

I reluctantly roll to the opposite side of the bed, grudgingly opening my eyes to glance at the dressing table as my cell phone vibrates for the third time. I throw leg punches in the air while wearing an agitated grimace on my face. I consult the digital clock on the bedside table; it reads 4:47. I ponder who might be calling with such persistency yet so early. It must be very important.

As far as my eyes could see, the folds of the massive moon cast a bright spotlight along the perimeter of my room. The strong white light accentuated the gloomy parts. I had slept for only four hours. I could feel the dampness; my entire body was dripping from a puddle of my own sweat, which had soaked the bedsheets.

My neighbour's negligence and refusal to pay a shared energy bill resulted in the electricity company disconnecting the entire compound from the grid three days ago. My generator gave up on me the following day, and even after I had fully compensated the technician, he has not responded to my calls, messages or come back to fix the damn generator. This is another reminder not to trust Lagos artisans, just like the popular slang, *'they will run you street'*. The technician has indeed *ran me street*.

After thirty years of my existence, this is the life I get to live, my current reality: untimely utility bill payment, with an obnoxious neighbour, who seems to always enlarge her eyes when she stares at me, and I had the impression that she could see straight through me. Aside from when the rent is due, no one sees the landlord, not even his shadow. A feeble gateman, who is six feet tall, exceedingly slender, and wears an offensive oud that may cause one to go blind with only a whiff, which truly irritates me. I must admit, I cannot wait to move into a saner environment.

I was barely able to move when I tried to get out of my seemingly large bed. I vividly recall the day I acquired this piece of furniture. I had just relocated to Lagos in anticipation of my first job, which I abruptly left after three months of unpaid salaries.

"My colour, this bed is very strong and big; I promise, you will like it", the vendor said.

Prosper, who has now become my very good friend, tried to convince me to go for a larger bed. That day he was wearing a grey papa's cap that squeezed the top of his balloon-shaped head. He had big facial features, hazel-brown coloured eyes, and rolled-up corduroy sleeves that covered his tanned arms. He had a slight talc and dry perspiration odour.

"Oga, I just need something small. I did not bring my entire village to Lagos!" I replied.

"Madam, you are very funny oh! Okay, make I remove small money from it just because of next time, you are now my new customer!"

I contemplated whether to buy it for a few weeks because I was not sure my humble, one-bedroom apartment needed that amount of bedspace. It now serves as storage in addition to its other purposes: for my books and for clothes that are too dirty to go into the wardrobe but too clean for the laundry basket. Since then, he has been my personal shopper for general merchandise. He is such a reliable person.

My phone starts to vibrate again, bringing me back to the present. I was able to stand up and move toward the dressing table, where I had placed the phone overnight. I pick up the phone before it cuts off again. It was my mother.

"Mama, what is the matter?" I blurted out.

"Amaka", my mother calls my name.

I presumed my mother had been sobbing. Her default reaction to anything is to cry, so I was not alarmed.

I ask again, as I walk towards my bed to get into a comfortable position, *"Mama, what is it?"*

Mama remained silent for a while. She didn't seem to be breathing at all. When she finally spoke, it sounded almost as though her voice had cracked.

She replies with a shaking voice, *'Your father did not wake up!'*

Mama's words bounced around in my head, and I find myself unable to utter a word. My eyes were as wide as they could open, and my mouth hung open with my lips slightly apart. I had to cover my mouth like I was preventing air from escaping. I am as motionless as a stone.

I could barely hear the words my mother was mumbling afterwards. I did not feel sorry for her. For the first time in a long while, I felt peace and a sudden calmness. I could not even console her. I did not have the words.

"You girls need to come home as soon as possible; call your sisters", she says.

"I would fly in by next week." I replied.

I hung up the phone and went in search of my power bank, since my battery percentage was already low. I crawl back onto my bed to lie on the dry portion. This time, forcing myself to sleep.

Papa's death was unavoidable. The cancer was in its third stage when the physicians discovered it. They were all aware that he would die at some point. Chemotherapy and surgery barely extended his life by a few months. Everyone was psychologically prepared for that 'day' except Mama, who wished she had a son to claim his inheritance, knowing the kind of family members he has. She was ridiculed her entire life for having only girls.

I was the only one my mother dared to call; my sisters resent her for never standing up for us. My twin sisters, Adaeze and Amara, both reside in Abuja; although they live in the same city, they only met over Christmas at the village. We did not grow up in oneness, so we never practiced it. I have not gone to my family house in five years, and I never had a reason to go after my last dispute with my father. The day I received my job offer marked the beginning of my independence. I moved to Lagos, and I never looked back.

Our father did not love us enough as we grew up. He had always wanted a son, although Mama never gave him none, and my parents' relationship was strained after one stillbirth and two miscarriages. I grew up resenting my parents. I envied the love and relationship other children had with their parents.

His death was a headache I did not need but eventually had to cope with; to say I am irritated would be an understatement.

I closed my eyes for a few moments and reopened them. There had been no change. I wasn't hallucinating.

I check my phone to see what time it is: 7.03 a.m.

My father is truly dead.

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The pilot's voice over the microphone and the rustling of people attempting to get their bags awakened me even before the plane came to a standstill. I had no idea we had landed in the coal city. I slept throughout the entire one-hour journey without waking up. I could still hear the pilot's faint voice.

"...for your safety... Please remain seated. On behalf of Naija Airways and the entire crew, we wish you a wonderful day."

It was past midday, which was the worst time to arrive. I found it difficult to breathe as I descended the aircraft's stairs since the air was thick and smelled like fuel. I was already sweating by the time I got to the bottom of the step. The arrival lobby provided no respite; it was a circus inside.

I find myself unbuttoning my top, exposing my sweat-soaked stripped camisole, because the air conditioner is broken. Absolutely nothing had changed in the five years prior. The walls were drab, and there were several leaks in the ceiling. I began to have reservations about my return home. Did I make the right decision? Was it all worth it?

I moved toward the conveyor belt in search of my luggage, but it was nowhere to be found. I was concerned that my luggage had been stolen or had not made the journey with me. After ten minutes of waiting, I see my blue Samsonite luggage with the pink tag clearly visible. I dragged it off the conveyor line and exited the airport.

Taxi drivers were all over the parking lot, soliciting passengers, negotiating prices, and helping to carry luggage in a bid to attract customers. I opted for the driver with a reasonable offer, and we were out of the airport in no time.

"What radio channel would you like to listen to?" he asked, cutting the silence. We had barely driven for ten minutes out of an hour.

"Any channel is okay. Thank you." I responded.

"How is the protest going in Lagos? I hear the youths are not backing down as they want to see an end to police brutality."

My driver was a short, fine-featured man with a lot of black hair and piercing brown eyes. He had this watchful expression that could be translated into friendliness, which was unusual in these difficult times.

"I have also seen from the social media that it has been very peaceful, and it has been trending worldwide. Finally, change is coming." He continued.

I appeared not to be paying attention anymore, particularly considering that my eyes were starting to droop from increasing fatigue. I used all my strength to fight it. I haven't been here for a very long time, so I tried to get familiar with the surroundings, terrain, roads, and buildings in search of any pleasant memories. I was craving spicy food. I haven't had a full meal in the last six hours.

If there is one thing I have missed, it is my mother's delicacies and how we assisted her in setting the table each evening as she prepared the tastiest meals. That little bonding time was ruined the moment Papa came home. As we travelled through the streets of the coal city, memories began to flood back. They were not totally bad memories, but nostalgia was not the feeling.

My father, Chief Okoye, was a professor at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, and a devout Catholic. He was an ardent advocate for education who did not tolerate failure. A learned man of immeasurable value, respected for his astuteness and wisdom, with all his knowledge and exposure, he still considered a male child better. He always appeared unsophisticated, with tangles of thick grey hair, white beards that practically concealed his frail face, and spectacles. Papa, even in his mid-sixties, tried to remain stylish.

I clearly recall his brown eyes looking into my soul the last time he scowled at me; the colour stood out against his light complexion and grey hair. He flogged me with his 'special' cane because I had missed that Sunday's evening mass. I was nowhere to be found when the whole family went to church. I was just nineteen. That was the last day I missed mass.

My driver cuts in, *"Do you know that some celebrities are leading the Enugu protest tomorrow?"*

I decided to grant him an audience as I bounced back to reality. *"Oh! Really. Would you be participating?"*

Seemingly excited, *"Yes, o! We all want a better Nigeria. All impunity and lawlessness must stop"*, he replied.

Chike's song 'Forgive' is playing on the radio. *"If true peace is what you want and if long life is what you need, I am just here to let you know that it is time to let it go. Please forgive me, oh..."*

Every time I hear the song, it strikes a chord within me, and I would not hesitate to burst into tears. This time, I refrained from crying.

"I think we have arrived." My driver announced.

I looked around. It took me a second to realize where I was. I jerked my head back and forth and instantly sat up.

The taxi is parked directly in front of our black gate. It was easy to spot Papa's funeral banner, which was prominently displayed at the entrance of the gate. It contained the announcement for the burial rites.

"Let me help with your luggage." He offered.

"I can handle that. Thank you." I replied.

I paid the driver's fee and gave him a tip as well. He is beaming from ear to ear; he has never made so much money on a single trip, and to think that he reluctantly accepted after the negotiation.

"Thank you!" He jumps in excitement as he gets into his taxi.

I take a deep breath as I enter my parent's house, a four-bedroom bungalow sitting on a three-acre plot of land. Nothing has changed since I left. The gardens and trees were still intact. My father did a wonderful job of keeping it up. He was a lover of nature. The compound is bustling with activities, with movement here and there in preparation for the funeral.

My guess was that my mother had seen me from a distance and rushed out to meet me halfway. I wrap my arms around her and pull her close for a tight hug.

Grief. It was more than crying. The feeling leaves a hollowness in one's heart, a sense of emptiness. It gives you this heavy feeling, like the weight of the world is resting on your shoulders, and there is nothing one can do about it.

Observing how frail and fragile she appeared, her skin looked pale like a malnourished child. Her voluminous white kimono made it obvious. I covered my mouth with my hands and allowed tiny drops of salty tears to flow down my cheeks. She looked so much older than her age. All her life, she lived for her husband.

"Amaka, my daughter, you are welcome. How was the trip? I have missed you so much."

"I am fine, Mama. How are you doing?" I reply as I try to hold back the tears.

Mama cuts in, *"I can see you. I can see the anguish in those eyes. It has always been there. I also see love, the kind of love you would have extended if the wounds had not existed."*

I reach over my mother's shoulders and whisper, *"Mama, I know that already"*, before giving her another hug.

I just needed the hug, and for the first time in my life, I felt happy to be home, beside my mother and for her sake, I must get rid of the anger and hate, forgive my father, and pay my respect. A gradual healing process, and I hope my sisters will take the same step.

As we walked into the house, Mama insisted on carrying my bags. She smiled at me and said, *"Thank you for coming home."*

I nodded, feeling a deep sense of fulfilment. I was happy I made the journey.