

7:37 AM

Her mother never slept in the same room with her father.

She never asked why. Her mother usually lay on the floor beside her. She would tell her stories of her childhood as they lay on the cool cemented floor covered by a brown raffia mat that smelled of *Uziza* leaf and charcoal.

Her father slept in the *obi* on a large wooden framed bed big enough to fit a family of four plus two fattened Christmas goats. He also mostly woke up angry at her mother. It was always as if her mother had fought with him in the dream and because he could not overpower her, he woke up to physically do so.

A cold splash of water landed on her mother's body beside where she slept. She woke up abruptly. Her father stood towering over them. He had a chewing stick in his mouth, a white singlet on his back, a brown *wrapper* tied in a big knot on his waist and a cloud of anger in his eyes. This was how he woke her mother up almost every other day. With a cold bucket of water on her body while she laid still on the mat where they slept. He was always careful to not let it spill on Tobe. For this she was always grateful.

Her mother usually woke up with a start and a mumbled Good morning. Then she would wait.

Wait for her father to shout at her for not closing the *obi* door properly hence causing mosquitoes to "finish" him the night before. Or rant that the hens were not laying enough eggs because her mother was not giving them the feed properly. It could range from anything really. Then her mother would stand up apologetically and ask if he wanted her to boil his hot water now or if he would eat his *abacha* first. Ask if he wanted her to make his bed first or if he would prefer his back massage. He would usually bark at her what he wanted first then he would saunter off while Tobe started rolling up the mat they had slept in.

Today was different.

Her mother just rolled to the other side of the mat and shut her eyes tightly. Her father, still standing over her, kicked her in the middle of her back. Her mother hissed and continued to lay on the mat, eyes still tightly shut. Her hands curled around her body because the cold water was making her shiver. *Agulu* was especially cold this time of the year, it had the dry harmattan weather that made your knuckles and knees white like a ghost no matter how much vaseline you applied to them.

A sense of fore brooding engulfed Tobe. Her father started to call her mother "Oluchi-".

Her mother sat up. Her nipples puckered beneath the wrapper due to the cold water splashed on them.

“What is it?” Her mother asked dryly. “Osita what did I *ever* do to you in my life? Eh?”

“Mazi Ogbuefi woke me up from my peaceful sleep. What did you do to his wife?” her father snapped back, ignoring her question of what she had ever done to him.

Tobe was really interested in knowing what her mother had done to him. *There had to be something right?*

She also wondered why her father always claimed his sleep was peaceful yet he always woke up like he had been in a war. Her mother looked up at her father. The silence between them was a long and uncomfortable stretch.

“Papa Good morning”

“Good morning, my beautiful daughter” He said with a tight smile on his face. Tobe started to panic. There was something in her mother’s eyes that made her fear. It was anger, newly born and slowly building. The kind of anger that simmered beneath the surface, ready to tip over at the very slightest provocation.

“Papa, should I make *Abacha* for you?” Tobe asked desperately. Anything to distract the inevitable premonition that hung in the atmosphere. *Abacha* was after all her father’s favorite delicacy, it had to have a distracting ability. She could feel something changing in her mother. Something that made her feel fear and yet excitement.

“What did you do to Mazi Oguefi’s wife?” He asked again. His face is tighter than ever.

“Why don’t you ask Ulomma what she did to me? Or did that not occur to your dense skull to ask?” Her mother replied dryly.

Tobe’s armpit began to sweat, she stood up and started to look for the broom so she could start to sweep the floor. Her father was taken aback. He had never expected her mother to reply to him, much less like this. Then especially in front of Tobe. He took a step backwards like she had physically slapped him.

Tobe started to see fear gather briefly in her father’s eyes. It was her mother that owned the farm, and the shop, and it was her mother that had the *okada* and drove to *Nkwoo* market every morning to get the firewood. It was her mother who was paying her school fees (although she sent the money to her father’s account so that it came from his account into the school’s). It was her mother that bought the Christmas goat every year and still gave her father the largest portion simply because that was what the Bible advised.

Tobe had never been sure if she loved her father. It was a thought that she generally did not try to prod for the fear of how the truth will unfold. However, she was sure he was not a man she particularly liked.

The fear that registered in her father's eyes was a result of his imminent emasculation. He lived in a village where being a man in itself was a privilege. Her mother should also know that being married to a man afforded her privileges in the village. Her mother's new found defiance and lazy wake from blind submission was threatening to snatch that privilege from him and that terrified him.

With a deft movement he slapped her mother. Her father then proceeded to curl his hand around her throat, used his grip on her throat to lift her off the ground and shoved her against the wall.

He continued to slap her face against the wall, in a series of front end and backhanded slaps.

Tobe dropped the broom and focussed on the clock on the wall above her mother's head. It was a black square clock with white trimmings and white hands. It ticked silently. It was 7:37am. She knew that this time will be forever imprinted in her memory and she willed her mind to freeze time. For things to remain this way, just at the cusp of everything falling apart.

"You think I am your mate?" Her father asked "Eh? You think God created us equally? You should be worshipping the ground I step on. You useless woman!" Her father's voice seeped into her consciousness until it shook her out of the reverie.

She saw him push her down to the floor. He started to jump viciously on her stomach, as he did this her mother curled into herself, using her elbows as a shield to cover her stomach. Her eyes were shut tightly. He dragged her back up and curled his fingers tighter and tighter around her mother's throat. She started to gasp for air and water started to come out from her eyes. Tobe was certain that water from her eyes did not mean she was not crying. Her eyes were filled with rage, however she did not say anything.

Whenever her father got into his moods in front of Tobe, her mother would say, placating "*Osita look at our daughter? She is crying? Why do you want her to grow up in this environment? Eh? Please stop it for her sake. This is not you. Please*" and like that with the speed of lightning her father would stop. Abruptly. As if he had been in a trance. Then he would hug Tobe tightly and walk away.

Today, her mother did not beg. She stood, rigid, with her back against the wall, watching him. She had stopped struggling and she started to sag against the wall. Her lime yellow wrapper had fallen away from her body. Her breasts were yellow, it laid against her stomach that was swollen from childbirth. Her pubic hair was black and unshaven, a rough triangle at the juncture of her thighs.

Tobe looked away from her mother's nakedness and looked at the clock, its hands registered that it was 7:39am. Her mother wanted to die, she could tell.

She looked back at her mother, sagging against the wall, eyes rolling back, hands going limp beside her, she looked almost lifeless.

Tobe knew then that she would never taste her *Oha* soup again. Its rich aroma that could only come from using firewood, sprinkled with diced beef and *okporoko* fish.

She also knew she would never hear any of her mother's childhood stories. She thought about the story her mother had told her about her childhood the night before. She forced herself to remember it. It was about her Mother and Grandma. One of her favorite stories to tell because Tobe could see her mother's heart beam with pride. Her mother had told her about when she was younger and had just gained admission into secondary school. Grandma used to be a very wealthy tailor. However, things took a turn for the worse after she had a car accident which meant that she could not continue to use the sewing machine and she was losing clients.

Her mother had just gotten admission into Agulu Grammar Girls secondary school and was supposed to resume the following day. She had woken up to pee in the night and had heard her mother praying and crying about how she did not know how she would be able to pay the school fees especially with her legs still in cast.

The following morning, she told her mother goodbye and she headed for school. Grandma had also resumed in her shop and had been trying her best to sew with only her hand when her mother had come in, like she had not meant to be in school. Grandma, very shocked, had asked her why she was not in school and she had responded that nothing. While Grandma was still shouting, her mother had used her school fees and had gone to the market. The sales assistants entered the shop and started to drop tomato, pepper, biscuits, fruits and sweets in the shop. Grandma had asked what it was for and she had said that they would be selling this in the shop in the meantime Grandma's her legs healed. Grandma had started crying and had asked her about her admission and she had said she had deferred it for one year. Grandma, too filled with emotion to speak, had hugged her tightly and with tears in her eyes asked what a deferral was. After her mother had explained, Grandma had asked her to have spoken to her first. Her mother feigned an apology. Grandma feigned acceptance.

Tobe's eyes had misted yesterday when her mother told her the story. Suddenly, she knew why she was born, to absolve her mother from pain like her mother had done for Grandma.

Without thinking, she rushed outside and came in, holding one of the biggest logs of firewood she could carry. The end of the firewood was charred black from the making of *Oha* soup the night before.

She took another look at the clock, 7:40am. She connected the log of firewood to the back of her father's head.

He fell soundlessly to the floor. She stood over him, he seemed confused and when his eyes focussed on her, his eyes and mouth widened in shock.

Her mother also fell, a bit slower to the ground. She started coughing and crawling to the drum of water so she could get a cup.

Her father lay with his back on the floor, unmoving and unblinking, glass eyes stuck on Tobe.

A pool of blood had gathered around his head. She dropped the log and ran to her mother to cover her with her wrapper which was crumpled on the floor. She would never have to see her nakedness again. Her mother crawled to where her father lay, with a cup of water in her hand and put her ear on his chest to check for his heartbeat.

“His heart is no longer beating” she said quietly and continued to cough. She took another generous sip of water.

Her mother’s face was blank. She put her two hands on top of each other and was pressing them against her father’s heart. Why hadn’t he been stronger, how can one soft blow to the head kill a man? She hated his weakness.

Her mother crawled to where the log of wood was, she lifted and examined it, curiously, like it was an alien object. She started to rub the charred firewood over her palms, her wrapper, and wrists.

“ I just...I wanted him to leave me alone, I didn't mean for it to end...” Her mother whispered.

Her voice was so low that Tobe did not hear it at first till she repeated it.

Realization dawned on Tobe. Her mother finally stood up and came to hug her tightly. ‘First thing tomorrow, you will go to the motor park. You have to go and stay with your Uncle in Lagos’

Tobe nodded. The cock began to crow. She glanced at the clock. 7:43am. She watched it tick tock slowly while she waited in vain for the guilt to descend.