

Unspoken Echoes: Remembering Emeka's Light

I was getting ready to start my day when I received an email notifying me that I had just been nominated for the best author of the year for the book I wrote titled "Ife," which means love. The book narrates the story of two individuals who grew up in entirely different circumstances – one privileged and the other without privilege. It explores their lives and how they navigate their love story. People are drawn to tales of love, and in this story, love flourished despite their differing life circumstances.

I was overwhelmed with excitement, and my thoughts immediately turned to you. How I wish you were here to witness all that is happening. You would have been overjoyed and incredibly proud of me. Tears welled up in my eyes as I realized that you had inspired the book I wrote. I spoke to you as though you were right here with me, and every time I received congratulations, I looked up and shared those congratulations with you.

I was about to call my mother and father to share the wonderful news when another email arrived. It informed me that I had been nominated to speak at TEDx Nigeria, a dream come true for me. They were hosting a special edition featuring writers as speakers. My excitement soared, and I exclaimed, "Double congratulations!" while gazing upward. I then called my mother, who eagerly shared the news with our entire family. Suddenly, my phone was inundated with congratulatory messages.

My team promptly confirmed and sent me a statement that I could share with people to inform them of the event and invite them to listen to my talk. I am exceptionally thrilled and filled with happiness. Amidst all this excitement, I wasn't entirely sure about the topic of my talk, but I had a strong feeling that inspiration would strike before the event on August 12, 2023.

I have been completely engrossed in the whirlwind of emotions, but then it hit me – on August 12, 2014, it happened. Nine years without you. On August 12, 2022, I received flowers from family, friends, and fans who expressed nothing but love and support. However, I am still somewhat perplexed about what exactly I should speak about, to be honest.

My glam team is currently assisting me in preparing for the event, and I can hardly wait to share my thoughts and experiences with the world.

As we arrived at the venue, the team received instructions on how the event would proceed. This was incredibly exciting. I was directed to a waiting room where I contemplated my speech. To be honest, I was still uncertain about the topic I would address today. The event manager entered the room and exclaimed, "You look amazing!" She then provided a rundown of how the event would unfold and assured me that everything was set up for my presentation. She wished me luck, and I felt a surge of confidence.

We could hear the crowd clapping in the background as I, Tolani, walked onto the stage. Taking the microphone, I began, "Thank you, everyone, for joining us today. When I received the invitation, I was filled with excitement, but I also pondered what I should speak about. Then, a Twitter notification caught my attention, saying, 'Tolani, please talk about Emeka in detail; we want to know everything.' The truth is, this story is very close to my heart, and I hope I can get through it without shedding tears. But if I do, please bear with me. We've got this." The audience erupted in applause, and I heard someone shout, "Go T" Thank you I replied I am excited to actually tell you this story.

The story I'm about to share revolves around Emeka and me – what some may call “the tea.” Emeka and I grew up together, inseparable as kids. Wherever Emeka was, you would find me right there beside him. People even started calling us 'Ibeji,' which means twins in Yoruba language. Emeka wasn't just Tolani's twin; he was my best friend. We shared everything with each other. He had a remarkable ability to make me feel comfortable and truly seen. There was something special about our friendship; it felt just right. Around him, I was less judgmental and never felt out of place. Emeka was intelligent, hardworking, and undeniably handsome. His smile was captivating, and he had a heart full of love. He cared deeply and possessed a big heart. He had a way with words, and the manner in which he delivered his messages was impeccable. It was as if he never said the wrong thing, and his sense of humor was unmatched. Emeka was emotionally and mentally intelligent. I'm sure that if he were here, he'd say, “Tolani, please don't let my head swell.” He enjoyed reading and was smart I had only witness Emeka angry once and when he was angry he communicated well about his feeling.

Emeka worked as a domestic staff member, often referred to as a “houseboy” in Nigeria. He was brimming with dreams and aspirations. Emeka had been sent to Lagos to work for a family who promised him food, shelter, and an education. In return, he was to take care of their only child and handle household chores. Emeka excelled in his duties and performed exceptionally well in school, even though his classroom was overcrowded. Despite the challenges, he consistently ranked first in his class. He'd proudly declare, "I'm going to become a pilot, your personal pilot, Tolani mi." To which I would respond, "I'll become an author and write about you because the world needs to know your story." We'd both smile, and I would share the places I wanted to visit. We were two children with dreams and aspirations, on the brink of graduating from primary school when our lives took a dramatic turn.

Emeka's madam was going through a brutal divorce with her husband, and she became increasingly cruel. She used a whip called a “koboko,” made from cowhide or horsehair, to beat Emeka, leaving marks on his body. Sometimes, she would resort to using wire, blades, or red pepper to ensure that the pain was excruciating. She vented her frustration and anger on him, leaving behind scars both physical and emotional. Whenever I saw those marks, anger would well up inside me, and I wished I could fast-forward to the part where Emeka would become a pilot and escape this torment. Emeka always asserted that he wouldn't be an “Uncle Tom,” quietly enduring mistreatment. He spoke up whenever he had the strength, but his predicament was complicated. The very people mistreating him were also providing him with the essentials he

needed: food, shelter, and an education – the very things that could help him achieve his dream of becoming a pilot.

As his madam's behavior grew worse, I saw my twin less frequently. Our meetings, which had been weekly, dwindled to perhaps once a month. Whenever I missed him terribly, I would attempt to visit, but his madam always claimed that he was too busy to play with me or the neighborhood children. Emeka would often peek through a window when he spotted me and force a smile as if to say, "I miss you too." Occasionally, he would sneak out just to say hello, but he couldn't stay long, for fear of his madam discovering his absence. Each time she caught him, the beatings intensified.

One fateful day, Emeka showed up at my house, and there was something different about him. It felt as though he was saying goodbye forever, but I reassured myself "Tolani why are you thinking about such thing." Instead I convinced myself "I'll see him again soon." He told me he was staying longer which I thought was surprising but I was so happy.. That day, we spoke, played, and laughed. Yet, there was a tiredness in his eyes, one that could not be hidden by his smile. He asked me during dinner, before leaving my house, "Tolani, do you ever think about...?" My voice trembled as I continued, "Do you ever think about killing yourself, like the way Sula's mom killed herself?" Sula was a book Emeka enjoyed reading repeatedly. I hesitated to read that book because of how he described it—it felt depressing. When he said that, I screamed, snapping my hands around my head, saying, "God forbid bad things." He looked at me and laughed, playfully pushing my shoulders. "Ode, I'm just playing with you." We continued talking and laughing. If I'd known those moments would be our last, I would've hugged him tighter and told him, "You see, this life thing, na me and you, we go achieve our dreams; it will all work out." He told me that night he was leaving for the village and would be back the next week—he wanted to see his family. I hugged him and told him not to forget to call me.

When Emeka reached his family, he called me, and I spoke to everyone, including his mother. Once again, I heard my friend's happiness through the phone, and I cherished it for him. One week went by, and Emeka wasn't back. I tried calling; he didn't pick up. The next week, I made a mental note to visit his madam's house to ask about him. Graduation was fast approaching and I knew that Emeka would never miss his graduation for anything. It was one step closer to help becoming a pilot and him living his dream. I didn't hear back from Emeka that week, so I went to his madam's place, but nobody was home. I asked the neighbor to let her know I'd stopped by and inquired about Emeka. I continued to call; his number remained unreachable. The following week, on my way back from school, my cousin rushed to me, saying he needed to tell me something.

Sometimes people don't always know how to deliver bad news gently—It is like they want to say it quickly so you can get over the pain quickly. My cousin said, "Tolani, Emeka ti ku," which means "Emeka is... Please give me a second." She wipes her face with a tissue and takes a deep breath. "Emeka is dead. I thought he was joking; but why would someone joke about death a loud noise buzzed in my head. I looked at him, and he held me before I collapsed onto the

ground. Letting out a loud cry, I wept. I never thought of death coming early we had dreams. I did not eat for days; I didn't feel like talking to anyone. Life moved on, but I stood still. Three weeks later, his madam came to visit. She seemed to be struggling too, and when I saw her, I held her and said, "You caused it, now he's gone. You have no one to take your anger out on. I hope you're happy." Everyone held me as I cried. She cried too; I wasn't sure if it was genuine, but she seemed sorry for a moment. I felt a brief pity for her, told her to leave, and she did.

Two weeks later, she returned and asked to speak to me. I listened as she explained that Emeka had taken his own life by jumping into the water—he was done with everything. He just could not continue to go on that way instead he said he was done with all of that and took matters into his own hands. Fast forward to today, I understand that he was depressed, and when he could have been assured, I said, "God forbid."

This talk is in memory of my beloved twin, Emeka. There is no tea, but the truth is, people can be going through things in plain sight. Sometimes, they speak, but not in words, because even though we're open about mental health, it's still hard for people to discuss it.

Emeka's death left a pain in my heart that I'm not sure will ever heal. That's the thing about grief—you never fully heal; you just learn to live with it. Some days are good, and some days are bad. Please do not rush yourself through the grieving process. Everyone around you may tell you it's enough because you've cried and the burial ceremony has been done, and you should move on. They might say, "It's okay, he's in a happy place, and you'll be alright." Please grieve in a way that feels comfortable to you. Grief is not one-size-fits-all.

This talk is dedicated to my beloved twin, Emeka. There's no "tea," but the truth is, people can be struggling in plain sight. Sometimes they speak in ways that aren't verbal, because even in our openness about mental health, speaking about it can be challenging. To anyone listening to this please do not just be bystanders when you see people being mistreated or treated with injustice. Please I know it is hard and easy for me to say I understand we are all going through different things but please speak up for people who might not have the voice to fight for themselves.

Emeka's death reminds us of the struggles young and old individuals face, where dreams are stifled by circumstances and privileges. Emeka, rest in peace and know we made it my Ibeji

[Thunderous applause and cheers from the audience]