

FADING PAIN, FINDING LOVE

Written by

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PART 1: NUMB

Staring at myself in the mirror, I couldn't help but notice the faint dark circles around my eyes. At least I was getting more sleep in, that was a good thing. Getting out of my bathrobe and placing it on the wall hook beside the mirror, I walked over to the tub. I carefully dipped my feet feeling the warmth of the water, before slowly soaking my entire body in.

Resting my head on the edge of the tub I sighed. "Everything will be fine, this is just temporary" I consoled myself as I buried my head underwater.

"I can't believe we have just 3 months left before school is finally over. No more homework, quizzes and most importantly-" she pointed at Mr Brian, our Math teacher who was walking over to his car in the school's parking lot *"-we don't have to see him anymore".*

"You know University is the same as Secondary school right? It just has a few differences. And you know, Mr. Brian isn't the villain here." I turned to face her *"Nana, you had just one bad grade score from him. It isn't the end of your life."* I said diverting her focus to me

"But Peju, what if that affects my chances of getting into Liedien University?, then we won't be together" she lowered her head *"Hey that won't happen-"* I lifted her head *"-I know you, and I know you can easily maneuverer this. I trust you"* I smiled at her and gave her a light tap on her shoulders.

Jolting my head back up I wiped my face with my hands "Peju, mom said dinner is ready!" my younger brother called out from the other side of my bathroom.

"Yeah, I'll be right out!" I replied, hearing the squeaking sound of my room door as it closed shut.

A couple of minutes later, I got out of my bathroom wrapped in my towel. I dressed in my pyjamas and made my way to the corridor. It appeared dark and lonely as some of the bulbs on the walls of the corridor were burned out. Eyeing the brown boxes that filled the little space left to walk through in the corridor, I made my way to the dining room.

My mom had decided this last month to move. She claimed that she had applied to work at the headquarters of her job in Lagos because she believed she wasn't doing much here in Port-Harcourt. True, the area of Port-Harcourt where we stayed was quite small and my siblings and I had lived here our entire lives. It didn't seem fair to go. Then again, I could understand why she would wish to relocate to a place with greener pastures.

But still, I couldn't help but feel that she was doing this for another reason.

"Good to see you out of your room" My mom cheered looking at me with a large smile on her lips before placing a plate of fried plantain on the dining table and heading back into the kitchen. Coming out of the kitchen holding some serving spoons, she placed them on an empty plate on the table. "Lami, come sit. We're about to eat dinner!" She called out to my brother who was in the living room watching TV. Switching off the TV he ran over to us before taking a seat.

"Mom, I'll have to take a rain check tonight. The hospital just called, and they need extra nurses. Some emergency patients just came in" My sister Dumni, dashed out of her room and grabbed her car keys from the kitchen counter.

She swiftly made her way to my mom and gave her a light peck on her cheek.

"I'll be back home by tomorrow afternoon. Bye guys" She waved as she quickly walked over to the door and left the house.

"I guess it's just us then." my mom sat on her chair, scooting it towards the table. "Lami, would you like to give the grace?" She asked smiling over at him. "Yup" he beamed with joy like he had won an award. I get how this could be like that, he was just 7. He always got so excited when he was involved in anything.

"So um...Mrs Azi called. They plan on giving Nana's things to Goodwill and-" My mom paused sighing deeply and looking into my eyes " -they wanted to know if you wanted to keep any of her things before they gave them out".

A few months ago, I would have burst out angry at why they would do that and at why Mom would have told me such. But, that was then. "Um..., ok-" I paused placing my hands on my thigh, suddenly looking at the prints of my pyjamas short. "When?" I asked.

"On Thursday, but she said you could come by their place tomorrow if that's okay with you.".

"Yeah, that's fine" I lifted my head and gave my mom a reassuring smile. I felt a wave of comfort as she smiled back at me.

PART TWO: CHANGE**NEXT DAY**

Reaching the last step of my front yard, I felt the balmy air around me filling my lungs. I lifted my hands to shield my face from the sun, to look at the sky. The weather wasn't violent, it was just a perfect mix of warm and bright. I wasn't sure if I wanted to go to Nana's house immediately. It was quite still early and I didn't want to drop in suddenly. *Why did I wake up so early?* I still couldn't answer that question.

I had barely had breakfast. However, I had quietly told my Mom—who was still getting ready for work—that I was leaving. It could have looked like I was rushing somewhere, but that was far from the case.

Looking at the houses I passed as I walked down the street. I realised the neighbourhood appeared different. Though not entirely different, I could tell that something changed. Like how you could spot a few yellow or orange leaves on some trees and plants. How warm the air felt and how the breeze lightly brushed the hair on your skin. I didn't think I had missed out on much. It seemed as though time did not wait for me, not that it could.

I hadn't been past my house since Nana's funeral, and all day the weather was gloomy. I remember how it threatened to rain that day. The clouds were heavy and grey. The air was chilly and muggy. I was convinced that it would rain. But, it didn't. I recall thinking, *Wow, even the weather is sad.* Just like the weather, I was very different back then. So angry with the world, I couldn't see the good in anything. One would think that with how I am now, she left us a couple of weeks ago. But no, it's been four months and I still *feel* deeply. At least, I constantly tell myself, *I'm not angry anymore* and that's where I am at now.

Every day is just another step taken towards healing. It is often said that 'time heals our wounds'. But, what if it doesn't?

Standing at the front door, I took a deep breath before ringing the bell. "I'm coming" I heard a familiar voice echo from within the house. Without wasting time, the door was opened. "Good Morning, Mrs Azi" I smiled coming face to face with the owner of the voice. "Good Morning Peju" She gave a wide smile as moved closer to hug me. I always loved her hugs, she never made it a trouble to treat me like her own child. Likewise, I saw her as a second mom "I didn't expect you'll be here this early, not that I mind of course. Please come in" She opened the door widely gesturing for me to step into her home. "What about Mr Azi?" I asked.

"Oh he had something to take care of in town" She smiled "Would you like to have breakfast with me?. You know you're not a guest here, so feel free to help yourself." She closed the door behind her as she walked towards the kitchen.

Following her into the kitchen, the scent of pancakes and eggs filled the air and my lungs. I couldn't possibly say no. Taking out a plate and serving myself I joined her at the dining table. The entire time we just talked and enjoyed each other's company. When we were done, we walked upstairs to what was once Nana's room.

"So, we have already started packing up some of her things. They are labelled though, so you'll be able to check through without getting confused". Mrs Azi said standing by the door frame as I walked some of the now full boxes in the room. "You know before coming here, I wondered how you could from this?. She was your only child, and yet you seem-" I turned around to face her "- more at peace than I do".

"Well, the truth is" she paused "you don't actually stop grieving the loss of a loved one. With time, you tend to just...live with it" She nodded her head giving a slight smile. "You will learn to heal and rebuild around the pain you have. Nothing will ever feel the same again, and it's okay". She continued.

I sighed. It was true, I didn't feel the same any longer. A huge part of my life had been taken from me. But, to be ok, I wasn't so sure about it.

"I'll leave you to it then." She said before disappearing into the hallway.

PART THREE: MEMORIES

Scanning the labels on the boxes-clothes, shoes, and books-my eyes caught on one particular box which was not labelled. It was secluded at the corner of the room, maybe it wasn't up for donation. Walking over to it, I could see some of it's content. It had pictures, some papers, books and other random items. Slowly searching through the box my hand felt a familiar texture buried. Dragging it from the pile of items, I was shocked to see I was right.

"She kept it" I whispered to myself in shock as I wiped the little dust off it. "She had told me, she had thrown it away". Looking at the now-old straw bracelet in my hands, I couldn't believe she had kept it all this while. How could she have kept it? I was so sure it was long gone.

I remember how she gifted me this when we were just in elementary school. Nana had made one for each of us. But unfortunately, we got into a big argument the week after and I gave it back to her in anger. When we resolved our fight, and I asked her for it she said she had thrown it away. I didn't believe it at first, so I kept asking her for it till the end of junior school when I gave up.

I unconsciously found myself wiping a tear from my eyes as I smiled.

I took my time going through things and found some really funny pictures of her and I which I had then kept in a little box I had found.

"Last drawer" I cracked my fingers before pulling it open. There were a bunch of papers, magazines and... "Liedien University?" I scrunched my brows. I slowly opened the envelope and brought out the letter. I was terrified to read it at first, but it didn't matter anymore. So, I swiftly opened it reading the first sentence.

"She got in!" I gasped, putting my palm over my mouth. "She got in" I repeated. I squeaked jumping up and down in the same spot. Suddenly, I stopped. It dawned on me. She got in, but she wasn't even here to know that. *This shouldn't have been* was all I could think about. Nana's death was too quick and unexpected. No one saw it coming.

On that day I had tried her calling number repeatedly, but it kept saying her line was switched off. I found it odd because Nana never allowed her phone to run out of battery, and she never purposely switched off her phone. But, I didn't think too deeply about it until later that evening. My mom got a call from my sister while we were making dinner. She stepped out to the dining and I instinctively followed. She talked in hushed tones and stared at me with fear and disbelief in her eyes.

After her call she approached me and said It was about Nana, and without hearing the rest of what she had to say my head was sent into a spiral. *Was that why her phone was switched off?* I kept asking myself. We rushed to the hospital only to see Mr and Mrs Azi seated in the waiting room. Mrs Azi was crying profusely on her husband's chest.

That was when I knew Nana had gone. Apparently, Nana had a brain aneurysm. The Doctor said it rarely happened to younger adults and children, but was still possible. He mentioned it was hard to have been detected because sometimes one doesn't show the symptoms, and that was the case for Nana.

But now looking at this letter, I was convinced about a lot of things.

PART FOUR: MOVING ON

Taking what I deemed necessary and saying goodbye to Mrs Azi, I left the house. My phone rang in my back pocket as I made my way to the street. It was my sister, she offered to pick me up cause Mom had told her about my visit. I told her that I had something to do first, and informed her where to pick me up.

Getting to my destination, I walked passed the familiar path I knew. I had been here just once, but I could still remember the way. Finally resting my eyes on what could only seem like a dream, I sat down on the grass. *Nana Love Azi, a beloved daughter and friend.* I smiled at the last past, because she was indeed a beloved friend.

"Well, hi Nana" I started "I know I haven't been a frequent here, or haven't even been here since the funeral and...I'm sorry" I apologised. "I didn't think coming here, could help me heal in any way. But, that was at first when I couldn't properly process you leaving".

"I visited your home today. And, I picked up some things" I reached out for the straw bracelet "I didn't know you had kept this" My voice cracked as I tried to swallow any sign of pain in them. "Funny how, how the memory of our first and only fight since childhood is laced with this bracelet" I said as I quickly wiped a tear that threatened to fall.

"I could see why you didn't give it back" I sniffed. "And this" I brought out the acceptance letter, "You got in". I opened it reading the first sentence out. "You were so scared about not getting accepted, but this is proof that I knew you would bounce back" At this point I had given up trying to wipe away the tears on my face, as more tears had followed. "And, I know running away won't make any difference. So, I'm going to go for both of us" I promised. "My memories will be your memories" I smiled as I sniffed. "You know, I never really thanked you for being there when my parents got divorced" I sniffed again. "I know you knew I was thankful. But, I should I have said so with words. So...I'm saying thank you now, even though it's late" I lowered my head. "And lastly. I won't feel guilty for moving on, because I know you wouldn't have wanted that" I lifted my head staring at the tombstone. "This is not goodbye, because I know you're still with me" I took a deep breath "So...till we meet again, rest well my friend". I wiped my tears as I stood up picking up the little brown box with me.

I smiled at the tombstone one last time before heading towards my sister's car which had just pulled up.

"Are you okay?" She asked as I got in.

I turned my head to face her and I smiled "I will be perfectly fine".