

Faded whispers

It is said that things do not just fall apart, Sometimes it begins with a crack.

A tiny crack on the wall that eventually spreads like wild fire fueled by the harmattan winds on a hot afternoon in December.

Other times, it begins with an explosion, forcing you to embrace the inevitability of watching the tiny pieces of your life fall, London bridge style.

Trouble was brewing and it was going to be served because my mother had just made her hair.

My mother never bothered to make her hair because it grew like it was being pursued, slowly receding and thinning more around the edges with each plait, announcing its retreat in the most stupendous manner.

Today was different. She had to make her hair, her husband was getting married.

The salon two streets away from where we lived was the spot for the juiciest gossip in the city, be it rumors of cheating husbands and escapades with their flat-chested university girlfriends or the girls who were pregnant for the governor and had terminated the pregnancy for an extravagant price or women who had used diabolical powers to “lock their husbands in bottles” and have them eating from the tip of the fingers. Friends were easily made at the salon, it was some sort of therapy for women as they could afford to bare themselves before one another without shame, getting advice from people their age and not from their mothers or mother-in-laws who came from a generation of broken women.

A congratulatory message played on the radio and I saw the expression on my mother's face metamorphose into a puree of bewilderment, I caught her reflection from the large mirror in front of the salon, her eyes met mine, I quickly looked away.

The congratulatory announcement had stirred up an eruption in her, in me.

My mother had shown the hairdresser a picture of the hairstyle she wanted.

Looking at it for no more than a second, the hairdresser twisted her lips wryly and said;

“Choose another style, this one will not bring out your face”.

“No! I want the one I show to you and you go make it for my head”. My mother replied, her voice shaky and unsure.

At that moment, I wished my mother had not spoken in English. She had mixed her tenses up again. She should have spoken Yoruba.

Another woman with well rounded lips protruding like a weaver bird enunciating the sound of the small letter “q” shot out a high pitched laughter which mirrored a cackle and if a bird of prey ever laughed, I imagined it would sound just like hers.

The women in the salon all turned to look at my mother with half a smile plastered on their faces, I saw how inadequate she felt. She glanced at me from the mirror again.

The weaver bird woman stopped laughing and turned to my mother, it was then I noticed her eyes were even wider than her mouth

“Sisi why so serious? The hairstyle you chose will not make you beautiful o, Let the stylist choose for you, she knows the best...”

This woman at the salon made my mother think about how her life had been ruined by choices others had made on her behalf.

My father had always been golden, I had never met him, but to me, he was Golden because he lived in America. Was it not capital of Heaven?

There was a consolation, a spark that burned as bright as a solar fire that someday, he would come and take me and my mother to live with him and we would be golden just like him, especially me. I would rise above Beans and Garri for lunch, Eba and Egusi for dinner, Yes. I had a higher calling, I was made for greater things like Mac and cheese or whatever sweet treats Enid Blyton wrote about.

My mother said he had travelled to America in search of greener pastures even before I was born. He had been there for over eleven years this gave ample time for my longing to grow and my imagination to grow even bigger.

I would ask her to tell me things about him but she was just as blank as I was, He was a mystery to her too.

We both lived with my Paternal grandmother who was a striking resemblance of her son, they both had a round face and droopy eyes that made it seem like they had not slept for days.

Granny was an Academician a Lecturer of English and Literary Studies at the University of Ibadan, she had an aura of foreignness that was all too foreign. I reckon it was born out of her obsession with the royal family of England, She had a habit of fanning herself while drinking hot tea at midday when the sun was at its peak, shining apologetically upon bald heads and bare skin, she would ask me to pour her tea from from a big porcelain jug into a tiny cup, then proceed to lift the cup to the edge of her lips while keeping the saucer underneath. After the first sip, she would shut her eyes and give her face a light squeeze suggesting the bland taste of unsweetened tea was divine. "Tea, not wine is the drink of the refined", she would say.

Granny was one of those people who sucked the air from any room they occupied until everything got its life-source from them. She never studied in England, but her late husband did. she became the chairwoman of the British College Alumni by putting on the life and stories of her late husband, wearing it like a skirt.

The society threw the grandest Christmas parties and every one who was anyone would be in attendance. Those parties were nothing but show and tell. It was a place for old mates to see how well the other was turning out, to brag about the achievements of their children, it was a place to scrutinize those whose grand children had the fanciest of accents.

It was at one of those parties Granny told me to call her "Liz". Her full name was Elizabeth Morakinyo Adebola.

Before attending the party that day, Granny had me practice at home as I would sometimes forget to call her "Liz".

At the party, she would call out to me for the silliest reason, one time just to whisper a bunch of nothings in my ear.

I heard the other women gasp at my response of "Yes, Liz"!

A bolt of astonishment and mild outrage flashed in their eyes.

"You allow your grand daughter call you Liz! that's quite something no?!"

Granny would give out a soft laugh waving her well polished nails, gesticulating in an off hand manner.

“Of course I do. She can call me granny only when I am six feet under. I prefer being called by my name.”

They stood in awe of her progressiveness,utterly amazed at her “unafricanness”.
Waking up the next morning and running into Granny across the hall, I said
“Good morning Liz.”

She stood, transfixed,staring at me for the longest three seconds of my life and before I could think about what had been discovered from my long list of mischief, she struck me hard across the face,I swear I saw stars dancing right above my head.

“Have you no respect? Am I your mate?!...”

Anyone with half a brain could figure that I was to call her “Liz” only at important functions.

It was after one of such functions she stopped my mother from speaking to me in Yoruba and English broken in bits; Pidgin, even though it was the only language my mother knew.

Granny raved on about how I had disgraced her at the party, using past and present participles wrongly in the same sentence when a friend of hers asked how my studies were going.

“It’s that illiterate mother of yours filling your head with that dirty pidgin language. In fact no more Yoruba in this house before you will disgrace me some more!
After paying heavily for your tuition,you dare speak this rubbish?!
Is this what they teach you at school? Go call that Mother of yours.”

My mother had no voice of her own,she lived her life in hushed tones,speaking in whispers. She carried the heavy weight of unhappiness in her chest,I could reach out to touch it if I tried hard enough.

Marriage was the only cure for wild boys who needed to be tamed. If they were not ready to settle down, there were ways to assist them or better still force them by marrying wives on their behalf,fatherhood was sure to soften even the hardest of men. This was what granny believed. It had worked for her late husband years ago when his family came to the village in search of a wife for their son, they chose her a naive little uneducated girl,but she had risen from the ashes and made something out of herself on account of her husband.

When looking for a wife for wild boys, one was not to choose a city girl. No, Those ones were sharp tongued vipers.Too loud.Too spoiled.
Girls from the village were the best,obedient like wet clay in the hands of a potter,One could mould them into anything. Just the way her late husband had done with her.

My mother was from Iwo, the same town as Granny.she was the only daughter of a wretched farmer with more than enough mouths to feed he considered it an honour that one of the most renowned families in the city wanted his young daughter for a wife, the marriage rites were quickly set in motion.there was no need for a ceremony since the groom was not in attendance,they were told he was out of the country.

My young mother came to Ibadan with her Mother- in -Law to find her “out of the country husband ” in the flesh, she struggled to earn his trust by pleasing him but to her dismay,he was cruel and spoiled to a fault. His mother had gotten him this play-thing from the village and he enjoyed himself to the fullest at her expense. My mother told me that he would travel for months without anyone knowing his whereabouts only to return months later with fading scars and tons of money,he kept a guns in his

drawer which he would sometimes point at her, making jokes of ending her life because he could,she was his property after all.

One day,the police came looking for him,his address was their only lead concerning investigations on a series of thefts and murders,at the time my mother was a few months pregnant with me.

He fled the city only calling to demand money from his Mother.

Sometimes,my mother would hear granny arguing back and forth,screaming into the telephone:

“This is the reason your father disowned you! I have no more money to give...”

Granny made sure everyone believed her son had travelled to complete his studies abroad, while he lived a thousand miles away at the other end of the country far south,some place the authorities would find difficult to reach; a mushroom town in Delta state.

Fourteen years later, the man whose framed picture hung on the walls of the living room knocked at the door,there was no denying that this man was my father, I was over the moon and reached out to hug him,but his face quickly turned into a scowl.finally,my father had returned but he did not come alone,he came holding another woman on his arm who he introduced as his wife-to-be,Julie.She was white,British and overly excited about the most unremarkable things, for instance,seeing sticks of brooms tied together somehow enthralled her,she held on to it like a relic,telling my father to watch her sweep.

Julie had curly dark brown hair that had started to gray at the roots and wrinkles on her forehead that became more elaborate when she smiled,I found it odd that she was older than my father.

She said they had met online and coming to Africa had been on her bucket list,she spoke about the things she had seen and experienced using the word culture all too often, I wondered how possible it was for a person experience the culture of a people at such a short time,wasn't three days too short to experience culture?

My father said he wanted the wedding to be done at the registry but Julia wanted thing done differently,she wanted to live her dream of being an African bride.

The wedding arrangements were rushed like clockwork, Granny acted as though she had been put under a spell,there was something that Julie's accent did to her,she would melt at the superiority of it trying also to mimic responses with an accent that was clearly not Nigerian. The wedding was going to be luxurious, Julie spared no expense in funding,she would fly her family from London to Ibadan to witness the grand moment of her becoming an African queen.

Julie was told that I had lost my mother during childbirth,and the woman at the house taking care of me was a distant relative, Granny and my father treated my mother as though she did not exist. She really was insignificant.

Julie hugged me tightly saying it was okay for me to call her mom since I would be her step daughter.

Granny made sure a congratulatory message was announced on the radio in honour of the soon-to-be couple.

My mother and I went to get our hairs done at the salon two streets away from home when the congratulatory message aired on the radio.

The women in the salon started talking about how they heard the bride was a rich white woman,one said the groom was the son of a governor,everyone had things to say until the one with the mouth shaped like a weaver bird boasted loudly about how her employer would was the one in charge of catering for the food and drinks at the

wedding and she came to make her hair because important guests would be in attendance.

“ I don’t know who will be there o, but I will look my best,who knows if a white man will be there and tell me to become his african queen”

The other women laughed loudly giving her high fives and telling her she was making a smart move.

She continued talking in Yoruba telling the women she heard the groom was a widower who went to further his studies abroad that was where he fell in love with a white woman.

“ I even heard that he has a daughter and after the wedding, three of them would travel back to America...” she added.

My mother sat still and stared at me from the mirror until both our hairs were done. She held my hands tightly and as we got up to leave, I realized how wrong the lady at the salon was. The hairstyle my mother chose was suitable enough for her face. we walked a distance until we got to a police station and reported all she knew about a cold case from fourteen years ago about a series of murders,theft and the current whereabouts of the long lost suspect and for the first time ever,I heard my mother speak without whispering.

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