

## Silence of the truth.

If you asked the devil, even he would say he was invited in, served a proper meal of *Iyan* and *elegede* (pounded yam and vegetable soup) accompanied with calabashes of palm wine and pieces of bushmeat to clean his mouth, as is customary to the people of Akure. Even he knows that the moment his landlord denounces him, he must flee. My mother allowed him to live comfortably in our home, while she chased after God everywhere else for her redemption.

Ochanya and I ran towards home panting, like dogs on heat after running around our school building for hours unending, with an extreme focus to finish all the play before I leave for boarding school tomorrow. But the clouds seemed more determined to end our time together.

There had been a fickle change in the weather from bright and sunny to almost dark within a short time. We ignored the change for some time until we realised this could be the type of rain that could go on for days.

As we drew closer to the path where we would bid each other goodbye, our eyes became teary of their accord, we reluctantly tried to release each other, neither of us willing to let the other go.

It took the descent of the first droplets of rain to bring us back to our senses as we let go of each other's hands and sprinted in opposite directions.

By the time I got home, I was completely drenched, and my father, in his usual wearisomeness, was almost outside the gate in what I perceived would be to look for me.

His tight face broke into a smile immediately he saw me running past the gate. Despite the rain, he ran towards me and carried me as he ran back to take cover under the façade, both of us laughing loudly.

He balanced me across his shoulder and unlocked the doors. As soon as we were inside, he dropped me and quickly went upstairs to get towels and wipe me dry.

It was the year 2001 when I turned ten, about to begin my journey into secondary school and my last day at home.

Baba Enitan, as he loved to be called, had taken the week off work to take me to the market to ensure everything I needed for school was ready.

I remember calling him dada, which morphed into daddy just as I had heard my mum mumble to me as I learnt to speak. As I grew older, whenever we were in the company of friends or the public, he would say to everyone to refer to him as Baba Enitan, instead of Mr Ayeni.

The first time we had an open day in school, I recall waiting patiently at my classroom door for my mum, knowing she probably would never show up as she had planned to go to the mountains with her church group that morning. Still, I waited.

I soon gave up hope of anyone showing up for me and ran to the bathroom in tears. Only to be sought after by my teacher, Mrs Adewumi, that someone was here to see me.

I wiped my tears with the back of my palms and hurriedly took the hand she offered me. I slipped my hand from my teacher's and ran to him with all the strength I could muster. As always, he was ready to catch and flip me. I was overjoyed that it was my dad who made it instead of my mum.

"How are you here?" I wanted to ask, but instead, it got drowned in my ecstatic mood. He wasn't supposed to be back from his trip.

I was only in Primary three and did not understand much of anything, only that my dad always found a way to make everything better. He would always hold my hand tightly in his, and tell everyone, "Hello, I am Enitan's father."

I don't know whether it was in the way he announced it to everyone or the pride in his eyes whenever he said it.

Unlike my mother, his face would soften whenever he looked at me. He would ask me to show him all my friends, ask them questions, and buy me presents to give them on their birthdays, and everyone loved him.

Whenever he visited my school, I knew that the headmistress was soon to follow with teachers to walk with him. I didn't know it then, but as I got older, I learnt that children of parents who had money were treated differently than those without. The number of teachers who would walk you to your car also meant how much donation you contributed to the school.

It was about thirty minutes to the end of the school day, but the headmistress permitted me to leave with him since the rest of the day was free anyway.

As usual, he drove me to the only ice cream shop that had opened on the next street. We were about to leave when pastor Tokunbo stopped to greet us.

"*Ab* Mr Ayeni, good afternoon, sir." He said, his face breaking into a smile.

My father was one of the most joyful people I knew. He always minded his business and never talked too much. He was always the first person to greet anyone. I had never seen him frown or get angry for more than a few seconds. I had often heard some women down the street refer to him as "that rich-handsome-man *wey no sabi vex*".

Yet, this particular afternoon, I knew he saw pastor Tokunbo long before he made his way to us. I saw him frown; I saw his black, blemish-less face get wrinkled in a few places. His grip on my hand tightened, and I noticed him try to quickly walk to the car to avoid saying hello. He ground his teeth and broke into a smile almost instantly, that one, wouldn't have noticed. Yet I did, because it was something I had not seen before.

"Good afternoon pastor, you can call me Baba Enitan. How are you and the family?" He responded with a smile I knew did not reach his eyes.

"All is well Mr Ayeni." His face settled on mine, and his smile broadened further. "Enitan baby, won't you greet pastor?"

I was about to open my mouth to greet when my father's grip tightened harder. "She's a little tired pastor, we need to get going. My regards to your family."

Pastor Tokunbo bobbed his head as if they had both spoken a secret language I didn't understand, because the pastor's smile was still as wild. "Sure. How is your wife?"

My father immediately dragged me around the car, almost like he had not heard the pastor's question, leaving the pastor looking at us as he settled me in the backseat of the car.

He also turned the other way rather than the front of the car as he would normally turn, leaving the pastor still in the same position as we drove off.

The rest of the drive home was quiet, and I noticed him ground his teeth a couple of times, and his grip on the car steering was tight.

By the time we got home, the mood I was used to had returned. He opened the car door smiling and carried me on his shoulder into the house.

The rest of that day, everything was as it would normally be; Dad making dinner, washing the dishes, occasionally watching TV with me, bathing me and telling me old Yoruba folklore stories before turning in for the night. Except, there was nothing usual about that night.

I woke up startled by raised voices late into the night. Thinking it was armed robbers, I jumped out of bed and ran under the bed for cover, blocked my ears and closed my eyes just as my father had taught me, willing him to be alive and come to save me.

As the voices grew louder and louder, I recognised that it was my parents screaming at each other. I opened my eyes and released my hands from my ears as the words of their anger became clearer.

"You said you forgave me," I heard my mother say.

"How can one forgive a sin they see every day and he keeps parading himself like he owns her? Look, you better get your dog on a leash or I will be forced to take action." My father retorted.

They kept going at each other until I heard something smash against the wall and I screamed, "Daddy!"

The entire house went completely silent like they weren't trying to shake the foundations of the house a few seconds before.

I heard the thudding of footsteps towards my room, and I heard the door open, but my eyes remained shut. I knew someone was hurt and I wanted it not to be Baba Enitan.

My mother would never come to me even if I was dying anyway, yet, I was scared to open my eyes, scared that it would be her.

I heard his heavy breathing and felt calmer when he held my hands and pulled me to his side. I finally opened my eyes and started to inspect his body for wounds and embraced him tightly when I found none.

He rocked me back to sleep and never again did I hear or see them fight.

Only that he had taken the forefront to taking care of me more than before. So, like today, he took the week off to properly send me to school.

We were setting the table for dinner when my mother walked into the living room, causing us both to stop momentarily. Even the winds knew something was different that night as a strong gust of wind blew up the curtains.

“Enitan.” She called softly. Her being at the table with us seemed strange, even the sound of her voice seemed foreign, and I stilled further.

My heart suddenly drummed against my chest, unsure if I should run to her or look at my dad for permission.

I resisted the urge. I was going to start boarding school the next day, and my dad would no longer be at my side to protect me. I needed to start thinking for myself. I am an adult now.

“Yes, mummy.”

Her face shifted into a smile; one I had not seen her wear in a long time. Maybe that is not entirely true, because I try not to spend any time more than was necessary with her.

I avoided looking into her eyes whenever she spoke too, as that had warranted her dousing me in an entire bottle of anointing oil two years ago, praying away any spirit of witchcraft in me.

“My beautiful child,” she murmured. “Come and give mummy a hug.”

I hesitated again, but eventually moved towards her as my father sat across from her.

She wrapped her hands around me tightly and sucked in the air. “I am so proud of you my dear child. I am so proud of you. I hope you know that.”

I bopped my head even though I didn’t know that. How would I know anything when she barely says anything to me? If she was not reeling out instructions on her way out to another prayer congress, she was announcing her being back home.

“I can’t believe you are already starting secondary school. When I was your age, I was—” she trailed off in her usual manner.

Mummy was always short with her words with me and everyone else. But something in her eyes always suggested she had so much to say.

I can’t tell how long she held me before Baba Enitan broke the silence.

“Ojoma, let us eat, the food is getting cold.”

She sniffled, held me at her arm’s length and nodded as if having an internal conversation with herself.

Dinner that night was as awkward as always, anytime she joined us for dinner. Conversations were mild, which I particularly hated except for Dad asking if I liked the food, or explaining what the newly elected President Obasanjo Olusegun was saying in the news.

I couldn’t laugh or ask questions as much as I would have wanted, for fear of my mum screaming at me.

I had just tonight and the next day to have my dad with me until the end of term which was three months away. I wondered why she chose today to spoil our time together.

After dinner, she stayed back to clear the table, wash the dishes and tuck me into bed. I wanted to scream that I didn't want her, I no longer needed her, but I couldn't.

Dad had said to be patient with her that she was sick. So, I sucked in my cheeks and let her do all the things a mother would normally do for her child.

She remembers me once in a while. She remembers to make me breakfast before school sometimes. Like tonight, she spent time with me in the bath. She remembered to tell me that she loved me and would do anything to protect me.

Yet, there was that look in her eyes; the one that always leaves me confused. The one that looks at me like I was her everything, again, I feel like she blames me for everything going wrong in our home.

I woke up the next morning giddy with the excitement of going away on my own for the first time. I ran downstairs by 7am, already dressed, I sat at the table waiting for my dad.

I heard my parents' door open thirty minutes later, and my father's footsteps as he descended the staircase.

"Eni...?" He asked, in his usual groggy morning voice.

I jumped from the chair and ran to hug him at the foot of the stairs. "Yes daddy, good morning."

"Why are you up so early?"

"And you are not dressed yet dad." I arched my brows in a frown and folded my hands across my chest.

"Eni, resumption is not until 11am, we can get to Ibadan under two hours. Besides, I only need to dress up. I came to make us breakfast." He said as he strolled into the kitchen.

"Dad, I already had a bowl of cornflakes, can we please leave already?" I lied.

His eyes widened as he tilted his head to the right. "Wow! Somebody is in such a hurry to leave me. I hope you do not start crying to come back after two weeks."

I shrugged. "I won't. Now, can you go and get dressed. Thank God we packed everything in the car last night."

An hour later, we were driving out of Akure as we jammed to Tony Tetuila's "My car".

"Dad, may I please tune down the volume of the music?"

He stopped singing along and turned to look at me briefly before looking at the road. "What's wrong my angel, I thought this was our jam?" I pouted my lips in a sulking manner. "Okay fine, you can turn it off, what is it?"

"Don't be mad dad, but am I your daughter?"

I heard a screech, as the car came to a sudden halt and I was held back by the seatbelt. He quickly recovered and parked properly by the road side. "Why would you ask me such a thing?!"

"Okay, why does mum hate me?"

He vehemently shook his head, “Your mum doesn’t hate you; she’s just depressed.”

I rolled my eyes. “Dad please, I am no longer a child.”

“Young lady, don’t roll your eyes at me.”

“I’m sorry dad,” I murmured.

He sighed.

“Last question, why do you dislike Pastor Tokunbo?”

“What?!”

“It’s okay if you don’t answer any of them. I know I could never be his child.”

“Jesus Christ!” He dragged in a sharp intake of breath and closed his eyes briefly.

“Enitan Ayeni, I love you. You are my daughter and nothing in this world will ever change that. If you ever had a doubt, think about where you got your eyes, nose and that sharp brain from?”

“I love you daddy.”

### **Glossary**

*Ab* – Exclamation for emphasis

*Wey no sabi vex* – Never gets angry