

"Why are you stopping me from doing this?"

My life has been filled with so many tragedies and I had attempted to give it an ending of my own just like you, but I realized that as long as there is life, there is still hope. You have to be strong because strong people always find their way through

"You don't know what I've had to endure, I am not strong, please just let me go"

Maybe you should hold on a little bit and let me give you a little insight into my story. Please, have a sit.

"Fine, but make haste, I have a story to end as well"

Thank you. My name is Maria.

My guardian, Mr. Alfred was a young man with a well-paying job and a stable life when he found me. He believed I was a result of an unwanted pregnancy and I was dropped somewhere. He decided to take me in. He named me Maria because I was found very close to the sea. He said I was a special child because he didn't know how I survived in the condition he found me in. The person who dropped me there definitely left me to die. This man saved my life, but at what cost?

I had been living in his home for almost five years before his mom sent the woman who would show me what hell was; to be his wife. For me to remember vividly, trust me, it was that bad. I was forced to learn how to do a lot of house chores from a very young age which I obviously couldn't do and I got beaten and burnt with a heated iron spoon for it. Mr Alfred didn't know about it because he was mostly at work. She sent away the maid who used to work for my guardian so she wouldn't snitch and told him she'd handle the chores while I was in fact, the one who *handled* it.

He was forced into the marriage and it showed. But he got tired of his mother always telling him to get married. He thought it would end there but he forgot how insatiable people are.

"I want a grandchild" was what rang in his ear every single day after he married the fair, tall woman named Esther. My guardian stood his ground on this one, saying I was his child and I was enough. But I wasn't enough for everyone else, he was the only one who wished well for me. His mother never considered me part of the family and wanted her blood, and for his wife, she just purely disliked me and it grew into hatred when she almost had a child almost two years after.

How did she get pregnant? I didn't know but I'm sure it had something to do with drugging Mr Alfred, and I wouldn't be surprised if his mom was in on it. He had no choice but to take care of her because he was a good man but unfortunately, her long-awaited due date was met with the tragedy of giving birth to a stillborn. It was a painful period for the family but this woman didn't miss a chance to point fingers at me.

"Maria is a witch! She killed my baby!" she cried, "I told everyone there was something wrong with this girl but nobody believed me!"

"Esther, take it easy eh? I know we should have done something about her from the beginning but we didn't" her mother consoled her.

"Listen to yourselves, How can you be blaming the innocent girl for the loss of

your child? She has done nothing to you” Mr. Alfred replied.

“It was also your child too, this girl has bewitched you” His mom hissed.

“Don’t tell me you believe this too, blaming a seven-year-old for something she knows nothing about. This little girl has never harmed anyone, it’s just sad how you all think she is a witch” Mr Alfred said.

“She is! She killed our child! She has to leave this house!” Mrs. Esther yelled.

“If anyone has to leave it certainly won’t be her, she’s not going anywhere” Mr. Alfred answered in frustration.

“Are you saying my daughter is the one that has to leave this place? Is this how you treat her??” his mother-in-law reacted.

“Is that how you will talk to your grieving wife eh Alfred? Because of that little orphan?” his mom added.

Mrs. Esther kept crying and everyone kept arguing in the highest of tones while I stood at the far corner of the room, watching the drama with uncontrollable tears, and seeing how much I wasn’t wanted there.

After a lot of argument and thoughtful consideration, Mr Alfred decided that I would stay in his sister’s place for some time, at least till everything dies down.

“You’re a strong girl Maria, and strong girls always find their way in life because they never give up” Mr. Alfred crouched and wiped the tears off my face. I didn’t want him to leave me all alone, but he felt the hateful words from his wife would affect me badly and he also thought being around kids my age would help me get better in my communication and speech.

“You can tell Auntie to call me whenever you want to talk to me, and I’ll come to see you, I promise. Be good, okay?” I nodded as he hugged me.

I had always been very quiet and being home-schooled didn’t help much. He just thought a change of environment would be better for me generally. I also thought it would, but nothing ever came easy for me.

Mr. Alfred’s sister, Mrs. Ruth, was a very nice woman. She didn’t make me feel unwanted and told me I could refer to her as auntie and I should feel comfortable. She was married and had a baby; Sophia, who was almost two years at the time. Her close friend and her neighbour, Mrs. Tahira, had two kids; Zara, who was around my age and Jamal, who was about three years older than me. Mrs. Tahira was also very nice and always had me over to play with her kids.

It took me a while to talk to anyone but when I did, we all got along well and I was beginning to find my smile. I started going to school though it was very challenging for me, I stuttered a lot and found it hard to relate with people, but Zara and Jamal made learning a bit easier for me.

“It’s so difficult” I complained, closing my book in frustration.

“It’s not, it’s just maths” Jamal opened my book.

“I hate maths” I rolled my eyes.

“But this one is simple,” Zara said.

“This is not fair” I wailed.

“Don’t be a baby, we’d help you” Caleb said as Zara giggled.

“Thank you!” I smiled.

Maybe maths didn't come easy for me, but drawing did. I wanted to become an artist when I was older.

"Your niece is so talented, she draws excellently well for a seven-year-old," my teacher told Mrs Ruth.

"That's great, Maria can I see your drawing?" she asked.

"Yes Auntie," I said as I opened my sketch pad on the table.

"Maria, you drew this?" Mrs. Ruth picked it up and stared in disbelief.

"Yes auntie" I answered.

"Wow. This is amazing!" she said in excitement "I'm so proud of you" she said as she kissed my forehead.

That sentence stuck with me till today, no one has ever been proud of me.

"Thank you Auntie" I smiled so much my face started to hurt. That was the last time I remember smiling the hardest.

Mr Alfred came to see me once or twice and asked how I was doing. He promised that I would come back home soon and I told him I liked Mrs. Ruth's place. That preference was changed sooner than expected.

"Aren't you bored, Maria? Do you want to play a game?" Mrs. Ruth's husband asked me.

Mrs. Ruth was out, probably to the market and Sophia was asleep.

"What game uncle?" I asked.

"It's called imagination" he said as he walked towards the guest room and nudged me to come with him.

"This game is a secret game so you have to promise not to tell anyone, okay?" I nodded as he brought out a piece of cloth from his pocket.

"So this is how the game goes" he covered my eyes with the cloth and gently knotted it "I cover your eyes with this so you can imagine properly" he led me to the bed and told me to lie down. I didn't think there was a right way to imagine, but what could I say?

"Can you see anything?" he asked me.

"No uncle" I answered.

"Great" He replied. "Now this is the fun part, imagine a tiny ant is crawling on your hand..." he traced his fingers up and down my left arm, then to my right.

"But you can feel the ant?"

"Mmhm"

"Now the ant is crawling over your stomach" he ran his fingers over my stomach and it tickled.

"Yes" I giggled as he tickled me and I laughed uncontrollably.

"Okay, now the ant is on your leg," he said, running his fingers on my legs.

"What do you think the ant is looking for?" he asked me.

"uhm.. sugar" I answered lightly.

"Yes and oops, it found sugar," he said as he stopped his fingers on my lap"

"But I don't have sugar"

"Remember this is all in your head, anything is real if you imagine it," he said as he slowly moved his fingers under my skirt.

"Ow, uncle that hurts" I winced

"It's the ant biting you, it's just your imagination" he didn't stop.

"I don't want to imagine again, uncle It hurts" I struggled and cried and he held my hands over my stomach to keep me firm.

"Mmm, the pain would go away sooner than you think" he sighed.

I begged for the game to stop but he said I was the only one who could stop my imagination, and nothing I felt was real. The game did stop. He said I had to imagine the ant leaving as it did. I also had to imagine going to the shower and washing off the sugar in my body. He led me to the shower, still blindfolded and poured water on me, with my clothes.

He took off the blindfold after some minutes and asked if I enjoyed the game.

"No, it hurt" I wiped my face

"Sorry darling, It won't hurt next time, we won't imagine an ant biting you."

And the game continued for a year and it all started creeping out of my imagination.

"It hurts! Please get them off!" I woke up, screaming and crying as Mrs. Ruth rushed into my room.

"Auntie it hurts, Please get the ants off" I cried, hugging Mrs. Ruth

"What ants?" she scanned my body looking for the insects.

"They are everywhere" I kept sobbing and telling her to get them off.

The nightmares became consistent and Mrs. Ruth suggested I see a children's psychologist, thinking I would get better, but I didn't. Instead, I developed insomnia. I stayed up all night trying to avoid the nightmares, but I started hearing voices.

I started telling Zara and Jamal about the things I used to hear and they said it was because I used to watch too many scary movies but I could sleep at theirs.

I stopped hearing the voices for a while and I was getting better, until Mrs. Tahira decided to relocate abroad with her kids.

"Zara, Jamal, please don't go" I cried as I watched them move their things.

"Mom, can Maria come with us?" Zara asked her mom.

"No sweetie, I also wish she could. But she'll come and visit us soon. Right?" Mrs. Tahira asked Mrs Ruth.

"Of course. Maria, we'll also go soon. Your dad will come with us too"

"Really?" I asked, wiping my face

"Yes, really," Mrs Ruth said as she hugged me.

I missed them, they were my only friends. Their being away made me devastated, and I started isolating myself again. It didn't take long for the voices to creep back in. It started as a whisper, then it grew into very loud noises over the years and I felt like I was going insane. The voices became too much to handle when I was about eleven and I gave in by throwing myself over the balcony. For some reason. I thought I was going to land on my feet.

Unfortunately, I survived. Truly I was special but I was in a coma for months and when I finally woke up, they said to Mr. Alfred and Mrs. Ruth that I had

developed selective amnesia and I could remember some things and others I couldn't. I remembered Zara and Jamal but I had to relive the fact that they were gone all over again. My sight became bad, I broke my arm and I also couldn't walk for some months but I slowly recovered.

At fifteen, I was already tired of living. My grades had dropped terribly, I became very quiet and I started to eat less. I continued to have nightmares regularly. I was constantly bullied and harassed. Tried making friends but they all turned out to be liars and pretenders. Suddenly, people started spreading rumors and it got to the school authorities. They had to call my aunt to tell her that rumours were spreading and that I pretended to be quiet but I slept around secretly. How?? I don't even talk to anyone or stay behind after closing hours. But I guess if people are desperate to know anything about you they'll believe everything they hear concerning you.

"Aunt I don't know what they're talking about" I told her as she stepped out of the proprietress' office.

"I believe you dear, but they don't, How did this even start?" she asked me.

"It was probably this senior who tried to talk me into being with him. I said I wasn't interested and he asked me who I thought I was and threatened to teach me a lesson. This was probably his way of doing that" I rolled my eyes and entered the car. Mrs. Ruth sat on the driver's seat and sighed.

"She suggested I do a test for you" She stared at me through the rear-view mirror.

"You want me to do a test?" my smile faded.

"I told her the rumours are false but she went on with how her school doesn't tolerate such and she'll take action if you don't do the test"

"I'm just fifteen auntie. Many of her students do worse things but she does nothing to them. So why me?"

"Let's just do it to shut them up, it's not like we have anything to hide"

"It's embarrassing, but if that's what would shut them up, fine" I sighed.

I was sure that would shut them up, but little did I know that it would give them more to talk about.

"What do you mean?" my auntie asked the doctor.

"We did what you asked us to and that's what we saw ma'am" the doctor replied.

"I don't believe that," Mrs. Ruth said

"Maria, you can tell us if anyone has forced you into anything" the doctor turned to me.

"I haven't... done anything, I don't know what you're talking about" I was shocked

"You don't remember anything?" the doctor asked.

"I.. don't"

"She was diagnosed with selective amnesia, could she have forgotten if someone did something to her?" Mrs. Ruth asked.

"It is possible"

Mrs. Ruth thought I was either assaulted and I couldn't remember or I was lying straight to her face, but either way, it didn't change the fact that my life was about to take another unexpected turn.

"You're a strong girl Maria, and strong girls always find their way in life because they never give up" I looked at myself in the mirror and wiped my face.

I had to go back to live with Mr. Alfred. I couldn't go back to school because I had imagined the Proprietress asking Mrs. Ruth and her being unable to speak. Even if Mrs. Ruth didn't say it I knew she was disappointed. I was also confused as to what was happening.

I went downstairs with my bags and tried to look like I hadn't been crying all night.

"Hey Maria" Mr. Alfred turned away from Mrs. Ruth and walked up to me.

"Good afternoon sir" I looked away.

"How are you doing?" he asked.

"I'm... okay sir" I wavered.

"Hmm" was his only response before he helped me carry some of my bags to the car.

Mrs. Ruth came to me and hugged me. "Take care of yourself dear. We'll miss you"

"I'll miss you sister Maria" Sophia came running and hugged me too.

"I'll miss you too Sophie" I kissed her forehead.

"We'll miss you, Maria, I know everything seems overwhelming but it will all go away sooner than you think, and you'd forget all about it like it never even happened" Mrs. Ruth's husband stuttered while completing his sentence, probably realizing what he just said.

"Like it was all in my imagination," I said as I fell and I started to feel dizzy. Mr. Alfred ran and held me. My head started to ache and then

"I remember," I said faintly.

"What?" Mrs. Ruth asked.

"What.. what did you say?" Mrs. Ruth's husband spoke haltingly. I looked dead at him, watching his face fill with worry.

"I said, I remembered"