

# A Victim of Family

“Stop it, Daddy, stop!” Kamsó’s words rang out in the small yard of their Zaria home just before her mother collapsed into a careless pile in front of her. Blood. Lifeless. Kamsó tried to convince herself that she didn’t know for sure.

Staring at her mother’s stationary mass, Kamsó stood transfixed with horror. Now, her father was bent over the body, calling out her mother’s name, frantically checking for a pulse. His calmness soon dissolved into an immediate urgency. She stared on but couldn’t react. He buried his head in his wife’s bosom, wailing uncontrollably like a helpless child. Kamsó watched him in silence and struggled to piece together the events leading up to this nightmare.

That Sunday had started like every recent Sunday in the Ukachukwu household. Kamsó’s dad woke up early to prepare for church. Throughout the past year, Kamsó’s father had been going to church alone. Her mom was no longer interested in indulging greedy “men of God” who specialized in accumulating wealth for themselves at the expense of their congregation’s sparse incomes. Kamsó was also asked to choose between attending church with her father or staying home with her mother. This decision was a no-brainer for her. She was tired of being a futile project for churches.

Growing up with selective mutism, Kamso was a very different child. Initially, her parents attributed her extremely quiet demeanor to shyness and convinced themselves that she would outgrow it. But as she grew older, more symptoms began to manifest and it became clear that hers wasn't a simple case of shyness. She suffered extreme social anxiety and remained completely mute in social gatherings. Public attention scared her so much, causing intense moments of shortness of breath whenever she was put in the spotlight. She struggled in school because the Nigerian education system wasn't built to support children like her. At age 15, there were only five people to whom she spoke with strained ease— her father, her mother, her two childhood best friends, and the old man who sold provisions at the kiosk down the street from her house. It was extremely tough to navigate her way through a community where most people had little to no knowledge of her condition and openly mocked the legitimacy of her social anxiety.

When she turned seven, she was clinically diagnosed with selective mutism by a child psychologist recommended to her parents by her aunt, Oge, a registered nurse living and working in Denmark and familiar with the condition. Kamso remembered her first visit to the psychologist. Even though she didn't speak to the doctor until her fifth session, she was immediately drawn to the doctor's non-judgmental words acknowledging the legitimacy of her anxiety and assuring

her that she could learn to thrive. She began to look forward to her sessions until her parents decided that therapy was not working fast enough.

Naturally, as devout Nigerian Christians, her parents sought help from the church. Thus began their unfortunate encounters with all sorts of self-acclaimed representatives of God. Kamso became a direct victim of deceptive pastors who blindly robbed her parents of their hard-earned money, under the guise of curing Kamso's condition. The exaggerated prayers, endless fasting periods, and forced consumption of *anointing* oil, continuously proved futile. But her parents didn't learn fast enough. Her mutism trudged on unperturbed, and Kamso gradually stopped believing in the possibility of overcoming her social anxiety. When she first told her parents to stop taking her to different churches in search of healing, she was sternly reprimanded by her dad. His exact words were, "You must have faith. You cannot receive your healing without faith." Fortunately, her mother eventually concluded that the so-called pastors had no knowledge of the nature of her daughter's condition and were even more clueless about how to treat it. That was about a year ago. So now, every Sunday morning, Kamso and her mother lay in bed, with no remorse, while her father prepared for church.

The normalcy of that morning was soon interrupted by Mama Kamso's voice ringing out in pronounced irritation as she chased after Papa Kamso who was just stepping out of the back door. He was heading to his car parked underneath the

oldest of three mango trees in the compound. Kamsolay lay in bed straining her ears in an attempt to make out what her mother was complaining about this time. She listened and waited.

“*Bia* this man, better come back and answer me!” Mama Kamsolay screamed. There was no response from Papa Kamsolay, and this increased her irritation, so she screamed even louder, “You think I will leave you because it’s Sunday? You’ve not seen anything oh! *I maara onye i luru!* You know me!”

As if knowing that his silence would only further aggravate his wife, Papa Kamsolay bellowed in response, “Oh God! What is it again, this woman? You know I’m running late for church. *Chere ka m laghachi.* I will be back soon.” Kamsolay imagined that he probably had the tired expression that permanently sat on his face for the past few months.

Mama Kamsolay’s mocking laughter rang out as she said, “*Lee ndi na-aga church!* So if they say those who are going to church should come out, you’ll come out?” She laughed even harder, obviously trying to get under Papa Kamsolay’s skin. Kamsolay bit her lower lip knowing just how troublesome her mother could get when taunting her father.

A brief silence ensued and Kamsolay dared to think that perhaps, her mother had decided to let her father leave peacefully. But her mother’s subsequent elevated

voice soon shattered this hope, “*Ka m gwa gi*, you’re not going anywhere oh. You will sit down in this house until you tell me where you got the money you used to fuel this car because we both know that you don’t have any money!” On hearing this, Kamso heaved a sigh of desperation, realizing that the altercation was far from over.

Recently, her mother’s favorite thing to do was mock her father’s unemployed status, and Kamso often wondered why this was suddenly an issue. He lost his job when Kamso was about 3 years old. Eleven years elapsed since he lost his job, and she never sensed that her mother had a problem with being the family's sole breadwinner. However, a year ago, things took a drastic turn, after Mama Kamso decided she would no longer drag her daughter from pillar to post in search of answers that the church didn’t have, but her husband refused to let go of the vain pursuit. Suddenly, Mama Kamso took advantage of every opportunity to remind her husband that his unemployed status was indeed shameful. Papa Kamso’s mouth was just as sharp as his wife’s and he didn’t hesitate to flaunt it. He responded to his wife’s jabs with a generous amount of sarcasm that further aggravated her. Usually, they went at each other continuously until one person decided to walk away cursing the other under their breath.

However, that morning, on hearing his wife veer towards another attempt to shame his unemployed status, Papa Kamso let out an exaggerated laugh that

stretched on long enough to unsettle his wife and Kamso. It was an intentional attempt to throw Mama Kamso off balance. Unable to bear his laughter, Mama Kamso stuttered, “So, so, what’s funny?”, to which her husband responded, “Are you not tired of using this same line over and over again? Yes, I’m jobless! What else is new?” At this point, Kamso could taste the trouble brewing. She sighed and waited. Her father was speaking now in between fits of laughter, “See eh, let me just go to church because it’s obvious your tactics won’t work on me this morning.”

Suddenly, Kamso heard a loud smacking sound and she knew it was unmistakably the sound of one person getting slapped. While Kamso gasped in horror and waited to know who had slapped the other, even though she had a gut feeling that her mom was the culprit, she was even more shocked to hear another slap ring through the air. She sprang up from her bed in full panic mode.

By the time Kamso rushed outside to where her parents were having the squabble, her mother had already grabbed her father by his shirt, jerking him back and forth, daring him to hit her again if he was indeed a man. In response, Papa Kamso was warning her to let go of his shirt because he didn’t want to hurt her. His pleading fell on deaf ears and before Kamso could think of what to do, her mother slapped her father again. Stunned from the second slap, he made to enter his car but was immediately stopped by Mama Kamso who lunged forward and slammed

the car door as soon as he opened it. “Stop carrying the Bible up and down! Go and look for money for your family!” She howled as she clapped her hands in mockery. Kamsso cringed at the sight of her mother’s crassness in dealing with an already volatile situation. She looked to her father hoping that he would rise above the pettiness.

But Papa Kamsso had had enough. He dropped his car keys on the car bonnet and proceeded to take off his coat. In a voice that sent a shiver down Kamsso’s spine, he shouted, “I will kill you today!” Then he pounced on his wife with the gait of an angry predator, forcing her to take to her heels. Mama Kamsso ran toward the front of the house, her husband hot on her heels, followed by a now crying Kamsso. Just as Kamsso rounded the corner to come in full view of the front of the house, she saw her father reach for her mother’s Ankara wrapper tied loosely around her waist, knowing that it would come undone and she would be forced to stop and secure it or risk being unclad. His plan worked, the Ankara came undone and his wife stopped to secure her wrapper. Papa Kamsso seized the opportunity to catch her unguarded. As she held on to her Ankara, he bent her over and proceeded to unleash several blows on her unprotected back. The man pounding on her mother was no longer the father she knew. His dazed eyes were those of a stranger. Mama Kamsso let go of her wrapper and made a few unsuccessful attempts to push her husband away. Realizing that he had her pinned down and would not budge so

easily, she clenched her fists and began to fling them upward in reckless abandon, hoping to hit her husband and force him to let go of her. Papa Kamsu soon took a massive blow to his head from her right fist, and he let go, staggering backward and holding his face in agony. Mama Kamsu quickly stood up and rushed towards him with her fists still clenched but he saw her coming and thrust out his right arm just in time to shove her roughly away. She lost her balance and fell to the ground, landing hard on her buttocks. But she would not stay down. By now, Kamsu was a sad helpless mess kneeling on the ground, tears streaming down her face as she watched her parents go at each other. She could see that her mother was losing momentum. She wanted to implore her daddy to stop, but the words wouldn't form. Eventually, amidst her anxiety and the stream of tears choking her, Kamsu found her voice to scream, "Stop it, Daddy, stop!" Unfortunately, it was too late. As the tears blurred her vision, Kamsu didn't see the final blow but she felt the life bolt from her mother's body as she hit the ground one last time, her head landing hard on a concrete slab. Blood streaming from her head.

A transfixed Kamsu was jolted back to reality by the loud banging on their compound gate. She could hear the concerned voices of their neighbors, who wanted to know why there was a commotion in the Ukachukwu compound. It wouldn't be enough to try to persuade them about the state of things. These people would not leave until they entered the compound to see things for themselves.

Turning back towards the house, she met her father's tear-stained eyes. He was still cradling her mother's body in his arms as he knelt on the ground. Kamsa looked away. She needed to think and the increasingly agitated voices at the gate, threatening to break it down if they were not let in, were not helping her to focus. Slowly, she moved away from the front of the house towards the back of the house away from the gate. Reaching her father's car, she leaned against it for fear that her legs would give way. Who or what had she wronged so badly on her journey to this present life to deserve such an ill-fated destiny? Her life was already a daily struggle to overcome a mental disability that her world had yet to understand. Now, she had lost one parent and was forced to contemplate betraying the other. The banging on the gate was getting louder. But she was determined to think this through before responding.

Letting out a heavy sigh burdened by grief, she wondered if perhaps this was an opportunity to reinvent her life. It was unclear to her what would happen to her if she lost both parents that day. Where would she go? Culture and tradition would swoop in faster than thieves running from the law, and her parents' relatives would appear without an invitation to lay claim to all of her parents' possessions. Who would want her? But despite these tragic thoughts, a part of her felt entirely convinced that she was better off away from this mess. Her mother was dead, killed at the hands of her father. Regardless of what happened or didn't happen to

her father today, her life was already off course. Deep down, she blamed both of her parents for this sad turn of events. Everything they had done together and individually in response to her condition culminated in a series of bad decisions leading up to this day. Her decision was made.

Slowly, she sauntered to the front of the house, pausing about halfway between the gate and where her father still knelt sobbing with his lifeless wife in his arms. As she stared at him, she felt deep sadness like she had never felt before. It was so intense, almost overpowering her will to follow through with her decision. Finding her voice to speak to the man who fathered her one last time, she said in a shaky voice, "I love you, Daddy. I always have. All I wanted was for you and Mommy to see me. I mean truly see me. But everything is ruined now. Mommy is gone, and in some kind of twisted way, you're gone too. There's no coming back from this. Goodbye, Daddy. I love you." As these final words escaped her mouth, she walked to the gate and proceeded to unlock the double bolt barring entry into the compound. She swung the gate open and stepped aside to let in the crowd of neighbors. She looked at her father. She expected to see hatred in his eyes. But all she saw was regret with a subtle yet potent hint of hope. How and why he would feel any hope after what she just did? The deeper she stared into his eyes, the more she realized he understood why she had to do this. He knew she needed to be free of the toxicity that ate up his marriage and tainted his approach to

parenthood. Knowing that he approved was the final push she needed to silence the turbulent waves of guilt crashing against her stomach walls. She could breathe again. As her father disappeared underneath the swarm of bodies rushing to exert their self-imposed right to jungle justice, she used the back of her palms to wipe the tears from her face. Then she turned and walked out of the compound. No one tried to stop her. No one noticed her. She wandered down the street, entirely unsure of her plan or destination. Yet another victim of family.