

Title: The Five Senses of Death

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Death has a voice, she speaks in hushed tones. Her very large breasts forced into a cream lace blouse, and her waist covered in a bright green wrapper. She's positioned at the landing of our staircase, her surplus and stubby form creating a blockage. She rubs my mother's shoulder and leans in for a hug when her eyes catch me, my back burdened by a school bag with Ugo C. Ugo and the math assignment I failed and was forced to re-do.

My math teacher, Mrs. Soniru, had created a scene by showing my poorly solved equations to the class and had asked them to repeat after her. "Shame, Shame, shame!" she sang, dragging out the final sounds. "Shame, shame, shame!" my classmates echoed, many of them dragging out the final m sound like Mrs Soniru had done. Their mockery crawled up my skin, clawing at my esteem before it finally formed a puddle of anger and frustration. Mrs. Soniru decided to grace the scene with four quick cane strokes that landed as a thud against my thick pinafore and layers of underwear I had wisely worn that morning. The show was the same; a math assignment I always failed, Mrs. Soniru's carefully thought-out punishments, or excruciating whips of a cane against my buttocks. I was powerless until Uncle Kelechi came up with a genius idea of padding myself up to receive her strokes of cane. Every day I got a math assignment, I carefully sorted out my thickest pants and layered them, placing my baby brother's diapers as a foundation.

I looked at the strange woman constricting my small mother in her arms, her sobs dramatically louder than my brother's mindless drumming against the metal railings.

"*Ada anyi*. Our daughter" she cried, releasing my mother and shuffling down a stair. She grabbed me tightly, my face plastered against her greasy chest that tasted slightly salty and bitter. She pulled back pouting her lips to whisper an "*Ndo*. Sorry oh." My eyes shifted to my mother who I just noticed looked sullen and somehow smaller. Her eyes glazed and she forced a small smile before pulling up the left sleeve of her blouse that had gone loose. Now separated from the woman who took turns squashing me and my brother, I held my mother's soft hands as she led me up the stairs where I would meet family members clustered in our living room and speaking in hushed tones. The largest group surrounded my grandmother who sat quietly with tears flooding her cheeks and drenching the pillow cushion in her lap. This was the first time I knew death, this abstract thing that left my grandfather a clumpy blackened corpse. A stranger who turned familiar and brought families together. The air was thick with the awful mix-match smell of fragrances, sweat, and the pungent aroma of *Onugbu* soup to be served to well-wishers who extended half-hearted condolences and spent the remaining time pretending not to see our maid as she handed them finely wrapped semovita. "Eh! All this for me?" They cried as they stretched

their arms to snatch the food, cleaning the cheap ceramic plates in a minute. Their suction against hollow bones echoing in the living room and somehow making its way to my bedroom. I sat at the edge of my bed and considered what death must have felt like. Did it hurt? Was one aware of it when it happened? I wondered what it must have felt like for my grandfather. Had he seen quick flashes of his life? Had he seen us? Had he seen me with my plump palm reaching his bedside table for his Jacob's Crackers that I enjoyed more than cookies. Tears rolled down my cheeks and I coiled to the center of my bed allowing myself to break into a quiet cry like my grandma. In the absence of my grandfather and the presence of crushing grief I drifted into sleep. My brain in her protective ways would allow this memory to be released into nothingness.

Death has a taste. She's the tangy sweetness of a Nigerian orange with a damaged skin because I'm yet to master the art of peeling a green orange. The news of my uncle's death came on a Saturday afternoon as I indulged in my juvenile obsession with Bollywood movies, the cinematic brilliance of perfect choreography, catchy lyrics, and bursts of bright colors. A woman's face fills the screen and her high-pitched voice pierces the living room walls before she breaks into a steady rhythmic shake of her waist, her orange sari swaying in all directions. The next scene is of a man in a brothel and I am reminded of my uncle. A trust-fund child who squandered his money and walked around with shoulders so high they scraped the sky. Wherever he went things changed, shape-shifting to his will. My uncle was an unattractive tall man with a heavy pocket to compensate. On random days I think of the girls who stuck to him, pretending not to notice his beady eyes that sometimes led him to covert; his cousin's wife, my mother's gold bracelet, and my juice packs in the fridge. He was a spoiled brat with an addiction to anything that could get him high. When his funds ran low he turned to simply 'taking' things from our house and showing up at the exact moment the table was set. I was uncomfortable anytime he was around, the stench of smoke always oozed from him, his lips darker than his dark skin. My feelings towards him easily grew to hate when he 'took' a collection of my Enid Blyton books and the black wedge boots I saved for special occasions. So when my mother comes into the living room frantically and announces his death, I feel relief though I'm sad for my father who has lost a brother. I hold my mother who keeps asking rhetorical questions in the now quiet living room. The TV has gone dark and we both sit in momentary silence meant to honour the dead.

"O ka onwu di? Is this how death is?" She asked me, a thirteen-year-old who only knew of death today. I stroke her arms with my orange-scented fingers and tell her "Sorry Mummy." My glee does a thousand backflips before leaping out of my lips into the solemn atmosphere.

"But nobody liked Uncle Ifeanyi," I said, my words exploding into silence. My mother turns to me in shock and in grief, her hands quick as lightning, slapping stars into my eyes. I stare back in shock, slowly realizing the carelessness of my words. The print of my mother's palm on my right cheek would teach me the lesson carefully using words more constructively or simply "Shut up your mouth!"

Death has a color. She is the ironical creamy crimson of blood, not the light type that oozes from a paper cut. It's the darkest shade of a pint, the dangerous shade of lifelessness and the ultimate end. She's the patches of red on my father's light blue shirt as he runs a shaky hand over his head. My mother's scream reverberates down the gaping Enugu-Onitsha express road, and the only working street light glitches before going completely off. My father's soft sobs begin to weaken as he fumbles with his car door before entering the driver's seat and breaking into a sound that my brain would permanently register as the sound of death. It was a low whimpering with ragged breath, a deep grunting that came from within, it was a sound conjured by a body porous with pain and withered by grief. I was sitting in the back seat as my brothers snored lightly beside me, their even breathing in contrast with the chaos at the front. I wondered how they could still be asleep when death had once again visited us. I carefully opened the car door, unsure of what lurked outside beneath the blanket of a starless sky and a bright moon that glistened over my grandmother's blood. This was the first time I registered death; she crouched at the lifeless body with a slithering tongue and soulless eyes, her body contorted backward. She lapped at the puddle of blood gathered around my grandmother and grazed her feet with her claws. Death, this abstract being had now made her first contact with me, leaving a gaping well of pain, forlorn and fear. My brain in her callous ways brought back the lost memories of my grandfather's passing. It fluttered furiously under the moonlight before shattering the shell of protection. My knees crashed into the cold and coarse tarred road and I joined my mother in her weeping. I mourned my grandmother for exactly three weeks, which were the weeks preceding my senior year in secondary school. I was to return on the exact resumption day because my father did not accommodate tardiness. He was a no-nonsense man with thick straight brows that made his face expressionless. I mourned her briefly, in the confines of the same room I had mourned her husband. I held her weird-looking antique doll that I used to be afraid of and sniffed in the cool lavender scent of everything she ever owned. Her favorite yellow pashmina that had begun fraying warmed my feet as I bawled my eyes out or nibbled mindlessly on Jacob's Crackers. I missed my grandmother, even when she was alive. I missed the maternal warmth that spread through her and into my delinquent self, I missed her forcing thoroughly washed bitter leaves into my mouth. I missed who she was before she became a fanatic who visited every pastor in the East and made heavy donations to prophets who rang bells and prayed with candles. While I quietly mourned her, my father was outraged, brimmed with blame for her recent devotion to all things spiritual. She lit bright red candles in every corner of the family house and littered the compound with salt, garlic, alligator pepper, or any other thing the pastors recommended. She closed down her boutique, burnt her jewelry in the backyard, and scraped her salt and pepper hair till her scalp glistened. Her perfumes were exchanged for Goya olive oil and her fashion magazines for the thick leather Bible she carried around. Quite frankly, in hindsight, my grandmother had gone mad with grief. She was radical for superstition and men who called themselves prophets. It was a journey to a crusade in Enugu that finally took her life. She had boarded a late bus to the town, refusing her driver's offer to take her; she insisted to appear before the Lord in humility. It was Rapu, her driver, who had informed my father about her

decision an hour before a random number called informing him of an accident. We were heading back to Onitsha from Awka that evening after a wedding and in a swift mechanical motion, my father turned the car around and into the express. I was dazed by the sudden change of route but I knew better than to ask questions because my parents had switched to our local language, they often did this when they wanted to keep the conversations between themselves.

“*Ogini?*” My mother asked, the glee of a family returning from a wedding creeping out the open window of the car.

My mother's question was answered with my father's low mumble of Igbo words that led to my mother repeating the name “Jesus!” My curiosity on this day would force me to learn Igbo the following year.

My father said my grandmother's death was avoidable, but the thin man, dressed in an all-white robe who sat next to my mother in our living room, said that her death was permitted by God. He credited God with the gushing of blood from her abdomen. He said the name God as if it were reason enough for a rustic car metal to tear through her and leave her a bleeding corpse. He said that God wouldn't have watched her die when she was on her way to his crusade if it wasn't all part of his plan. I watched his animated face move, his lips spewing verses he did not believe in. Our maid emerged from the kitchen into the living room, her hands heavy with a tray of red wine and fried chunks of beef. His explanations ceased as his nose tingled from the sharp aroma of well-seasoned beef, he spread open this leg and pulled the side table between them before throwing a piece of meat into his mouth.

“Did Mama leave anything for me...for the church?” he asked. His words were quickly swallowed by the loud cock of a gun behind him. “Get out of my house you bloodsucker” my father growled. Immediately, the man shuffled to his feet and bolted out the door, fist still holding a piece of fried meat. At that moment I failed to recognize the finite sanity of an orphaned parent but my heart glowed with pride and in my father's rigid features I saw a smile.

Death has a smell. She is the nauseating smell of hospitals and the orange medicine bag I carry around. This smell latches into the walls of my house and soaks into the leather seats of my car. She consumes everywhere reminding me of mortality. Not mine but my father's. She seeps into his red house coat refusing to leave no matter how many times I throw it into the washing machine. She remains there even on nights when I hand-wash his soiled pants. My father's brows are now thinning, his firm face fluid with pain. Death sits at the edge of his bed watching as I devote myself to him. I now make him tasteless soups and watch as he drinks mindlessly. Death mocks my efforts, she is adamant about breaking me, and, so, on a sunny Saturday morning as I enter the bedroom with a bowl of porridge, my father finds his voice and asks, “*Onye ka ibu?*” Who are you? In the silence of his simple curiosity tears well up in my eyes, I look hopefully into his puzzled face but nothing stares back. My father, who was once filled with life, is now a flicker of himself. I beg death to come but she refuses my plea. Death is deaf, too.

