much to do.

Four hours ago.

Her water had broken four hours ago.

The pot of soup simmered on the stove while she rigorously washed the dishes. The clothes were drying outside and the floor was lined with water paths were a mop had passed.

You've done this before. You don't need me there for this one. Call your mother.

She had heard the words come out of her husband's mouth but she hadn't quite processed them. Maybe if he had said her name, she would have remembered who she was and maybe, the woman she had forgotten she was would not take such disrespect.

But she was wife and mama. Her stunned silence did not last long after he hung up on her, his wife. She had wanted to scream at his indifference and call him all seven types of fools.

But she didn't say them. She couldn't.

“Okay,” she had said instead.

Jane, maybe? Her name. Like the woman who lived next door. What were the odds of that? Probably slim to none. She felt like a Fatima but it didn’t suit her either. She had known a Fatima, but that seemed like eons ago.

The next contraction made her pause. It slowed her but didn’t ultimately stop her war path. Her husband insisted they did not need a maid. It was just him, her (pregnant), and their two daughters. What did she need the extra help for?

She had never agreed, of course, but she had stopped arguing. What was the point? He didn’t understand, and he didn’t care to.

The house was quiet and the silence was occasionally broken by her wobbling feet as they moved from one room to the next; fixing, cleaning, preparing for the day she would not be around. The children would need clean clothes and food, and she couldn’t leave a mess behind. Her body begged for rest and somewhere deep inside, she hoped someone, hell anyone would say, “It’s enough. You’ve done enough.”

When everything was done, she called her mother.

Mary could look after her father and her sister, that she was sure of.

There was that burden again. Dragging her eldest daughter into the troubles of womanhood.

This wasn’t how it was supposed to be.

The bitter thought surfaced suddenly but she shoved it aside. Thoughts like that were dangerous. They led to places she couldn’t afford to go. Besides, she couldn’t even remember her own name and nobody around her seemed to acknowledge its existence.

A list.

She needed to make a list for Mary to follow; what to do, when to eat, and how to help around. She pressed a fist to her mouth to stifle the groan, biting down until the wave of pain passed. It wasn't just a contraction though. It was mixed with guilt and hurt. She wanted to grab the world and shake it until it rattled back to its senses.

How had it come to this?

Did Mary even know what it meant to be a child anymore?

Did the people not care for this?

The throbbing in her back intensified.

Her contractions were getting closer together.

She glanced at the empty chair at the dining table, the one where her husband used to sit and tell her about his day. They had laughed about the mundane things like the coworker that called their boss a stuck up prick. Or the time he had farted during a presentation.

He wasn't her partner anymore. He was another weight on her strained shoulders, another person to consider, and another demand that drained her. She had come to realize that, in many ways, she was taking care of him in the same way she took care of their children.

How could she be expected to feel attraction toward someone who resembled another child, someone whose emotional needs and demands had surpassed her own?

She cleaned up after him. She wiped pee stains off the toilet after him, and picked up his shoes and socks from where he tossed them in the living room.

She was his caretaker, if anything. He did not see her as his wife deserving of his love and affection. Or as the mother of his children, human and in need of support. He had stopped seeing her as a person, as a woman with desires and dreams of

her own.

She found herself enduring his presence, and his touch became repulsive.

“Men are like that sometimes.”

Not all men, but somehow, always a man.

She had heard women in her community whisper about how marriages could change, how love could wilt but she didn't understand the sentiment until her last contraction had her writhing on the floor. She barely made it out the door before another one rocked her frame.

God, just a little more time, please.

Was already gone.

Why couldn't she stop? Why couldn't she walk away?

What would *people* say? There.

Again, the *people*. Who even were they?

"But think of your children."

"Do you want them to grow up without a father?"

"All marriages have their downs."

What would it take for her to feel like a woman again?

Or was she too late? She could barely remember what being loved felt like. 10 years. Where had the time truly gone? Wasn't she supposed to be a nurse by now? That was her dream, wasn't it? But when she had passed the nursing entrance exams, her husband said they could not finance it, and in his next breath talked about getting himself a better car.

She had smiled at him. She always smiled. It was a reflex, a way to make it seem like everything was fine. The *people* didn't ask for her pain; they only demanded that she continue, that she keep going, that she fulfill her duties without complaint.

Irritation surfaced as she tried to remember who these *people* were and why they had such a hold on her life.

Who made them judge and oversee? No, they were self-appointed.

Bitterness.

Yes, that was what she felt and a touch more resentment. Envy too at the nurses who tended to her as she laid on in the hospital bed. They had followed their dreams, while she stayed idle in a life that squeezed her throat more each day.

A small tap on her shoulder brought her back to the reality she felt she no longer belonged in.

“I have been calling your name. Are you okay?” her mother asked with furrowed eyebrows.

She had called her? She blinked absently. She must have missed the mention of her own name. Damn it. It seemed silly to ask now.

It was a while since anyone had asked if she was okay. What did that even mean anymore?

“I am fine, Ma. Just a little tired is all.”

The baby had come minutes after she had arrived, heaving and distraught. She had done this before but that did not mean she did not feel like she was being ripped into two. It did not stop the capillaries in her eyes from bursting or the perineal tears.

She simply had the misfortune of being a woman.

The woman paused. A thought had occurred to her.

“Ma, what is your name?”

Remembered her name.

The proverb “*the straw that broke the camel’s back*” refers to the final, seemingly small burden or event that causes an overwhelming collapse after a series of increasingly heavy and unaddressed stresses. It’s not the single event itself that causes the breakdown, but the accumulation of weight that has already been carried.

The woman stepped through the front door cautiously. She balanced a small swaddled baby and her overwhelmingly heavy hospital bag.

Her husband hadn’t come to the hospital. Not even once. He had said he’d wait until they were discharged, but she had expected more. She had expected *him* to come.

What was that they said? Great expectations make frustrated men.

The house was filled with the sound of the evening news. He was probably sprawled on the couch as his wife hailed a taxi from the hospital with their newborn baby.

Lest he lift a finger and die.

The poor bastard.

The woman quietly dropped her bag and walked to the kitchen where Mary bent over the stove. She had hunched over the pot, and gracefully took on the responsibility of an

adult with such quiet grace that it only seemed to make her mother's guilt grow.

Her heart squeezed painfully.

She wanted to tell Mary to stop. To go outside, to leave the cooking, and to be free.

She searched for the words and failed. They had burned. The words had burned in the fire of rage that roared inside her.

She hadn't protected her daughter from this. She hadn't protected *any* of her children.

Her mind was spiraling when she heard the words.

"Where's my dinner?"

She turned to face him where he stood in the doorway. He casually leaned against the door frame.

Dinner. He wanted *dinner.*

She didn't expect any kindness at this point and she couldn't stop the fury.

She could feel the tears well up. The ones she had been holding back for days, weeks, months, and years.

The frustration, the betrayal, the loneliness; it all rushed forward.

She wanted to hold it in; the rage, and the frustration. She wanted to swallow it all down but her body was sore and could not stomach that assault without ripping her apart.

She looked at him, really looked at him. What had she initially seen in him that had made her think he was the love of her life? What was the foundation of their relationship that she could hold onto in that moment? Friendship? Partnership? Trust?

"I just had a baby."

He wasn't impressed and the expectation held in his eyes. "You've had babies before. It's not a big deal."

She wanted to shout, to scream at him, and tell him how much

she had carried. She wanted to scream about how much she had endured, and how much she *needed* him. But he would call her emotional and hormonal. Her feelings would be disregarded.

“If she cries, she is being hysterical.”

“If she complains, she is a nagging wife.”

This was what their life had become: her giving, him taking, and never, ever giving anything in return. Never an appreciation or an affirmation. Just take, take, take until she had nothing left to give.

“Mary, go to your room.” Her daughter didn’t have to be there for her next words.

Mary didn’t ask why. She just nodded and walked away.

The woman gently set the baby down in the crib. Her hands trembled. No matter how hard she clenched them into fists, and how tightly she pressed them against her sides, they betrayed her.

“You don’t see me anymore,” she began, her words trembling as she tried and failed to steady herself. “You haven’t seen me in a long time.”

His indifferent expression made the pain in her chest swell but she did not care anymore.

“I’ve lost myself in you, and try as I might to find my love for you, I can’t. I haven’t loved you in a *long* time. I don’t even remember what it felt like anymore to be loved and adored by you. Which should be a ridiculous notion considering I was once the center of your universe.”

There was so much left to say and she needed to steady herself or she would cry and never stop. She took a deep breath. One that filled her lungs and brought her back to life.

“I’ve forgotten my name, *and* my identity. All these years, I’ve been *just* your wife, *just* their mother, and nothing else. It’s

never been about who *I* am, what *I* want, what *I* need. Do you understand? I've been nothing but an extension of everyone else's needs. I'm *invisible*."

She paused, her chest heaving as she struggled to breathe.

God, she needed to breathe.

"I feel like I'm *forgotten*. I feel overlooked. Like you don't even see me, and maybe you don't even care enough to look anymore. And I keep doing everything, everything that needs to be done, *everything*, but it's not out of love. I'm sick and tired of putting everyone but myself first. I don't even know how to find myself again. But I can't keep doing this."

"Lower your voice. The children will hear you." He narrowed her eyes at her.

Maybe he was trying to warn her but frankly, she did not care.

"Let them hear it."

She waited for his response as her heart punched her rib cage over and over again but it never came.

Why did she think this time would be any different?

She could see the walls in his eyes. The indifference that had built up over time, brick by brick, and she knew, he wasn't listening. Not truly.

"I want to leave," she whispered. She wanted to breathe again. She wanted to leave the woman she had become. Maybe, she could give nursing a shot. Or teach like her mother. Her dreams were endless and had been boxed for years. Neatly packed under the responsibility of being a mother, a caretaker, a wife, a daughter, a nurturer, a shoulder for the world to lean on; the list was endless.

She had to go. Somehow, she had to go.

His eyes flickered for a moment, but only a moment. He

shook his head, as if the thought was preposterous.

“Where would you go?” he mocked, like he couldn’t fathom her wanting anything more than what he had given her. “You have nothing without me.”

He was right.

She had built her life around him, around their family, around the idea of being together forever. She had put herself last, buried herself and her desires beneath layers of self-sacrifice.

She wasn’t nothing and she didn’t have nothing.

That much she knew.

“I don’t need you to give me permission to leave.”

Her husband didn’t say anything else, and for the first time, she didn’t care. She brushed past him. She had only taken a few steps when she turned back to him.

He hadn’t moved from where he stood. *Dinnerless.*

“What’s my name?”

He eyed, skeptical of the intention behind her question. She was trying to trick him, surely. The woman didn’t move from where she stood.

She wanted, no, needed her name.

“Inara.”

Yes, that was it. It fit like a glove, it was hers.

And that, at least, was a beginning.

About the Author

Myra Okumu is a Malawian writer, blogger and newspaper columnist. She has authored several books, including 'Uncharted Territory', 'After the clouds, the sun' and 'The Poetry of broken people'. She has also penned several short stories, with the most notable being 'Freddy', 'Beg God for me', 'I go mad as I write' and 'Tomb for two.'

She has two dogs, Olly and Ghost and spends her free time sewing.

