

I don't know where this sudden surge of courage came from, but it compelled me to burst into laughter. I had just returned from the UK, and the stark contrast between the world I had experienced abroad and the stifling expectations of Nzé, my hometown, was evident. It felt as though a reservoir of defiance had erupted within me, manifesting in laughter that boldly challenged what they expected. These people must be crazy to believe they can dictate my future as if I were already dead and not sitting here.

Mama's eyes pleaded with me to keep my cool. She knew me more than anyone else in the room. She knew that my emotions were unpredictable and as volatile as a raging tornado, and that I could create a scene right then and there. But what she didn't realize was that I was on the verge of creating that scene if they persisted in plotting my future and dictating my next line of action.

I am an adult perfectly capable of making my own decisions, and not getting married was one of them.

My return from the United Kingdom brought forth a whirlwind of emotions. My family had been eagerly awaiting my return, armed with plans that excluded my input. To them, it seemed as if my time in Europe had been nothing more than a temporary diversion, a brief hiatus from the meticulously crafted path they had envisioned for me.

Something inside of me snapped under the weight of the pressure as I sat there with my family, listening to their voices full of expectations and demands.

Uncle Nkem, who had appointed himself as the family's spokesperson, continued to deliver his sermon, seemingly unaffected by my laughter. It is worth noting that my oldest uncle, who might have traditionally assumed such a role, was now too frail for the kind of conversation that was being had. So it fell upon Uncle Nkem, whom I would rather not listen to, to champion the cause of tradition within our family.

His determination to uphold our customs was unwavering, and it was evident in every word he spoke, regardless of my defiant laughter. His words were heavy, as if he were determined to preserve all of Nzé's traditions at all costs. Perhaps, in his mind, he had likely calculated the bride price—the large sum of money that would be paid for my "hand in marriage" as the Ada, the first and only daughter in our family. I could only imagine the meticulously crafted list he had devised for the hypothetical Kanayo, my supposed husband-to-be. It was apparent that he viewed me as a commodity, a treasure chest ready to be auctioned off to the highest bidder in the name of custom and tradition.

"It is our revered tradition that the Ada of Nzé must marry before the age of twenty, and as we all know, Sochikaima here is twenty-nine and will be thirty in two months," he

intoned, as though he were a high priest delivering a sacred decree. His voice resonated with the echoes of generations past, as if he believed the essence of our ancestors flowed through him.

"We have a lot of abled and eligible young men in our community," he added, almost mockingly, his words like venomous serpents poised to strike down any defiance.

"Haven't we?"

"We have, indeed. Nzé has no shortage of men, nor is it lacking in eligible bachelors." My other uncles, seemingly bound by an unseen oath to agree with whatever Uncle Nkem proposed, chimed in, nodding solemnly as if they were sworn members of a secret society, their gestures sealing an unspoken pact with the unyielding forces of tradition.

Uncle Nkem went on. His voice was a mix of concern and pressure. "Do we want her to be a spinster forever? To be an old cargo and be forced to settle for an old man?"

His words were charged with the implication that if I didn't conform to their expectations now, my future options would be limited to choices dictated solely by desperation and societal pressure. It was a not-so-subtle attempt to sway my decision and make me believe that I had no alternative but to yield to their plans.

"She has passed the age of 'whose daughter is she' and is not even at the age of 'whose wife is she,' but 'whose mother is she,'" he continued, echoing the labels that had confined women's roles in society for generations. "Now that she is still considered manageable goods, and her time, like that of all women, hasn't yet run out, I speak for everyone here when I say it's high time she settled down." It was as though he believed that my worth, my very existence, was defined by marriage, as if I were a product on a market shelf, and he, the shrewd merchant, determined the terms of the sale.

"I don't understand why she's been rejecting all the suitors who come to ask for her hand," Uncle Nkem continued, his voice carrying a note of frustration, like a storm brewing on the horizon. "But then, with the meticulously laid-out plans we've crafted, we should have her married to Kanayo within the next four weeks."

"We should be lucky that someone as handsome as Kanayo, who also comes with other enticing offerings like wealth, a fleet of cars, and vast land, is interested in marrying Sochikaima, regardless of her age." He added with a wry smile. His words were intended to emphasize the apparent rarity of such an opportunity and the material benefits that came with it, all factors that seemed to matter more than my desires and aspirations.

"Twelve years in the UK and no man to show for it," Uncle Nkem couldn't resist also adding. Amid the tension-laden atmosphere, his words were laced with mockery, as if my time in Europe should have been solely dedicated to securing a husband. It was a reminder of the narrow perspective that had brought me to this crossroads, a perspective I was determined to shatter.

"Or do you have a spirit husband or something that is preventing you from getting married?" Uncle Nkem asked rhetorically, his voice dripping with a mix of condescension and skepticism as he turned his attention to me. It was as if he were challenging the unseen forces that might dare to possess me.

'I don't want to get married', I heard someone who sounded like me say.

The collective gasp and shock on their faces as they all turned toward me made me realize the voice was mine. I momentarily regretted my words and, for a split second, considered taking back what I had said, but it was too late to back down now. I was exhausted with their incessant meddling, like an unyielding tempest against a mighty fortress.

Mama was already tearing up, and deep down, I knew she regretted sending me to the UK for my education, or maybe even having me in the first place. I must admit that I am not an easy child when my mind is made up.

I took a deep breath, and with newfound determination, I spoke up, my words cutting through the tension like a lightning bolt splitting the sky. "I don't want to get married," I declared firmly, my voice a defiant thunderclap in the stillness of the room. "I don't want to get married," I repeated, my voice unwavering, like a lighthouse guiding ships through the storm. "I don't believe that marriage defines a woman or..."

But before I could finish my sentence, my father's voice thundered through the room, crashing upon me like a tidal wave, threatening to engulf my resolve. "Then you cease to be my daughter from today on," he all but screamed, his words a tempestuous whirlwind that threatened to tear me apart. "You either marry Kanayo in four weeks, as your uncles and I have concluded, or you pack your things, leave my house, and never come back."

The room fell into stunned silence, broken only by the sound of Mama's quiet sobbing. I had expected disapproval, perhaps even anger, but I had not anticipated being disowned. My father had always called me the apple of his eye, and his pride in me was well-founded. When other parents cautioned their daughters about the distractions of

boys, mine never had to, for I had always been singularly focused on my studies and had been a model child in their eyes.

It was this unwavering dedication that had led them to make the pivotal decision to sell some of their lands and send me to the UK for my studies, and I repaid them by succeeding in every aspect of my life. From earning top grades in school to receiving a first-class degree and being named the best-graduating student in practically all of my courses of study.

My dedication and skill also propelled me to become one of the nation's finest surgeons. Yet, despite all my accomplishments, it seemed that the mere act of refusing to marry would be the one to cast me out, like the devil being expelled from heaven, turning me into a fallen angel banished from their realm of expectations. Was getting married truly the only path to not becoming the forbidden fruit in my father's eyes?

As I stood up to leave the room, I heard Mama's desperate pleas to my father. She was on her knees, tears streaming down her face, as she begged him not to make such hasty decisions and not to disown me. "Please, my love," she implored, "give me some time to talk to her." Then, in a poignant moment, she turned toward me. Still on her knees, she rushed toward me, her hands trembling as if trying to grasp hold of a vanishing hope. Her eyes, filled with a mother's love and desperation, met mine. "Ada'm," she said, her voice quivering, "we all want the best for you. Kanayo is a good man. You would learn to love him."

But I remained silent, my heart heavy with the weight of my decision. Her pleas hung in the air, unanswered, as I continued to walk away. Undeterred, Mama, still on her knees, rushed to my uncles, who were seated nearby, and beseeched them to intervene on her behalf. She implored them to beg my father not to rush things and to give me more time to reconsider.

Feeling the need to clear my head, I made a conscious choice not to return to my father's house. Instead, I walked away from the imposing structure that had been my family's home for as long as I could remember. The weight of my father's disownment still hung heavy in the air, and I longed for the solace of the open road to help me make sense of it all.

The path I selected led me away from the familiar streets I remembered growing up. As the sun began to set, casting long shadows on the dirt road ahead, I could feel the tension gradually dissipating with each step. It was as if the simple act of walking away was a small act of defiance in itself.

I didn't know where this path would lead me, but I followed it with a sense of purpose and defiance, guided by the tempest of change that raged within me. My mind was a whirlwind of memories and reflections as I wandered, not scared at this point if I got lost or not.

My life had been marked by a lifelong struggle against the suffocating confines of my parents' penchant for making decisions on my behalf. Growing up as an Ada entailed carrying a burdensome set of expectations. It was evident from a young age that my life would be meticulously sculpted according to my parents' wishes, with traditions dictating what a first daughter should become. They had predetermined everything for me, from what I should study to the minute details of my life. This was why I had chosen to stay in the UK for as long as I could, reluctant to return to the confines of a life mapped out for me.

I would not have come back, at least not yet, if Mama's health hadn't taken a turn for the worse. Her illness had been the tether that had dragged me back, but the truth is, Mama's illness wasn't as dire as she had initially made it seem. It was only after I returned that I discovered it had been part of a plot, a strategy concocted by her, my father, and my uncles to ensure I returned to Nigeria when I did.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, painting the sky with hues of orange and purple, I made a momentous decision—a decision that was entirely my own. I had spent my life being molded into their ideal image, but I had reached a breaking point. I refused to be solely defined by traditions or to have my worth measured solely by my marital status.

My father's disownment, though excruciatingly painful, served as a stark reminder of the lengths to which my parents were willing to go to ensure my compliance with their desires. It was a harsh lesson that even a single act of defiance, an assertion of my independence, would lead to such drastic consequences. I couldn't help but contemplate the irony of the situation—the one time I dared to choose my own path, I was disowned.

The weight of my decision pressed heavily on my shoulders, but as I continued walking, I couldn't help but sense a feeling of liberation. The path ahead was uncertain, and the tempest of change I had unleashed was tumultuous, but I was determined to navigate it on my own terms.

With each step, I distanced myself from the life that had been meticulously planned for me and moved closer to the uncharted territory of self-discovery. The night was shrouded in darkness, but the stars above offered a glimmer of hope, a reminder that even in the face of disownment, I, Sochukwukaima, was a woman crafting her own path.