

ADÉMÚNÁ

What happens to the body in the minutes after death?

Muna stared at her phone screen at the words she just typed to look up online. Post mortem, rigor mortis, skin sags - those were words that stood out. She couldn't help wondering how her world had come to this.

Muna used to think her childhood experience was common across every household. This naivete lasted through her junior year in secondary school. In senior year, she was yanked into an all too late epiphany. It was then she realised she was the exception. Her family was the exception. All about them, their code of conduct, reasoning, and even diet were quite peculiar.

On her 11th birthday, a family friend, Mrs F with whom she shared her birthday invited her to come celebrate and her mom agreed. Though the details of the entire event or the process of seeking out permission still seemed hazy in her head, she could recall no feeling of resentment on her mum's part when she permitted her to go spend the day with Mr. F's family. The details were sorted out between her mum and Mrs. F. She had a great time as she had not experienced such an arrangement before. Mrs F and her family had been so sweet. But by the time she got back home, it was to a very angry, bitter, and resentful mum.

After that night's episode of chastising, she learned that her mum permitting her to go had not in fact been permission at all. It was testing to see her daughter's loyalty to her. She had expected Muna to say a 'no, thank you'. Going to a party with Mr. F's family had been Muna's way of saying her mother was not good enough to provide her with the kind of lifestyle she wanted and Mr. F's family was better off. It had been a family meeting that night when Muna's grandmother and aunty together with her mum had sat her down and given her a complete dress-down. They had kept emphasising how ungrateful she was and how much of a bad child she had been for not recognising the test her mother had put her through and for daring to fail it.

All her life Muna had thought she was the problem. She has been constantly reminded how she was never smart enough. Not good enough. Not hospitable enough. Not responsible enough. Not homely or domestic enough.

Not a good enough older sister for her siblings. Everything hinged on her. She had to learn to cook and clean. It was her sole responsibility to clean the one toilet that the entire household of six used. All these had been her job as the girl, as the firstborn. She had to know it all. She had to be it all.

Muna never had the luxury of a choice either. She was never made to think she could have that luxury. She had not been allowed to have her opinions. Voicing out her thoughts or disagreeing with someone's opinion had been termed rude and disrespectful. Disagreeing with someone older had meant she was arguing with them and that, as a properly trained Yoruba girl was a taboo. You never disagreed or questioned anyone older than you.

She also couldn't afford to not like anything, especially anything generously provided to her by her mother. Expressing dislike had equalled being unthankful and greedy. Wanting different in the moment or not wanting a type of food at all had made her a bad child. This had even warranted a visit to her school principal one time when she was in Junior secondary school.

That day, Muna had forgotten to take her lunch to school with her. The food for the day had been yam. She hated it. It was never spicy enough. Always cold and dry by lunchtime even in her flask. Moreso, Her grandmother who had lived with them did the cooking. The egg and stew were never enough, and most times tasteless. However, she never for once deliberately left her lunch so she could escape eating yam. Though her mother thought this. She had drawn the picture of what Muna had intended in her head and planned out what her reaction was going to be, so she was prepared. She had a story to sell the principal to show how great of a mother she already was to Muna, while her daughter instead of being a gratefully content child, was always a source of problems for her.

So Muna's mum told her principal that much. Muna's reputation from that day changed. At that moment, she got to know stories about her principal's childhood that she didn't ask for and had no business knowing in the first place.

Apparently, his mother had sold papers as a vocation to send him and his siblings to school. He had eaten plain cocoyam every day before heading to school and with palm oil on some days if he was lucky. The preaching that day took hours and Muna had missed two subject periods. Her mother had brought her food, which was the last

thing delivered to her after the long talk. Muna could very much imagine a different and shorter way the entire episode could have gone.

At the age of 10, Muna had lost her dad. It was a tragic and unexpected loss. Since her father died, her mother went down a religious spiral. Loss became a concept Muna would associate with many other life realities. It meant a dimming of future prospects, malnourishment, excessive shielding and overprotection. It also meant fear engaging religion as a preventive measure. Vigils could not be missed. Midnight prayers became a must. There couldn't be less than five pastors or prophets when witches stayed awake in the middle of the night watching the household's every move.

Also, her father's family became the evil people with resident witches. They wanted her glory and those of her siblings as well. But her mother was not going to have that. So she had to be fortified spiritually against all the arrows of the enemies. All these was too much for young Muna but she had to rise up to the occasion as the first child and daughter of the home. There was little choice for her. She had to set a solid example at 10 years old for her three other siblings. Even as an adult she still fights for her choice. According to her Mum, time or age doesn't deter enemies. So her Mum kept spiraling.

Muna wished her grandmother and aunt had spoken the truth and steered her Mum off the course of religious fanaticism. Maybe she'd have been on a balanced plane of reasoning and spirituality. Instead, they had encouraged and supported her. Perhaps because they also had not known any better or because they all thought the familiar, more welcoming than the idea of asking questions for personal clarity.

Maybe if they had known that their insane religiosity would very soon tear them apart they would have explored it differently. Sadly, while they had been busy entertaining thoughts of the enemies, they had gradually become each other's physical enemies. They had lost trust, had become resentful of each other and this resentment had kept building till it blew up in their faces. Muna learned the hard way that vulnerability and social skills even within a family is not a given. It had to be built and no height of religiousness could take the place of genuine communication, respect, and social skill, all of which had been lacking in her mother and her family.

As a late bloomer, Muna grew up timid and scared of emotions. Romantic emotions particularly. The first time she had been brave enough to try a relationship, she had not even liked the guy romantically. Though she had had a crush on him years before at 13 years old and she could bear having a conversation with him about 9 years later, she had assumed that was enough. But it wasn't. They had dated for one month and only saw each other one time. That one time, they had kissed and all she felt was irritation. The next time she dated after that and the guy attempted to kiss her, she had simply frozen and that guy typically misunderstood her freeze. He had broken up not too long after that.

Muna hasn't seen her grandmother in three years. Her Mum no longer speaks to her. In fact, as far as Muna's mum was concerned, her own mother was another witch and so she had to stay far away from her. Muna's immediate family had become a shadow of what it once was. Realities across the board appeared in one of two extremes. Heightened or severely lessened. Under the heightened would be her Mum's religious fanaticism, her fear of witches being after her life and her children's glory, people who gossiped about her family and didn't want the best for them, her mum severing every relationship that has contributed greatly to her life in the past. On the other end of the spectrum, social activities, being forthright about her thoughts and plans, taking adequate rest, exploring her interests, and discovering new ones all lessened critically.

Her family again, was the exception. This has had several different implications on Muna. She has no real relationship with her Mum. Muna thought she was harsh on her growing up and not because she had loved her as she claimed but because she has projected her hurt, bitterness, and resentment onto Muna and her siblings. She had justified abuse by calling it discipline. She had justified isolation by naming it safety. She had justified malnourishment, both body, mind, and social by calling it contentment.

Muna had learned to befriend her fantasies. She hid in them because she was able to find safety in them. The first time she had allowed her mind to travel very far was hazy but she had found how easy it was to escape. So she indulged. They carried her through any task or difficult situation. Whether it was a boring subject in school, a gathering that she didn't want to be in, or even the constant monthly three-day vigil, she had easily slipped into fantasyland. Muna became a dreamer quite early.

Unfortunately, the problem with being a dreamer is how it impairs you from seeing where to draw the line. Muna would learn how equally easy it was to get stuck in a dream and forget that time, in reality, wasn't waiting around for her. This meant that by societal standards, Mina was late on all counts. Late in her career, late in her love life, late in owning her own apartment, and even late in forging genuine friendships.

Still, all of these have nothing on what Muna had come to know to be true. Her mother wasn't perfect. In fact, perfect was very far from how she'd describe her mother. But Muna had come to the point of questioning. Asking why? What happened to her Mother? She could expressly say for sure that the mother she knows now is starkly different from the one she knew twenty years ago. What could make someone take a complete turn from the ideal image you had of them as a child to one so opposite you fail to remember who they were before now? Muna found that her hurt and trauma went deep, really deep and she needed to do some deep work and heal from the inside out. She discovered her fantasies had become a crutch which she couldn't lean on for too long.

Therapy was in her near future plan. However, pending that time when she could fully afford to pay for professional therapy, she had resorted to soul searching. Putting herself in her mother's shoes, would she have done the same exact things her mother had done? Could there be reasons to help her understand her mother's behaviour and decisions?

While she made the conscious decision to heal from her childhood, Muna allowed herself to fall in love but she made a mistake during it. How costly the mistake is is still to be determined, however, Muna assumed it would be smooth sailing. She didn't realize her childhood trauma would be brought to the fore and evidently so in a relationship with someone she genuinely loved. In the past, she could easily play hide and seek. She had been too scared to commit to a relationship with someone she truly cared about. She had been too scared of the intensity of her own feelings. So it was easy to fold after one or two months. She could easily foresee the end of the relationship and as soon as it started. There hadn't been very much to lose afterall. But that wasn't the case in her current relationship though. She cared and she cared deeply. The opportunity cost of ending things would hurt more deeply than she bargained for.

But she was happy. Maybe that was the challenge. Being that happy felt unfamiliar. It was novel territory. Although her lover would tell her that she was doing just great and she was the best thing that has ever happened

to him. She believed him or a part of her did. However, she also couldn't stop the voice of doubt in her mind from painting a picture of her scattered family and plastering on it the reminder of the familiar feeling of loss and grief. She thought it was amazing how naturally one would think that with each loss and grief, one can slowly get used to the idea of people leaving for relationships ending, but that was not the case for her. If anything, being familiar with loss made her dread it even more.

This dread takes a back seat on most days but there are times when it rears its grisly head and assumes the driver's seat in her mind. And it had a certain preference for her dreams mainly because it never featured alone, it always carried with it a sack of guilt waiting to spread itself like a confetti. This manifests in her dreams. Dreams of grief and loss. It was worse because dreams could hardly distinguish between those who were gone and those who remained. It simply lumped them all together. Just like it had that morning.

Her dream was a cocktail of her loss, her grief, her pain, her sadness, and her guilt. It was why her grandma whom she had not seen in seven years and had not tried to look for had laid in front of her dead. She had touched her grandma's body in the dream but it had been stiff and cold.

It was just a dream. But she wondered if it was more, like a premonition. How many more losses could she bear?.