

For the first time, I journeyed to the place where they said a certain god listened to prayers and absolved the sins of his people. They called him a priest, and I was there to confess my unholy and holy transgressions to him. As I settled into the confessional cubicle, a whirlwind of memories engulfed me, much like a brewing storm. These were memories I had long buried, but their scars still etched deep within me.

I touched my forehead, left shoulder, and right shoulder with my right hand to make the sign of the cross and prayed, 'In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.'

The sacrament was initiated. The priest greeted me and read Psalms 23. It was time for my confession.

I took a deep breath and began my confession. 'Eledumare bi etí alufa o se pa dé, e la etí nà si emi,' I said, invoking the Yoruba god of creation to open his ears.

I recounted my life story to the priest, starting from the day my father passed away when I was thirteen years old to the moment my mother sold me away. She had waited, holding hope that I might be an Àbíkú, returning to Eledumare like my siblings before me. However, with no impending death and no husband in sight, she, a widow, found herself unable to care for a seemingly purposeless child like me. Her family had forsaken her, her husband's kin rejected a girl child, and her new husband's family refused to accept me. To her, I was utterly useless.

I felt a mixture of sadness, anger, and shame as I told my story, but I also felt a sense of relief at finally being able to share it with someone.

I spoke slowly and deliberately, trying to control my emotions. I had fondly called my mother 'ìyè mi' because she was my life even though she hated the very sight of me. This time, though, my mother did not respond when I called her, and she remained silent as I inquired about our destination. It was as if she had suddenly turned deaf and mute.

We walked a distance till we got to a shade near the Yemoja stream, awaiting what would be the end of our journey together. By the end of the stream stood a man exuding a distinct African essence. He raised the folds of his Agbádá, inviting a refreshing breeze to grace his sides as a respite from the unforgiving Nigerian tropical heat.

As he approached us, my mother told me to stay by the tree. She left to discuss with him near the bank of the river. I stayed by and watched them from a distance, seeing the conversation that ensued between them. What struck me most was his sheer stature. He was a towering figure and his breadth eclipsed even the formidable size of my mother's cherished bench.

My mother waved to me as a sign to move to them. As I neared the riverbank, she stood in anticipation. He drew closer to me, and I could clearly see the scars etched into his skin come into view. It was three concise horizontal lines above four elongated vertical strokes. Ilà, the

thing they call tribal marks, commanded attention with a radiance that rivaled the brilliance of the noonday sun.

The man with the Ilà talked to me. He told me his name was Abimbola, and he will be my husband. I looked to the river to find my mother approaching us, but she was nowhere to be found. My mother has given me away.

I heard no goodbyes nor my mother's voice. The last thing she said to me was nothing. A heavy cloud of emotions draped over me, not merely because my mother left but because I found myself thrust into the uncharted realm of matrimony. It was as if fate had woven a tapestry of unexpected twists, and I stood at its epicenter, a bewildered character in a story I had never imagined for myself.

I had heard of women given off in marriage from Ifedore village, and I never wanted to be one of them. I wanted a grand wedding like the king's daughter. One befitting for a princess even though I was a pauper.

Abimbola had come all the way from Oyo town. With no ceremony nor goodbye, my mother had sold me for 3 tubers of yam and 10 pounds sterling. I moved to Oyo to settle with a rich man and became his slave wife.

Being wed to Abimbola was the worst thing that happened to me. I knew it would be bad, but I never could have fathomed how bad it would get. He was already married with four wives and had seven children.

His youngest child was ten years old. So, one could just imagine how wicked my mother and Abimbola were. I never got to know his age, yet the years he carried with him stretched far beyond my existence. The lines on his face spoke volumes, weaving the story of a life far richer in experience than my own fleeting years could fathom.

The sting of death would have tasted better than the life I live now. I was currently a full-bloomed woman. I had now spent 18 years on Yoruba soil with no child. In the darkened chambers of my soul, the cruel refrain lingers: 'All my children, now dead.' I did not extinguish their light but instead entrusted them back to Eledumare's care before they ever touched this earthly ground. No child of mine will go through what I have gone through in the name of poverty, hate, and shame.

'These are all my sins,' I ended my confession to the priest, my words trembling as tears welled up in my eyes.

The priest's sigh carried the weight of countless confessions.

'Sister, are you truly sorry for all your sins?' he said.

'Priest, I am now with a child. This one has refused to go. I have done everything possible to get rid of this child,' I said.

'Sister, your sins have been forgiven. You are now a new creature in Christ, having been baptized of water. Killing your child is a sin against God and your newfound faith.'

'I cannot bring this child into this wicked world. Especially with Abimbola in it.'

'The Lord will take care of your child, Sister.'

The priest reminds me of the new Christian faith I have been brought into. What he said was all so strange to me. He talked at length. I cannot listen. I only hear. The anger and sadness I felt was too overwhelming.

The only thing I heard was his final word, 'Amen,' bringing an end to the session.

I came out of the box thinking of how the priest wanted me to bring a child into this condition. I needed to do something about it, but I must first leave the church.

Our house was not too far from the Catholic church. I got home in time to find Abimbola and his babalawo sitting by the door's entrance.

'Abebi, I thought I told you not to leave today! It is an auspicious day!' Abimbola raked angrily. You could almost feel the veins on his face pop out into other tribal marks.

'I had to do something important today!' I yelled at him.

'You would have received the beating of your life today if not for the fact that you are near your delivery date,' he said.

I wish he had beaten me like he always did. I lost five pregnancies to his beating already. He should have ended all of my suffering, and I will take myself and the child with me to Eledumare.

'Beat me Abimbola! Leave scars on my body like you do!' I screamed as I walked to enter the house.

'Stop! Are you blind?!' Abimbola yelled. He grabbed my hand angrily. His grip closed inescapably around those who dared to challenge him. It was a grip that left no room for doubt, a relentless force of fate itself.

I was not afraid because if this was the day death would meet me, I welcomed it with open arms.

Apparently, the babalawo had locked everyone inside the house apart from Abimbola. He sat right in front of the door performing all manners of incantations to protect the house from all evils. He came to do it today because of my pregnancy. I had lost so much, and Abimbola was concerned about the new one I would have only for his selfish gains.

'It is done,' the babalawo said. As he stood and walked towards me, the sound of his anklets greatly irritated me.

'What do you want?' I said offensively. Before he could say a word, Abimbola had raised his hand and struck me. I felt the sting of the blow on my left cheek, but I refused to show any pain.

'When you give birth, you will give me your daughter,' the babalawo said.

My voice sails through the fog of confusion. I confess, 'I don't understand.' *How could the babalawo have known I would have a daughter*, I thought.

'Abebi, you heard him correctly. You will give our daughter to this man. She will be his wife,' Abimbola said.

I knew that he would do this. He had been planning it for a long time because he hated the very sight of me. I felt miserable, but I chose not to go down without a fight.

'Why can you not use one of your other children?! Why must you use my only child?!' I yelled.

'I can't give any of my cherished children out. You have not been useful to me in any way.'

I could not imagine the hateful words coming out of Abimbola's mouth. It's not like he has not said this before, but it carried a more callous tone this time around. One that brought me great fear. My child has been sold before it's even born. I wondered why fate was so wicked and why Eledumare did not accept this child when I wanted to return it.

The babalawo took his leave. Abimbola finally let me in, and I went to my room immediately.

I started to pace around in anger and confusion. The truth was, my due date was around the corner, and it might baffle anyone to know that I entertained the notion of parting with my child as soon as she entered this world. It had been my ritual. My desperate act of survival was to rid myself of all of my offsprings so they won't be bound to a life of misfortune. For those pregnancies that had defied fate and allowed a fragile existence to blossom within me, I had, without hesitation, extinguished their brief flickers of life.

But I wanted to keep this child. However, the thought that Abimbola had sold my child bothered me greatly. I had to do something drastic.

My water broke at the moment I was pacing around. I could blame it on how Abimbola has stressed the living daylight out of me. For the first time, I will leave Abimbola and my old life. I decided that I would go back to the church. The priest mentioned that this new God will care for my child, and so be it.

I packed my bags immediately and left before anyone could notice I was gone.

I reached the church in no time. As soon as I got to the altar and laid my bags down, I screamed in pain. My child was here already. A woman dressed in black and white ran towards me. I could see her face. I recognized her, it was Sister Mary. She helped me get converted to this new religion.

'Are you okay? You look like you are about to give birth.' she said. Her eyes, wide with the unexpected scene before her, tried to decipher the unspoken agony.

I nodded in agreement and showed her my wet clothes. She shouted for help, but I was quick to cover her mouth.

'Please, don't call for help. Do not take me to any hospital. I need a midwife,' I said while still groaning in pain. I wanted to be strong for my child.

'You can't give birth here, madam. I will take you to our clinic,' she said.

I was adamant about going anywhere, but I had no power to overcome her. We left the church and went to the nearby clinic, where many women rushed to me. That was all I knew before I reached the theater.

I pushed like my life depended on it. My child took the last strength I had in me. It was a girl. Abimbola was right. She wailed like the orchestra of nature itself had composed a symphony in her honor. Her cries were not just the sound of a newborn but the announcement of a new chapter in life's grand story.

The nurse asked for my husband, but I told her Sister Mary brought me in. She entered immediately carrying my child in her arms. The nurse left both of us.

Sister Mary told me how strong I was, but I had lost a lot of blood. I felt weak. She brought my child near and gave her to me.

'Àlàké, ni oju mi,' I said as I held her because indeed she had my face. She felt as light as a feather, and her face glowed with innocence and promise. I faced sister Mary to hand her back.

'Don't you want to hold her? Also, we will need to know where your husband is,' she said.

'Forget about my husband. Take my child away and give her to the priest. She belongs to our God now.'

'I cannot do that, Sister Abebi. I am sorry.'

'It is my wish. Please keep my child away from Abimbola. He will sell her off.'

As I lay there, my body weakened, my breaths growing shallow, and the world around me fading into a distant haze, I felt a peculiar breath. It was as if time had slowed to a crawl, and I was suspended between this world and the next.

In that final, fleeting second of consciousness, I surrendered to the inevitable. My grip on life loosened, and I watched as Sister Mary carried Àlàké away.

With the last remnants of strength, I whispered my faith and trust into the silent void, believing that Eledumare would watch over her, protect her, and guide her on a path far different from mine.

A fragile hope had taken root in my heart as I faded into the embrace of eternity.