

UNSCATHED.

I had just begun to heal from yet another heartbreak, but this time, I didn't drown in tears for too long. Instead, I allowed myself a month to retreat from the world, a month to mend my shattered spirit. I wiped away the tears, for I had come to terms with my unfortunate romantic history. Unlucky in love, they say, and I had to confront that harsh reality. I also had to look for a job. It's a long story, but I guess I should start somewhere. After this breakup, I made up my mind that I wasn't going to enter another relationship again. due to my numerous past failed relationships and also to the failed marriage of my parents. Maybe that is why I cling so tight to any man that makes me feel like I have a father—any man that provides or shows an element of a father figure.

It's 2005, and I am at my father's house. I am little again. I just celebrated my birthday, when I turned 12. We did not really do anything for my birthday, but my mother, God bless her soul, would always ensure we had a very small cake, which she baked on each and every one of our birthdays. We were three, and I was the last. She was a caterer; that was her work. When things were still fine, my dad would joke that it was one of the many reasons he married her, because from the first time he tasted her afang soup, he couldn't stop thinking about her, and even in his next life, he would have chosen her all over and over again. Now my mother is the pillar of my family. She trained us in school with her catering business. I don't know when things went haywire. Oh wait, I remember. I think it was the day my dad lost his job as an accountant in a bank, but that is a story for another day. Where was I? Oh yes, I just celebrated my birthday a week ago. Everyone is home for the holidays except my second-born brother, Dikachi, who hardly comes home. I can only imagine why Oge is in the kitchen clearing up the dishes; we had just finished eating my favourite, beans. I was in the sitting room with my mother, and we were having a little battle because she was combing my hair, which I didn't like. It's eight at night. We heard a knock on the door. Go and open the door, onyinye, my mother said as she ran the brush through my hair for the last time. She adjusted her wrapper and retreated to the couch, crossing her arms. That was her new position any time my father was around. It was the "I am ready for you position; she knew it was my dad at the door, and obviously he would be home drunk looking for another fight. I myself was scared to open the door; it was as if we were happy during the day and sad at night. He brought a dark cloud into the house every day.

Good evening, sir, I said as I opened up the door for him and stepped aside for him to pass. This time around, he wasn't drunk, but he was in tears. The first time I ever saw him in tears was the day he lost his mother. This would be the second. He pushed past me and went straight to my mother. Adrenaline was already running through me, ready to defend my mother concerning whatever allegation

he was about to throw at her. My mother stood up, ready for action, but instead my father was on his knees, crouching, hugging her knees, and saying he was sorry. He kept repeating those words. "I am sorry." Words that I would remember sixteen years later from the very first man that broke my heart. My sister was already in the living room due to the noise. Leaning on the door that connected our kitchen and parlour, the dress she wore accentuated her fine shape. I remember quite vividly. My mother's muscles relaxed. "What it is now! Eh!! Leave me alone, but he kept on repeating those very words. She calmed down and stooped low. "What is it? Talk to me, Daddy, she said in almost a whisper. Daddy, a name I had not heard her call him in a very long time. He began to murmur some words that I couldn't understand, but my mother did. I knew because she abruptly stood up. I kneeled to listen.

"I have defiled the marriage bed and gotten a girl pregnant". That is what I heard, or what I think I heard.

That night, my mother did not sleep in their matrimonial bed; she slept in my brother's room. My father did not sleep in the house, and he was not back after a week. She did not call, and she did not behave like anything happened that night. We all went about our daily tasks without him, but I knew she hated him. There was a day I overheard her discussion on the phone with Aunty Chi Chi. Her best friend and fellow caterer She was crying.

One faithful Saturday, she packed all our bags, including my brother's. We were still unable to contact him. She called me and Oge into her room. The bed was laid out neatly; she hadn't gone near it since that day. "It's time," she said. We left the house and never looked back. Fast forward to today. My brother is a womaniser and a drug addict.

I am thirty now, and I hate men. I don't quite hate my father, though I wanted to, for treating my mother the way he did. He beat her every day. My mother is the strongest woman I know. I never understood why she never left until that day. It was like he finally burst a balloon that had reached its expansion limit. In fact, I still talk with my dad and send him a little money here and there, but my mom and sister should not hear of it. My brother is somewhere outside the country. Nobody knows what he is up to. He sends my mother money once in a while. My mother never bothered to ask what work he did as long as she was being taken care of, but we all knew. It was like venom on our lips that couldn't be spilled. This is what that marriage turned my mother into. A cold and conceited woman. She never remarried.

Oh, I am so sorry. I have diverted again. One of my many bad habits. You might be wondering why I am thirty and looking for a job. Let's go back five years.

As a corpsman, fresh from the university, I had just finished serving. Yes, and I also studied accounting, just like my dad. I was too good at it. I was aiming for chartered accountancy, but I decided to take things one step at a time. I was single, of course, still living with my mother, but it was high time I found a place to call my own. I went around with my CV. I bought clothes for interviews and studied, jumping from one job posting to another. I would go through the examination process, and I would be told to wait for a call. They never called.

I had finally given up my search for a job. I was in my mother's store, which she opened some years ago, selling household materials and utensils. She was getting old. Luckily, the only person whose life turned out great was Oge's. She married a well-to-do man and is now blessed with four adorable kids. My nieces and nephews We talk once in a while. She showers my mother with gifts and takes care of me too. What more could she ask for? Her perfect daughter I have deviated again.

I was in my mother's shop when my phone rang. It was a call from one of the prestigious oil-producing companies I had applied to. They were impressed with my CV, and I was scheduled for an appointment with the manager. I was beyond elated. "Mummy, oh, come and see! she danced with me. One of those Igbo traditional dances where you shake your buttocks She was happy.

It's the day of my appointment. I am dressed to kill, but in a modest way. I wore heels, which I don't normally wear. I came one hour early, so I had to wait by the reception. I busied myself with notes I had taken down during my study. The study did not prepare me for what I would have experienced in that office.

I was told to go in. I made sure I followed every protocol in the book concerning interviews. You knock, wait until you are told to go in, don't close the door behind your interviewer, and don't sit until you are told to. He went on and on about how good my CV was. I was in such a good mood until he began to repeatedly mention how beautiful I looked. I began to get irritated.

"Thank you very much, sir," I said, trying to politely cut him off. "Does that mean I get the job?"

"Of course!!! Why not? You will be very useful to our company. But of course, he said, lowering his voice. "I am a man, and I have needs; you rub my back, and I rub yours. You are fit for this job".

I felt like I had been slapped across the face. "Excuse me, sir, but I don't understand."

"Oh, come on. You are not a baby. Stop pretending like you don't know what I am talking about. I need some sugar," he said with the most disgusting smile I have ever seen.

I wanted to be respectful. I gently picked up my bag and made to leave without uttering a word.

"Aaahh, you are leaving? You would regret this, Oh. Do you know how many people are looking for this position? Tell you what. I will give you one week's grace. Here is my number, he said, handing his business card to me. "Call me when you are ready". I don't know what made me collect that card that day. But I did.

"And so???" My friend Dorcas said this over the phone that night after I had just told her what happened with tears in my eyes.

"Ahah. What do you mean by that? Dorcas, are you trying to tell me to succumb to him?"

"Hmmm. Do you know how many people are looking for this golden opportunity? Oh God. I wish I was the one. Why are you behaving like a baby? All these top women—how do you think they got to where they are now? You better be wise".

Dorcas, Are you trying to say that if you were in my shoes, you would agree to this?"

"Yes!!! I am not only saying it. In fact, that is what I would do. You better think about this, oh."

We ended that conversation after deviating from the topic and indulging in cheap gossip.

I can't remember the last time I prayed. But that night, I did.

Five days later, I was in my room when my mother came in and sat on my bed. My mother does this when she wants to discuss something important with me.

"Nne, how are you? I want to have a word with you."

"I am fine, mummy; I hope all is well."

"All is well, oh. You never told me what happened in your meeting with that manager. Did you get the job?"

"Mummy, I don't think I am interested in that particular job again."

"Hope nothing happened? Why are you so relaxed, then? You know you are not

getting any younger. I am not chasing you from my house, oh. It's your house as well. But you are twenty-five and soon to be twenty-six. There is no time. You are either getting married or getting a job. Just take a look at your sister; she is...

"Eh, eh, don't go there, I have heard. It is enough. I will get a job". One thing I hated was her comparison between me and my sister. She talked some more. Immediately after she left, I rummaged through my bag for the card. I called the number in it. "When and where, sir".

A week before I turned in my resignation, I found out that Michael (which is what I now call the manager), pertaining to how close to marriage we had gotten, was sleeping around with half the females in the office. But that is not what triggered my resignation. It was the fact that he had a wife and children outside the country, and here he was promising heaven and earth to me.

The plan was that it would be a one-time thing, and after that, no more. But you know how men are one thing led to another, and I was falling head over heels for him. He looked quite young. There was no wedding ring on his finger. He promised me that I was the only one. That I changed him. Ever since he met me, his life has become better. I believed him. He made me feel special. I heard rumours, of course. But who cares? I was in love, and I loved my job. The pay was so good that I moved out within six months. I was living my best life.

One day, I received a call on my phone. It was a woman. She begged me to leave her husband alone; she even offered money, and when I told her I did not know what she was talking about, she began to cry. She told me Michael is her husband and that he always does this things like this. She told me about his kids. He has four children, and the last had just entered college. I didn't believe her. I conducted my research, I asked around, and it was like the veil over my eyes had disappeared. I saw Michael for who he truly was. It made me remember my father. I hated Michael. I felt like the other woman in my father's story. A week later, I turned in my resignation letter without saying a word. But not before collecting the money from his wife.

It's the present day, and I am in my two-bedroom apartment somewhere in Lekki. Planning my next move. I made up my mind that I wasn't going to dwell on the past. I was on my own now. I wasn't going to call my mom or my sister. I think I am going to relocate somewhere else, like Porthacourt. Start my life afresh. The money she had given me was enough for now. Almost three million. There was a knock on my door.

Who knows me? "Who is there?"

No answer. "Who is there?"

Still no answer. I am a bit scared now. I walk briskly to the door and swing it open.

"Dikachi!!! What are you doing here? I thought you were in the U.S".

They had just deported him for drug trafficking, and he did not have a place to stay. I hugged him. Welcome back, prodigal son.