

Becoming a Fractured Being

By: Emmanuel Chinedum

I did not become this version of myself by chance. It was a gradual evolution, starting from the night before we brought Mama Ukwu back to the village. I could remember vividly how my mother called me into the other room, where Mama Ukwu was lying, almost lifeless, and said to me, "We are taking Mama Ukwu to the village tomorrow. She will stay there for a while." Her eyes were tired, but I failed to look deeper into those eyeballs of hers, because if I had, I would have probably seen the bigger picture ahead of me. I would have understood that Mama Ukwu's relocation to the village would mean one thing: the disruption of my life.

When she said I should pack, I wondered what to pack. It was going to be a day trip, on which we would spend a maximum of two days in the village, so there was nothing to pack for, I had thought. When my mother saw the little luggage of mine—my clothes, ranging from my underwear to a top and a sweater—wrapped in a black polythene bag, she gazed at me strangely.

"What is this?" She asked. The night was quiet; my siblings were asleep, making her voice echo with such a disruptive tone. I shrugged, puzzled by her question.

"It's just my clothes. Something I will wear for a few days." I answered innocently and stared at her. There was a mysterious colouring plastered on her face, and once again, I missed the details. I missed what her round, dark facial features were telling me at that time. I missed the inaudible words that escaped her mouth. I missed the details her eyes carried as they rolled across to the other side of the room, where she advanced with numbered steps, bent slowly, unzipped my bag, and started pulling my clothes, sorting, arranging, and rearranging. Still, I did not realise what was actually going on.

Mama Ukwu cannot walk with her two legs, which meant we had to carry her into Oga Paulo's old Volvo car. My mother had woken up early in the morning and carried Mama Ukwu into the bathroom, where she bathed her. From the room, I could hear her sobs, no matter how hard she tried to muffle them. I also heard the 'Thank You Lord' chorus forcing its way from her mouth, but she struggled with it. I wondered what there was to thank God for anyway; we were struggling with several life issues, including Mama Ukwu's ailment, so I understood if she struggled to sing the song. It was her favourite song. It was the first song she would introduce whenever we were having our compulsory morning devotion.

"Okechukwu hold her hand!" My mother commanded my brother, and he obeyed swiftly. Oga Paulo controlled the transition of the process as we huddled Mama Ukwu into his car. He had removed the two seats at the back of his car, so there was an empty space where Mama Ukwu would lay down as we travelled to the village.

I struggled to understand why my mother asked me to bring so many clothes. What exactly are we going to the village to do?

Travelling burdened me, and that day was no exception. My mother instructed me to sit in the back with Mama Ukwu, and I was infuriated. Caring for Mama Ukwu was one of the tasks I didn't enjoy. I saw how it destroyed my mother, and little did I know that I was about to be destroyed by it as well. From the front seat, she passed the food flask to me. "She needs to eat; feed her." She instructed. *Feed who? Excuse me, feed who exactly?* I hesitated for a few passing seconds before collecting the food flask and proceeding towards Mama Ukwu. I adjusted her head slightly, shutting my nose from the stench emanating from her body. She gazed at me, looking me deep in the eye. That was the first time in many days we locked eyes. The other days in our apartment in Aba, I avoided her eyes as much as possible because it reminded me of her wickedness and her cruelty. The version of her that existed before the sickness came.

She turned her face away as I approached her with a spoonful of rice. My heart started boiling. *Not today, Mama Ukwu, not today.* "Mama Ukwu, open your mouth." I ordered loudly so that my mother would hear it. I also wanted her to hear the unwillingness in my voice and the lack of desire that accompanied this perilous task she ordered me to do. I also wanted her to hear my frustration about following her to the village. I tried to feed Mama Ukwu again, and she raised her right hand and slapped the food away. I fumed in anger. "Mama Ukwu!" I screamed.

My mother and I tidied up the house. This was another chore I hated. I was allergic to dust, and my mother, of all people, seemed not to understand this. After the clean-up, I developed a strong cough, and I barely slept through the night. The village was calm because it was not a festive period. In the morning, a few old faces came to welcome us and to also wish Mama Ukwu a quick recovery.

On the third day, my mother called me apart after laying Mama Ukwu to sleep. She cleared her throat. I was nervous. But I was expecting her to simply break the news of our departure the next day. Even though I had wondered who would stay with Mama Ukwu if we went back to Aba.

"I will be leaving for Aba tomorrow, and you'll stay with your grandmother." She dropped the bombshell. For a moment, I thought it was a trance. "Mummy, what do you mean? I would be staying with Mama Ukwu in the village. Doing what exactly? Are you coming back tomorrow?" I had so many questions, and she seemed not to be ready to answer them.

The silence captured me and threw me off balance. I wished I could just blink and find myself in Aba. "I will be visiting during the weekends. You will be looking after her until I find somebody who can handle her in her condition. You are no longer a child. If you cannot look after your grandmother in her time of sickness, who will look after you when you grow old?" She concluded with her words of subtle coercion and a hilarious question meant to guilt-trip me. I was stunned.

"How? Mummy, how? How do you expect me to look after Mama Ukwu? You know how she is. You know what she's suffering from? You know I cannot carry this burden." I cried out. I couldn't keep calm. The situation clouded my mind with so many questions, many of which I couldn't find momentum to ask my mother. How did she overestimate my capability to the extent of believing that I would be able to cater for her nagging, ungrateful, sick seventy-eight-year-old mother, who needed an aid for basically everything she did? I expected her to have a rethink, to change her mind, and to tell me that she was joking and that she didn't mean what she said, but it didn't happen. She meant every single word that came out of her mouth that night. I was stuck with Mama Ukwu.

A few days ago, I turned twenty. There was no peculiar event to mark my birthday, but my friends celebrated me online and offline. I shared pictures and exchanged laughs and crazy giggles via video call. How would I have thought that my life was about to change in a direction that I find so unkind and cruel? Watching my mother leave the next morning sent fangs of anger into my heart.

As she passed the instructions on how Mama Ukwu's drugs would be administered and how I was supposed to cook her dishes and take care of her body, I was thrown into a well of utmost confusion. How am I supposed to do all this every day until God knows when? I couldn't hold it in. I lashed out.

"Mummy, I don't understand how you expect me to care for Mama Ukwu. Remember, school will be opening soon, and since it's my first year, I have to prepare very well. How do you expect me to get my things ready while in the village with Mama Ukwu? I cannot do this! I am following you back to Aba. I cannot do this at all." I blurted.

My mother did not take it lightly. She sparked. She shouted at me. "What is wrong with you? What has come over you? Ugochi, you are a woman, and you must learn how to behave and take responsibility like a woman."

She turned her back and left.

It was difficult to forget the overwhelming sense of forced responsibility that weighed down on my young shoulders. I couldn't wrap my head around the reality surrounding me. Where do I start? How do I cope? How do I manage to be with her and cater for her? Restlessness descended on me. A wave of anxiety clouded my heart. I went through a whirlwind of emotions. From guilt to anger to resentment, buried deep in the depths of my heart. I grappling with an uneasy transition from adolescence into adulthood, and suddenly I am being entrusted with an old woman suffering from a partial stroke. My mental health was in shambles. I was left undone.

Mama Ukwu's sense of speech was affected by her ailment, so it was difficult to know what was wrong with her at each point in time. A woman, once vibrant and energetic, reduced to a sac of vegetables, was a mystery to behold. Mama Ukwu was a thorn in our flesh for as long as I could remember. I remember vividly how she criticised my siblings and me whenever she came

around. She would complain if we added weight, if we refused to eat certain kinds of food, if we listened to secular music—the list was endless. One time, she had an argument with my mother because she claimed she was spoiling us. She was the kind of person who despised anything she could not enjoy. When my father died, I heard her tell my aunt, ‘Afa asked for his death,’ According to her, it was my father’s careless lifestyle that led to his death.

Loneliness became my companion. As the day slipped into another, I sank deep into a hole of depression. My social life evaporated. The weight of isolation was suffocating. Most often than not, there was no network in the godforsaken village, so I was totally shut out from the world. My world was crumbling before my very eyes. My mother came a few times and never came again. She would call once in a while and sometimes send money for our feeding and Mama Ukwu’s medications.

The day I was supposed to resume my university studies was etched in my mind as a stark reminder of the harsh reality in which I was living. I was devastated when my mother told me that I wasn’t going to resume with my peers because I was catering for Mama Ukwu. "What happened to all your sisters? Why should I be the one to take care of your dying mother?" I cried on the phone. That night, sleep did not cross my mind. I thought the next morning, my mother would turn up and console me and tell me to pack my bags and get ready to travel to Nsukka to start my journey as an undergraduate, but to my greatest dismay, that did not happen. I vowed that I would never forgive her for doing this to me. For choosing her mother over me. I wish my father was alive. He would have said something. He would have done something.

Right in the middle of my cruel responsibility and missed opportunity, I fell in love with Bolaji, a National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) corper who was posted to our village to serve as a teacher in the village secondary school. In him, I found limited solace. He brought with him an air of excitement and novelty that was hard to resist. We met during one of his tours with the students. It didn’t take long for us to strike up a conversation. He was passionate about teaching, and his love for books was immeasurable. We shared stories, dreams, and, most importantly, laughter. I cherished the moments we stole away from our responsibilities, basking in the warmth of his affection.

However, this joy was short-lived. I caught him cheating. I had visited his apartment to serve him the egusi soup I had prepared and found him wrapped around in pleasure and euphoria with a young girl whom I suspected to be a senior student. The scars of the breakup ran deep, and the flashes of our time together became a cruel mirage. He came back to beg me, but I slapped him furiously and spat him in the face. I was angry with him and fed up with everything.

Nine months swept by, with me still trapped with Mama Ukwu in the village. I was turning into somebody I couldn’t recognize. The stress of caregiving itself took a significant toll. I watched Mama Ukwu’s health deteriorate, and I felt responsible and guilty for her well-being. The constant dread of what would happen and the fear of how I would handle it left me in phases of deep shattering. I was haunted by constant worry and stress that gnawed at my mental health, leaving me emotionally drained.

My breakup with Bolaji unlocked a deep darkness in me, a sudden piercing that broke the chambers of my heart.

The anticipated occurrence happened, and my mother was the first person I called. I heard her wail on the other end of the line. It took a while before I raised the alarm, and within minutes, our house was flooded with different faces. I threw myself on the floor like a child stung by a wild bee and wept. The old women held me, consoling me as I screamed, "Mama Ukwu muoooh! Ewooooh!" They wrapped their wrapper around me, whispering their words of consolation, telling me that I have tried to look after her and that my children and children-children will look after me the way I have taken care of her. Bolaji also visited to offer his condolences, and I treated him like a total stranger.

Mama Ukwu's burial was the talk of the town. Relatives whom I never met in my life, cousins whom I never knew existed, turned up in their numbers, and I was left in utmost wonder of their whereabouts ever since Mama Ukwu was sick. Well, I was glad I did what I had to do to pull myself from the trap my mother pushed me into, even though I was left with scars that will never be healed and a secret that will follow me to my grave.