

I haven't always liked my sister. In my earliest memory of us, we're trying to take a family picture. I'm 4 and a half, and she's 6, and our mother has dressed us up in matching outfits - white lace iro and bubas, with red aso-oke geles. She's wearing the same thing and my father is wearing an agbada in the same fabric. The photo studio is a small dingy space, with printed images and frames lined across the wall. Despite the looks of the studio, Baba Afusa manages to produce the best quality images in our adugbo. My gele feels too heavy and the lace itchy, so I keep squirming despite my mother's instructions to stay still. Irritated, she smacks me across the face and says, "I said stay still, Moradeyo. Can't you be like your sister?" I looked at my sister, with tears forming. She was perfectly poised and holding a smile, picture-ready. I wiped my tears quickly and copied her. Baba Afusa takes the picture and by the time it's printed and framed, it's hard to tell that we struggled to get there. The picture would go on the wall, behind our TV and remain there throughout our childhood.

I spent my childhood trying to be like my sister and in many ways, I failed. It's hard to fill shoes that were never meant to be yours in the first place and that's what being Modesire's sister felt like - wearing shoes that were too big and I would never grow into. She was "the sister", the sister who did better at school, who was prettier - taking my mother's smooth, brown skin and soft eyes, my father's full hair and tallness, the sister who everyone wanted to be friends with, the sister you looked up to and there was me. The sister who was shy and awkward, who was constantly falling behind at school, teachers asking *are you sure you're Modesire's sister?* The sister who couldn't make friends and whose features she couldn't seem to grow into - head too big for her body coupled with my mother's small stature. Whatever Modesire liked, I liked too. If she said her favourite colour was yellow, I said it was mine too. I asked for the same hairstyles she did. I was eager to wear matching clothes with her. I would go on errands with her and if my parents called for Modesire, I would be right behind her. In the early days of this attachment, Modesire indulged me and as we grew older, her indulgence waned. We went from *You can come to leave me alone*, from wearing the same clothes to Modesire insisting that I get dressed first, so she could wear an entirely different outfit and a constant desire to be away from me grew.

"But I'm your sister," I said to her in protest after she refused to let me go out with her. "And sometimes, I wish you weren't," she replied.

Failing to be like Modesire meant that I spent my teens being angry and resentful. I was ready to be anyone else, as long as it wasn't Modesire. I deliberately put myself at the opposite of everything she wanted. She went to science class, I went to arts class. She grew her hair out, I cut my hair. She loved math and biology, I loved English and literature. We fought so much, making big deals out of the

smallest things. I asked to move into our guest room so we could stop sharing a room. The gap between us widened and our parents couldn't wrap their heads around why we just couldn't get along. They staged multiple interventions to repair our relationship, all to the same end, that we stop whatever the rift between us was.

"We can't keep coming home to separate fights. We're your parents, not referees for your screaming matches. We raised both of you the same way, to love and respect each other. What is this constant unkindness between the both of you? Mo, you're the elder one, you should know better than this and Momo, she's not your mate. We're all the family you have and this isn't going to change. One day, we won't be here anymore and all you'll have is one another. This has to stop," they said to us for the umpteenth time.

To please our parents, we came to an understanding. We wouldn't fight each other anymore but we would stay out of each other's ways. We spent most of our teens away in our rooms, trying to find sisterhood and friendship, outside of each other, but it was hard to shake off years of being recognized as "Modesire's sister". I consoled myself with the fact that we would go off to university at different times, and it would be my chance to start over simply as Moradeyo.

In my second year at Unilag studying English, Modesire came to my hostel for the first time. It was one of the private hostels, by Unilag's second gate. She was studying at the College of Medicine, Unilag and stayed on the campus in LUTH, Idi-Araba. It was how we managed to never cross paths in university so far and it didn't help that we barely spoke to each other. More importantly for me, being apart from her was the beginning of exploring what it meant to simply be Moradeyo and not Modesire's sister. I didn't feel pressure to fill any shoes and I found myself out of the shadows that had clouded most of my life. It was freeing.

So when I got a text from her asking me to come outside, I knew that something had gone terribly wrong. She was standing there, in blue scrubs and a lab coat thrown over and her face broke into relief when she saw me. She asks us to sit and we decide on the staircases leading up to the hostel. She rushes through the details.

Our parents were on the way home and as they drove through the Ojuelegba underbridge, a tanker fell off the bridge onto their car. Our father was crushed on impact but our mother was terribly injured. It took hours before they were both removed from the car and rushed to LUTH's Accident and Emergency. They arrived in the back of a Danfo whose chairs had been removed, robbed of all valuables including phones and means of identification. In an odd twist of fate, her class was training on the ward and rushed towards the ruckus caused by their arrival. It didn't take long for her to realize who they were.

“I tried everything Moradeyo. There was no oxygen and there was no blood. I struggled to find a bed for her, to get the doctors to look at her. I was one of their own and I still couldn’t get decent care for her. I watched Mommy die. I’ve spent all my time in medical school training to save lives and I couldn’t save the people that mattered the most to me. I really tried.”

It started raining as she finished talking. I didn’t know what to say. I couldn’t wrap my head around the fact that our parents had just died, in the most cruel of ways. So we sat there, holding each other in the rain, and we cried and cried until our throats were hoarse and our tears merged with raindrops.

“You’re all I have now, Moradeyo. It’s just us.”

Grief being the thing that brought us together felt like a cruel joke. We had lost the most important people in our lives but gained unwavering love for each other. None of it mattered, none of the resentment from our childhood, none of the ways we misunderstood each other. We had been sisters all our lives, but it took us 20 years to become friends. We moved back to our parents’ house in Surulere. It was all we had left of them, the house and the memories in it. We shared our parents’ room and on nights when we couldn’t fall asleep, we would reminisce about growing up.

“I can’t believe we fought so much,” Modesire says to me.

“It seems so silly now, but I just wanted to be like you and no matter how hard I tried, I just couldn’t meet up. All the comparisons and pressure to live up to the expectation of being your sister? I just assumed you were embarrassed by me and better off without me. Throw in low self-esteem and raging hormones that come with puberty. I didn’t have anyone else to take it out on,” I say to her.

“I didn’t know you felt this way. I knew you looked up to me and I just felt so much pressure to get things right and be the sister you could look up to. You stopped talking to me and I didn’t know what was happening with you. Felt like you figured it out, like you didn’t need me anymore.,” she responds.

“We really had it all wrong, didn’t we? I’ll always need you Mo. Always,” I add, finding her hand in the dark.

“Me too Momo. More than you can imagine.”

We became inseparable. We never had to look for hands to hold because our hands were there for each other. These hands held space, pushed, comforted and rooted for. I was there when she finally finished medical school, clapping non-stop as she walked across the stage. She was there at my convocation. We celebrated her first job and she supported my decision to be a freelance writer. One call, one text, a shout of each other’s names, and we would be there for each other. There was

no me, without her and no her without me. We were better, stronger, capable because we had each other.

For the third month in a row, Modesire hadn't been paid a salary. She was showing up at the government hospital where she worked, every day, without fail. She was buying her equipment - gloves, masks, sanitizers. She was contributing towards patients' bills and working in conditions that were far from ideal. She was giving so much of herself and getting nothing in return.

So when she came home after a 24-hour shift and burst into tears as I opened the door, saying "I can't do this anymore" over and over again, I knew that we had to get her out. It wasn't the first time she expressed wanting to leave. I had spent the last few years with her, hearing her wish for a fresh start. *The only good thing about being here is you Momo. There's nothing else here for me.*

As much as I had envisioned a life where we'd never be too far away from each other, I knew that there was love in letting Mo go. We decided on her moving to the UK because, in some ways, it was the closest option. I did everything I could - doubling up on freelance writing and editing gigs, so the funds could go towards her move, practising with her for PLAB 1 & 2, and her IELTS, reworking her CV and applying for jobs with her. I was there through her passing the exams and through the multiple rejections, and I was there when the job offer came through.

On June 5th, 2021, five years after our parents died, Modesire came home with her passport and her visa in it. It was the final push she needed.

Modesire left at the end of June. The weeks leading up to her departure were a blur. Days spent making sure she had everything she needed and figuring out how to fit 27 years of her life into two 23kg boxes. Foodstuff to last her a couple of months, Okrika winter jackets for the winter, ankara wrappers that belonged to our mother, and hair extensions.

The night before, we go over her boxes, making sure she isn't forgetting anything.

"I think that's all," she says to me.

"No, there's one more thing." I had taken down the family picture from behind the TV. "I want you to have it, Mo. We're always with you," I say to her as I hand it over.

"Do you remember when I was 10 and I said I wish you weren't my sister?"

"How could I forget?"

"I'm sorry Momo. I lied. Being your sister has been the greatest joy of my life and I wouldn't have it any other way. Thank you, for everything."

We arrived at the airport at noon even though her flight was at six in the evening. There are queues, to get into the airport, to weigh her bags, to check-in. The entire process is chaotic but we manage to check her without greasing the palms of the numerous officials asking us to find them something. I wait with her and we watch as people say goodbye to their loved ones, knowing that it will be us doing the same soon. We stall until we can't anymore and then we decide that it's time for her to go.

The airport officials won't let me go past immigration. We're fighting tears as we say goodbye because we promised each other that we wouldn't cry. This was a thing of joy, she insisted.

"You have to let me go Moradeyo. Please," she says to me, as we hold each other in an embrace.

"Okay. I'm letting you go but mi o fi e n le." It was my way of saying she had my blessing but I was never going to let her go. I watch her until I lose sight of her.

On the way back from the airport, I let myself cry. I mourn the loss of what our relationship could have become. I know that we will try to stay in touch, over texts and blurry video calls, but the distance will take a toll. It won't be the type of distance that makes the heart grow fonder but a distance that makes the heart yearn. My heart will yearn for my sister and her presence. I can't help but think about how much this country has taken away from me and how it failed and continues to fail me. Yet, I know I can't leave. All I have and I've known is here. This house holds all that's left of my parents and all the love Modesire and I have experienced is within the walls of our home. Their bodies are at the Atan Cemetery in Yaba where we see them every month. I can't let this all go. A text from Modesire interrupts my thoughts.

"Boarding now. I'll text you when I land. We'll be together again soon. I promise." I want to say to her, but *we don't know when soon is. Please come back.* Instead, I respond, "Have a safe flight my darling Mo. See you soon."