

## A Race Against Time

When you turn 20, your mother's prayers change from "May you succeed in everything you do!" and "May you live long!" to "May God provide you with your husband." Your aunties start to hint, "You will soon grow old, oh! Don't waste time." When you turn 25, the hints become more incessant, sarcasm becomes passive aggression, and you start to cower and hide from the people you are supposed to call home. On some days, I wish I fought back against those questions. Being asked about a husband aggravated the science ruckus happening in my body.

At 26, my body betrayed me. Growing up, puberty was an embarrassing time. It was not because of the acne or the hormones but the lack of it. My breasts never mounted like those girls in my class, and my bum never shot out. Until I left my secondary school in Gwarimpa, I wore a 12-year-old boy's singlets as tops. I never felt like a "woman". I never understood what power femininity held, especially against men with libidos. I was simply a pretty canvas that I was at least grateful for.

I should have known something was wrong when I turned 19 and never had a period. "I am just a late bloomer," I told myself. I was mistaken.

"Aunty, we are here." pulled me out of my daydream as I looked up at what became my worst nightmare: my mother's house. I wrapped my jersey hijab tight around my neck and told myself, "Mariam, it's just three hours, and you can leave." It was bad enough that I was 30, a northern Muslim, unmarried, and pseudo-barren. My mother's new marriage was just the icing of my miserable life. I looked up at our white and gray family house that was bustling with people.

"Salam Mariam, Ina kwana?" asked my mother's sister as I walked in.

"Ina lafiya," I said as I sped off to avoid the many questions that would pour out.

My dad was Yoruba, and my mom was from Kano. When my dad died, my mother's family took her back to Kano and left me in Abuja at my mother's request. I was about to leave for university in Birmingham, and she didn't want anything to hinder that.

Whispers from cousins and aunties trailed as the day went on. The next few hours were excruciating, but by 8 p.m. in Kano, my mom was remarried and was whisked off in a hurdle of drums and bare-foot women.

As I said goodbyes, pitiful eyes stared at me; some held judgment and silent prayers. Others ignored me and found me unworthy of a salutation. At 30, Why was I unmarried? Why was I not womanly? My uterus was cancerous, so I had to get a hysterectomy or lose my life. One would think the masses would have supported my decision, but they didn't.

"How could you cut it off?", "What is a woman if she can't give birth?", "Pray it away!"

I laughed in remembrance. I had prayed, and I continued to pray. I prayed so much I was so sure the hysterectomy was the right thing to do. "God wouldn't burden a soul more than it can bear," said my mom as she held my hand before the procedure.

Mama had been so supportive. Having me at 20 and losing her husband at 28 meant she developed a backbone. She fought her family tooth and nail for me. "This is your path, Mimi. Be patient," she would always say. I was adamant. My visit to Nigeria and the surgery led me to a marriage craze. I quit my job at Continental Inn as the Head Manager in Europe and searched aggressively for a husband. It took me two years to find that job, yet I left without a thought.

"My body betrayed me," I remember telling Vela, my best friend in Birmingham, when she asked what I was doing with my life.

We were walking to the mall as she wailed, "Stop!" "We don't even know why this is happening."

"Does it matter?" "I better get married quick so they can stop asking."

"Why do you care what they say?" she retorted. "Is your mother bothering you?"

"No, I am doing it for myself."

"Do you even want children?" she asked.

"Who doesn't?" I replied.

Date after date, men would disappear when I told them I couldn't have kids. I didn't let that stop me. I would indeed find someone, or so I thought. At 27, I met Nurudeen, an Investment Banker in Manchester. He was from Katsina but hadn't been home since he was 5.

"Perfect!" I thought. He won't be traditional. We were six months into our relationship, and I told him, "I had a hysterectomy, I can't have children."

"Oh." was his reaction.

He never called or texted again. I saw him at a wedding later that year, and he walked past me like he didn't know me.

Later that year, I met Dan. Daniel was sweet. My mother would have had a fit with me dating a white man, but I didn't care. I had an invisible clock I was racing against. Even if I didn't have children, I could have a husband at least.

Daniel was the reason I thought, "May God punish White men!". I told Daniel from the start I couldn't have kids. He said he didn't care. I was ecstatic. The next three months were pure bliss.

We laughed, we played, and we ate. One evening, I got sick and didn't make dinner. He came in and asked, "What's for dinner, babe?"

"Hmm", I replied. I was pumped full of Tylenol and too tired to reply or move.

He pulled my toes and asked again, "What's for dinner, Mari?"

"Nothing", I said louder. I sat up and told him "I have been sick all day, so I haven't even eaten".

He laughed, walked away, and slammed the door behind him.

I didn't think of it as anything. Next, I heard pans and pots clanging and hitting each other. He started yelling loudly and cursing, "You stupid barren bitch!" he hollered. "Are you even a woman?" he screamed.

I walked out, and I retorted, "What? All this over dinner?"

"Just shut up."

"Why are you acting like this, Daniel? Did I do anything wrong?"

His pale skin reddened as he paced around the kitchen, heaving loudly. His following actions changed my life.

He grabbed a pan from the island and threw it at my head. I am unsure what happened next, but I woke up to my mother staring at me.

She had flown to Birmingham as my emergency contact. Daniel's pan caused a bleed in my brain.

As I sat up, she said, "That stupid boy told everyone you hit him, and he threw a pan at you in self-defense."

I started to seeth; my mother's words went down like venom in my throat.

"Daniel would never." I defended

"Oh, he would, and he did. Why are you doing this to yourself, Mimi?", "You quit your job and settled for a man who won't even meet your parents," She lectured.

"He was mad at me for not cooking, and we started to argue, but I never hit him." I frantically started explaining to my mother.

"I know, Mimi, We could all tell he was lying. He-" My mother stopped as my doctor walked in.

“How are you doing, Mariam?” she asked, a petite blonde woman clad in bright blue scrubs.

“I am okay, just dizzy.” “Have you seen Daniel?” I added.

“He hasn’t been here since he dropped you off. It’s been almost two weeks now.”

I wasn’t sure how to feel—the last few months suddenly seemed like a dream. I wondered if there were clues. Clues that Daniel was, in fact, a bonafide bastard. There were none. He never yelled, cursed, drank, or got angry, so how delusional was I?

I got up, shaking. My legs felt like they couldn’t bear the weight of my body. I started to remember. At game night with my friends, he would be quiet when we had conversations on limits. He got mad at Arissa, Vela’s sister when she said she would run away with her kids if her husband punched a wall out of anger.

“That’s so stupid,” he said. “Punching a wall doesn’t mean anything.”

When a man at the store asked me where the plantains were, he turned red and started screaming, “How dare he!”, “I would beat him and anyone else who tries that.”

I mistook it for pure jealousy. How dumb was I to assuage my ego with something so toxic?

I fell back into the stringy hospital bed, hopeless with one thought alone, “Where will I start from?”

### **A Few Weeks Later**

I got out of the hospital two weeks ago. My mom sent movers to pick up my items from Daniels’s apartment, and I still hadn’t heard a thing from him. I was running out of money since I quit my job and had no plans to return to work until I was married.

I considered going back to Daniel and apologizing.

“I am sorry I didn’t make dinner. It won’t happen again.”

Was I really that desperate that I would settle for abuse?

I considered going to the police. I wasn’t sure what I would say.

“I didn’t cook, so he threw a pan at me.”

I was more embarrassed to admit I got hit by a man. As a bonafide feminist, I was the loudest voice when discussing abusive relationships. How gullible was I not to have seen this coming? I was staring out of my apartment window at my mom's taxi pulling up at the curb.

"Are you sure you are going to be okay?" she asked

"No, but I don't have a choice."

"I am not sure I want you to be alone. Why don't you come back to Abuja with me?" she asked as she pulled her suitcase down a flight of stairs.

"I have to move on, Mum. I am now 31, and I need to get married."

"It is not a do-or-die affair; don't ruin your life," she lectured.

"Easy for you to say, you have been married twice! I want one for myself! Is that too much to ask?" I screamed at her.

The rest of the car ride was silent as I drowned in my thoughts.

I remember the story of Adwoa, who studied Chemistry at Manchester with Arissa. She married Liam after four months and suddenly stopped coming out. There was always a bruise on her neck that she called hickeys. Our girl dates were interrupted by her excessive drinking, and once she got pregnant, her hands always had ligature marks.

"You have to leave, Come stay with me," Arissa suggested.

She would always insist, "I am okay. My marriage is going through a rough time, but we are good. We love each other, we are just a bit rough in the bedroom."

I once called the police to her house since she never invited us over, but nothing was found. I now understand why. Who would believe Sweet Daniel did that if I tried to tell my story? A white man and a black woman? I set up myself for failure.

Leaving my mum was a bittersweet experience. Her story drifted through my mind as she loaded her bags on the conveyor belt. At 19, she met my dad, an Army official in Kano. Once he died, her world turned upside down. She spent the next decade fighting his family and hers for my sake. Once I was old enough, her grandfather said she had to be married again. At 44, she remarried. It's been over a year, and they are almost inseparable. She would never admit it, but she fell in love again.

As she walked off to her boarding gate, I felt jealous. Jealous that my own mother had found two loves. Jealous that a hysterectomy had cut my dreams in half and dealt me a bad hand.

The ride back to my apartment was cold. Even though it was July in England, it was always gloomy. You could never predict whether to wear a cardigan or a tank top, so you did both. I felt like Birmingham, powerless in the face of the English weather.

I went to a bar two hours after toiling in my misery alone. I didn't drink. I at least practiced my religion in those ways. I had prayed and prayed, but no results. I just stared at the moving bodies, the loud noises, the slight disdainful smell of piss that lingered on the wooden floors. I started to cry. In the middle of the bar, my small frame racked and jolted with tears amongst drunk bodies.

My body had betrayed me, and my heart had let me down. I didn't have a job or friends in the UK. Returning to Nigeria was not an option because it was even more lonely than Birmingham. I was one foot in and the other out.

I left the bar and walked without aim. I had never noticed how empty Birmingham was. It was old ugly buildings, some rundown, some pleasing to gaze at. There were no trees like there were in Abuja. People loitered the curb with a cigarette between two fingers, red blazing at the tip. The call to prayer broke my train of thought.

As I exited the mosque after the night prayer, I wanted to end it all. I felt miserable, sad, and alone. I thought of Mariam before the hysterectomy. Before the doctors told me something was wrong, my body gave me bright red warning signs. At 31, I looked 15 yet aged like I was 60.

The effort that suicide required was more than I could give it. Finding a bridge to jump off or tying a noose to a fan required time, money, and energy, and I didn't have any. My mother's face flashed in the puddles of water on the street as it started to rain. A woman who gave her all to me for over 15 years shouldn't have to bury me.

Why exactly did I want to die? I wasn't sure I remembered. I had drowned in my misery for so long that I was content being miserable without reason. Adwoa lost her baby and her life for a man. I was lucky I had a life. I grabbed my phone and dialed Vela.

"Mimi, what's up?" she said.

I was silent.

"Are you okay?" No response.

"I am freaking out, where are you?"

"I don't know," I mentioned.

"Wait for me," she said.

It was 40 minutes after the call, Vela found me soaking wet from the rain.

“I am done” was all I said to her. I wasn’t sure what I was done with it, but I was exhausted with the misery.

“Let’s go,” she said.

I spent the next two weeks on her couch, unable to move. I was so paralyzed that I had given up my life searching for a fantasy married life. My job from four years ago would have made me a millionaire at 30. Yet, I chased a lie.

I called my old boss the next day, asking for another chance.

“The position is filled, Mariam. I am sorry.”

“Are there other executive positions open?” I asked.

“Yes, but with the gap in your resume, you are underqualified.”

“I had a medical emergency, I couldn’t predict that.” I retorted.

“Well, you can come and interview for an entry-level position at our branch in Morocco.”

“Yes, I will take it.” I said out of desperation.

“See you tomorrow.” he said.

A new journey began when I got the job in Morocco. My mum’s words lingered as I boarded the plane to a new life. “This is your path, Mimi.” I spent almost five years pursuing a facade that even reality had become obtuse.

Fear gripped me as the plane taxied in Marrakesh, yet I thought, “Your best days are just starting, Live it up.”