

I thought I had seen the end of my Father's wickedness when he sent my three-month fetus and me off to be a maid in the neighbouring town, but that was just one of the thousands I have lived to see and I was yet to see.

It was a rainy day, and sales hadn't gone as planned. Nothing had been going as planned. Not my life, not my education, not my relationship, and definitely not this pregnancy or Ben's outright denial of being responsible. He knew he was responsible. He was my first and only. I could understand he was afraid, and I was ready to let it slide, but I needed him to come to his senses sooner than ever. While it wasn't looking like he was going to come around anytime soon, I had to move on and prepare for whatever that was going to happen to me.

I am the financial pillar of what is left of my family- my Father and I. When I turned ten, my Mother ran away from home, leaving us behind. My sister, Loretta, who was two years older than me, loathed her for abandoning us with the shadow of the man I used to once call Daddy so tenderly and affectionately. Me? I don't blame her, and neither do I loathe her. Sincerely, I was glad she took to her heels while she still could. It made me wonder if Loretta had a blindfold on whenever my Father was all over his punching bag- our Mother or if she had her eardrums blocked when my Father rained abuses and dehumanizing words on her, or if Loretta's heart was made of stone that she couldn't feel our Mother's broken and wounded soul. Could it be that Loretta was never aware of how our Father beat out our baby from Mother's stomach till she almost bled to death?

My Father wasn't always like that. He was the best Father in the whole world, from what my tender memories could recall. He would return from work every day with different goodies and junk for Loretta and me, giving us piggyback rides around the house whenever we demanded it and sweetly kissing my

Mother as she prepared our meal. Ah, those were good times that didn't last. If only I could turn back the hands of time and make things right again. If only I could tell my Father's boss not to terminate my Father's employment. If only I could ban Uncle Lukman, who introduced my Father to drinking and smoking from our house. If only I could tell my dearest Mother to hush, not speak or challenge my Father, and just let him be. If only I could make Aunty Patricia not move in with her sleeveless tops and skimpy skirts as our next-door neighbour.

That evening, I returned home drenched by the rain only to meet Aunty Patricia coming out of the kitchen. I could smell curry and thyme, and I knew she was cooking with our gas cooker. She did this occasionally, but I have decided to ignore it to avoid facing my Father's wrath. Her face was not a sight to behold, and I could tell her preoccupation before now from her messed up eye shadows to her faded lipstick, slacked spaghetti singlet to her unzipped trousers. I was too cold to say anything, so I decided to avoid her as always. Her jezebel's eyes peered at my chest, and she paid more attention.

“Are you pregnant?” Aunty Patricia asked with a scowl.

My heart skipped four beats, and I felt a seizure all over my body, but then, what does she know about pregnancy? She has never been pregnant, and behind her back, I helped spread the rumour that she was a barren woman, which was why she preyed on married men.

I hissed and strode past her, but her piercing nails dug into my skin, and she pulled me back. Aunty Patricia examined me, and I felt naked, more naked than I felt when I was with Ben that night, maybe more naked than I was on the day I was born.

“This girl, you’re pregnant.” She said and let go of my arms. “When last did you see your period?”

I turned away from her immediately and aimed for my room, only to meet my six-foot-tall Father standing guard at the entrance.

“Nonye, are you pregnant?” His coarse voice echoed through the house.

I began to breathe heavily. I shivered, not from the cold of my drenched body but from fear of the ill fortune that was about to meet me that evening. Right before I could form words to defend myself, my Father slapped me, sending me to the ground.

“Slut! Like Mother, like daughter.” He screamed as he kicked me on the ground.

It made me remember that night, how Loretta watched my Father kick my Mother in the stomach and how I tried to pull my Father away from my Mother. Immediately, I used my hands to cover my stomach, and amidst my Father’s angry kicks, I could hear Aunty Patricia clap her hands. I cried because I knew I was alone and no one was coming to save me. Maybe if Loretta hadn’t left the country three years ago, I wouldn’t be alone. In her way, she cared and looked out for me under our Father’s roof, but I was never to be in her way.

“Cornelius, leave her now! Do you want to kill her?” Aunty Patricia shrieked, and it pissed me off even though my Father stopped kicking me.

“Who is the father?” My Father panted like a beast.

I wasn’t going to answer him. He doesn’t deserve to know Ben. Besides, Ben was still in his feelings and shocked about being a Father out of the blue. I didn’t want to pull him into this mess or ruin his immediate future as he was

leaving for the University to study Mechanical Engineering. He was my pride and joy. I will do anything to protect him and my baby.

My silence was golden. It made my Father storm out of the house, and Aunty Patricia entered the kitchen. I shuddered as I tried to pacify myself on the ground, pulling my ached body together. I stayed there all evening. I couldn't figure out why I did that, but I did anyway. I watched my Father return home drunk. He ignored me like I wasn't even there while he ate dinner with Aunty Patricia. After dinner, they both retired to the room as if nothing happened.

Two days later, my Father came home with a man in his late thirties. He looked grumpy, and that sent a message to me as my Father handed me over to him like an item.

“You can send her back when she is due,” My Father said as the man handed a brown envelope to him.

After six months of toiling as the maid my Father sold me to be, I was sent back here to deliver my baby, and oh, the joy I felt when I heard my baby cry. I instantly forgot the pain, sorrow, regrets, and bitterness that swarmed my heart and body. My soul rejoiced as the midwives placed my baby boy on my chest, and I would never forget our first eye contact. It was heavenly bliss. He was my prize, my jewel, and I will do everything I can to protect him.

I lived in that joy for twenty hours until I discovered something was off. The midwives wouldn't let me see my baby. I was scared. Something must have gone wrong, and they did not want to tell me. I saw my Father with a Reverend Sister outside my room. The door was left ajar, and I could see them clearly as they discussed. I tried to read my Father's lips, but I couldn't, and after a while, they both left. I stayed in the room as bed rest was recommended for me and I prayed that all would be well with my son.

Moments later, a Nurse came in to check my vitals and took a record of whatever she found. She was a young Nurse, and she was living my dream life. I have always wanted to become a Nurse so that I can treat my Mother's wounds and patch up her injuries, but it won't be happening, not in this lifetime.

“How are you feeling?” The Nurse asked with a smile.

“Please, where is my baby? Is he safe? Why can't I see him?” I queried.

“He is fine. Your baby is such a healthy boy,” The Nurse replied.

I heaved a sigh of relief.

“Then, why can't I see him? I want to see him.” I earnestly requested.

“Don't worry, you'll see him soon. They are checking to see that all is well with him. So, just rest so that you can recover properly.” The Nurse said sweetly as she closed her note. She smiled at me one more time and left the room.

If she said my son was fine, I would choose to believe her. However, I couldn't tell how much longer I could hold still without seeing my baby. My Father entered the room, walked to my bedside, and stayed mute. I wasn't thrilled to see him. I would rather not see him at all. I wanted to have my baby and leave.

“I am giving your baby up for adoption.” My Father said firmly. It was to assure me he did not stutter when he spoke those words.

My heart hit a rock, sinking deep into the Atlantic Ocean. To what lengths, to what ends, is my Father's wickedness? When, just until when, will I keep making excuses for his pathetic, unrepentant, evil life? I forgave him when he killed my Mother's baby. It could have been a boy. She has always wanted a boy child to be her pillar, she said. I forgave him for all the times he beat up my

Mother and bruised her. I forgave him for sleeping with Aunty Patricia unapologetically. I forgave him for being mean and cruel to Loretta and me after my Mother left. I forgave him for making me quit school to become the breadwinner of the family. I even forgave him when he sold me when I was three months pregnant into slavery. But, this time around, with my baby, my only source of hope and happiness, I will not forgive him.

“You can’t do that,” I said lowly, fighting back the tears.

I was done being quiet, forgiving, and meek Nonye. For my son, I will be a fighter, a warrior, a backbone, and a Mother.

“If you were not in a hospital bed, I would have slapped you,” My Father flared. “Do you think it is easy to be a parent? What can you, an eighteen-year-old girl, do?”

“I have been a parent longer than you ever were,” I said sternly as my heart raced.

This was the very first time I would talk back to my Father or anyone. It brought a sense of relief, but I still feared him.

“Are you crazy? You are just like your Mother, useless and stupid.” He retorted.

“I am me!” I sniffed. “For once in your life, be a Father, be my Father.” I wiped the tears that rolled down my eyes. I saw the Reverend Sister from earlier come in.

“I have put up with your baggage for far too long that I have become a shadow of who I am, who I can be. Never for once have I asked you for anything. I let you get away with ruining our family. My Mother is nowhere to be found after your several attempts to kill her, and Loretta is overseas doing

prostitution. While this is their shame, you should know it is your bigger shame. You failed at the very one thing you ought to succeed in.” I breathed heavily.

“Nonye,” My Father started.

“Let me finish!” I yelled.

It could be that I didn’t see it right, but I saw my Father squirm. He looked fazed and shaken. He looked like he was before a judge, and anything he said could be and will be used against him.

“I am not you,” I continued. “I am not you to take the easy route, blame the whole world for your misfortune, and run away from responsibilities. I am not my Mother who left her children in the hands of a monster just to save her head. I am not Loretta, who willfully abandoned family for the sake of money. I am not Ben, a coward and a liar. I stand by my responsibilities, I stand by my child, and I will forever be what none of you could be.”

My Father was crying. It was like someone opened a bank of tears in his eyes and let it all out. I was sobbing, but I was firm. I wouldn’t let anything shake me ever again. I will be my son’s strongest pillar, one he can bank on for life.

“I am sorry,” Mucus ran down my Father’s nose, accompanying the tears that rolled off his cheek as he sniffed. “Nonye,” He continued but fell on his knees and wept more.

I looked away from him as I cried. The Reverend Sister came closer and embraced me. It was the warmest embrace I ever received. It gave me confidence, it gave me hope, it gave me strength, and it certainly gave me peace. I cried on her shoulders, not caring that I didn't know her. She softly patted my back as she prayed for me silently. I heard the words she muttered.

She told God to give me peace and heal my wounded heart. She told God to keep me and be my strength. She told God to forgive my Father and help him change. She also told God to bless my baby.

I was thankful to her. I was grateful for her soft prayers. I was thankful for this moment, and above all, I was thankful for my son, who, at this point, I had decided to name Tobeckukwu.

Moments later, my Father had left the hospital. He couldn't bear to look me in the eyes. It now seemed like I was a shining light that could make him go blind at any moment. The Nurse from earlier before came in, carrying my son with a broad smile on her face. I smiled too and carefully received him from her hands. He was sleeping, and he had the most peaceful look ever, maybe handsome like Ben, too. I rocked him gently, with my heart filled with warmth. I looked at the Reverend Sister, who was sitting on the plastic chair across the bed.

“Don't worry, no one will ever take your baby from you.” She assured me.

“Tobeckukwu, that's his name,” I said.

“That's a beautiful name.” She replied.

I smiled and nodded.

“I know this might seem too early, but how would you like to work for us at the Orphanage home, where you can take care of Tobeckukwu and other children who don't have a Mother like you?” The Reverend Sister asked in respect.

“I would love that.” I smiled as I was enveloped in bliss.

