

Please, Listen

“Oyin! Oyin! Oyin!”

Her voice echoed through the house like a relentless alarm clock, demanding attention and unwavering in its urgency.

“Maaaaa!” I yelled, my footsteps thundering down the stairs in my haste to reach her.

“So, you’re now counting my voice, right?” she asked as I finally reached her, her eyes flaming with unconcealed annoyance.

“No, ma. I was—”

“Save it! Useless girl. I don’t even know why I gave birth to you!”

Here we go.

“Ever since you were born, you’ve been giving me headaches. Every single day! Have you washed your clothes?”

“Not yet, ma. I just —”

“Ordinary cloth, you cannot wash. Your own clothes! I didn't even give you my own to wash for me. Just your own clothes and you can’t wash them.”

Eyeing me like I was the worst scum in the universe, she continued her query, “What exactly is now your usefulness? Sweep, you will say you have headache. Wash the bathroom, you have stomach-ache. Cook, you are not hungry. What exactly is your problem?”

“Ma, I —”

“Shut your mouth! You won’t let somebody talk. And the irresponsible father you have will not even bother talking some sense into your brain! What exactly is your problem? I told you to wash those clothes since yesterday and you didn’t.”

“That’s because I was just —”

“Will you keep quiet? So, because you’re now in the university, you think you’re above orders now, right? Me, your mother, cannot give you instructions again, right?”

Not bothering to respond this time, I kept quiet as she went on, “Before I open my eyes, go and pack your clothes and wash them right now! I don’t want to hear any stories. Is that clear?”

“Yes ma.”

Oh, I haven’t introduced myself. I’m Oyinlola Bamidele. And the person yelling at me is my mother, in case you haven’t noticed. I don’t really know what else to say right now because I make different impressions on people. For my mum, I’m a lazy, useless human

being she has no choice but to call her daughter. For my stepdad, well, he's never really around so, I don't even know what he thinks of me. For my stepbrother, I'm probably just some girl that lives in the house with him. And well, there's you. I'll let you come to your own conclusion.

'What are you standing there for? Do you need a wakeup call? Do I need to beat some sense into you? Your mates are already married and having children and you're still here!'

'When would I start enjoying the fruit of my labour? If at this stage in your life, you can't even do anything right, when will you learn? En? Have some shame, would you?'

'Yes ma.' I replied docilely as I walked back up the stairs to my room. It has become my comfort zone. My safe haven. A place where I could be myself without having to worry about anything else, namely my mum.

My dad died from a cardiac arrest when I was five years old and I have to say, I have not really been at peace in this house since then. My mum couldn't handle his death and the only person she could lash out at, was me. I think she doesn't want to be alone because my stepfather came into the picture barely six months after dad's funeral.

Things started taking a turn for the worse after she caught him cheating with our neighbour's wife. She couldn't confront him because she did not want to be alone. However, the bitterness and anger twisted her so much so, that her only outlet was berating me and finding faults in everything I do.

You're probably thinking this is so sad, right? Well, my mother's voice has become a familiar soundtrack in my life, a daily relentless drumbeat narrating all the ways I have failed to measure up to her standard in life. For the past 18 years, I have been Oyin, the useless daughter. I have become so used to disappointing her that I am numb to the point where I can take what she dishes out now without batting an eyelid.

However, deep down as the years go by, I find myself yearning for something more, something different. An end to this nightmare that is my reality.

I am currently in my third year of studying English Language at the University of Ilorin, a realm where I can dare to imagine myself as more than a perpetual disappointment. Yet, the scars that mar my psyche follow me everywhere in this institution. I hardly participate in roles that involve me being in the limelight, always seeking comfort in being a wallflower.

The crippling fear of speaking up, of expressing my thoughts, has become my constant companion. My only saving grace, the ray of light that shines through the darkness swirling in me, is Tunde.

I stumbled upon Tunde on my way to school one day, literally. He was a fellow course mate and I had seen him a couple of times in class during group presentations. We were to have an overnight rehearsal in school for Theatre Workshop, an elective course, and I

had managed to convince my mother to let me go, but not before she had barraged my dignity by questioning my chastity and intention, 'If you like, go and get pregnant, you are only adding to your problem'. Though unsurprising, her complete lack of faith in me stung and her words kept ringing in my head as I made my way to the rehearsal venue that day. Completely preoccupied, I ran into Tunde's back. He was having a conversation with Bimbo, the most beautiful girl in our set, and a complete airhead.

"I'm so sorry", I apologized, bowing a little, "I wasn't looking at where I was going."

The only response was a hiss from Bimbo. Typical.

Well, apology delivered so I turned around to find my way to the venue when a hand on my shoulder made me freeze in my tracks.

I must have trembled because a voice said, "It's okay. It's me. Tunde."

Turning around, I tried to smile but it probably came across as a grimace and his next words confirmed it, "You seem a bit off. Are you okay?"

Those few words reached a place in my soul that I did not want to acknowledge at that point. Someone cared. Cared enough to ask about my wellbeing. Part of me wanted to pour out all my hurt and sadness to this stranger but I stopped myself. He *was* a stranger and there was the probability that my mum had people stalk me at school. I did not want to give her more ammunition to use against me.

I also could not afford to be late for rehearsals; late comers were in the spotlight and that was the last place I wanted to be in that moment. So, as I saw Bimbo glaring daggers at me, I hastily replied, "I have to go", and hightailed it out of his hold to the rehearsal venue.

I arrived at LT1, the venue, with seconds to spare and guess who was right behind me calling my name. Yup, Tunde. Everybody at rehearsals started chanting his name and I desperately wished the ground would swallow me at that moment. Mr. Popular was definitely not what I wanted around me. He was obviously not there for rehearsals as he was not offering the course, so I could not figure out what he wanted there.

Not waiting to find out, I walked to the back of the alto group of the orchestra, and sat on my favourite chair where I could sing without worrying about people staring at me. Rehearsal began shortly afterwards and we started practicing the songs for our play. I particularly loved '*Lean on me*'. The lyrics embodied everything I longed for and I sang it with everything in me that day.

We rounded up rehearsals at about 5am and everybody dispersed. The ones staying on campus went back to their hostels, while the rest of us tried to get some sleep as the buses would not be active until 7am. I decided to continue reading *The Devotion of Suspect X* on my phone. I needed to know how *Ishigami's* intricate web of lies would unravel. So engrossed with my reading, I did not realize I was being watched.

Phone alarms blared once it was 7am and I pocketed my phone as I made my way to the bus stop with a bunch of groggy humans. We were all tired. Once in the bus, I took out my phone to continue reading when the person seated next to me tapped on my shoulder. Looking up, I realized it was Tunde.

My first thought was, '*what does he want again?*', but I smiled a little and greeted him, "Good morning."

"A good morning to you as well. Do you mind if I ask you the name of the book you're reading?"

Again, my thought was, '*yes, I mind. Go and pick another person to disturb. Just let me read my book in peace.*' But my mother did not raise me to speak like that so I told him the book title, hoping he would shut up and let me continue my reading. No such luck.

"Wow, That's an interesting read. *Kusanagi* is one of my all-time favourite mystery detectives. Which of his books is your favourite or is this the first one you're reading?"

And that's how we struck up a conversation, and Tunde became the best friend I had hoped for. He had this uncanny ability to make me feel heard, feel valued, and most importantly, I could express myself to him without fear. In his presence, I was able to speak my mind with joy, I was able to share my thoughts and feelings without that crushing weight of judgement.

After I opened up to him about my situation at home, Tunde did not criticise me. Instead, he taught me that my voice had worth, that *I* mattered. He encouraged me to start writing down my feelings in a journal and this helped me pour out my heart without any form of interruption or criticism.

As time went by and we moved on to 400 level, Tunde and I grew closer. He became not just my best friend, but also a mentor, guiding me through my late journey of self-discovery. With him beside me, I began to find my voice, I was slowly able to peel away the layers of fear and silence that had been wrapped around me by the actions of my mother.

She still would not let me defend myself as you read earlier, but now, I am no longer bothered by her words. I grab my journal from the hiding place I cut into my mattress and start writing about how her words and actions made me feel when I heard her voice yelling my name once again. The familiar dread washes over me, but this time around, something had to give. I need her to listen to my side.

Putting down my pen, I take a deep breath and walk out of my room. As I descend the stairs, Tunde's encouragement, urging me to speak up and stand up for myself, permeates my body. As I reach the kitchen, there is a broken china plate on the floor and my mother is berating my stepbrother, calling him useless and good for nothing, just as she has said to me countless times. I won't let this go on.

Taking another deep breath in an attempt to calm my nerves, “Mummy,” I say, my voice trembling, “That’s enough.”

My mother turns around at me, her body visibly shaking with anger, “What did you just say?”

“I said, that’s enough,” I repeat, my voice gaining strength with each word. “You can’t keep treating him like this, mummy. You can’t keep shutting him up like you do with me.”

My stepbrother looks up at me from where he is kneeling, eyes wide with surprise and gratitude. My mother’s face, on the other hand, is twisted with rage and for a moment, I fear she would beat the bejesus out of me. But I stand my ground. This has to be said.

“We are all humans, mummy. Everybody makes mistakes. We have feelings too. He wants to explain how the plate fell down but you won’t even give him a chance to defend himself,” I continue, my voice unwavering this time, “Why would he intentionally break the plate? It might have slipped from his hand or maybe he got dizzy. Remember he is diabetic. Why not just listen to what he has to say instead of always saying hurtful things?”

If a pin dropped in the kitchen, it would have been loud in the uneasy silence that ensue. All I can hear is the pounding of my heart as the realization of what I just did dawn on me. I have finally spoken up. I just confronted the very source of my fear. Now, it could go either way. I could end up disowned or beaten within an inch of my life.

I chance a glance at my mother to see her face undergoing a myriad of expressions. From anger to shock, surprise and then realization. She looks at my stepbrother, then back at me and I could see her anger slowly ebbing away.

“Oyin,” she began, her face solemn, her voice gentler than anything I’d ever heard come out of her mouth. “I am so sorry. I know I have always been harsh on you and your brother. Especially on you. Ever since your father died, something broke in me. I know there is no excuse for treating you this way.” With tears running down her face, she adds, “Can you ever forgive me?”

“I forgive you, every day, mummy. But, why? Why do you always have to say such awful things to me? That *‘you wish I was never born. You should have aborted me’*. Why would you say that to your own daughter? To me?”

Tears are flowing from my eyes as I finally pour out my hurt and questions to my mother.

“I don’t know,” she sobs as she reaches out to embrace me, visibly trembling with remorse, “I am so sorry, my baby. So so sorry.”

We sit on the kitchen floor and weep our sorrows, for all the pain caused throughout the years. My mother has acknowledged this pain, this wound she has inflicted upon us. This is a moment of redemption, not just for her, but for our family.

In the days that follow, a subtle but noticeable shift occurred in our house. My mother began to listen, sincerely listen, to what my stepbrother and I had to say. She also registered for an anger management class and encouraged us to express ourselves without fear. The heavy cloud of fear, resentment and bitterness has finally been lifted from our lives.

But my journey does not end here just yet. With Tunde's unwavering support and my ever-growing confidence, I continued to grow, to find my voice and use it for a good cause. I join an NGO that specializes in mental health where I share my experiences and help people find their voices in the face of fear and hopelessness.

Today, as I stand before a room full of people, narrating my story with the hope of encouraging them to speak up, I finally realize the true power of communication. It is a bridge that connects our hearts and minds together, breaking down barriers and building the foundation of understanding in us. With each word I speak, I hope I can inspire more people to not just talk. Please, listen.