

## **OUT OF MY MIND: BY NONYALIM UCHECHUKWUGEME**

Death is at my door, and I am strolling on the corridor that leads to it.

Today, I woke up feeling sore. My genitalia feels as though there are bruises plastered on its walls. I suspect that it would hurt a lot more to sit up, so I lay in bed with my belly faced down, and my arms folded under my head for balance. I notice that my breasts are a lot heavier, and that they tingle from time to time, but I do not let that bother me. My body has felt a lot of ways since the abortion.

My eyes are heavy from excessive crying, so I keep them closed. I am not one to cry, however, the last few days have broken me. Ignoring the pain I feel, I let my mind wander to the events of the past few days, and then, to the activities leading to those events.

Four months ago, Uncle Tony had attended my 13<sup>th</sup> birthday as a major contributor to my family. He pulled me to his laps, like he always did when he came around and whispered to me to dance on his crotch. This had been our interaction for over four years. He ran his fingers down the parting on my carefully braided hair and sniffed my neck. I wondered if nobody could see him, or if they pretended to not see him and not react to the way he touched me. I believed it was the latter because the interaction was one impossible to miss even by the most absent minded persons.

That day, however, he went farther than our regular interactions. He whispered “happy birthday” in my ear numerous times, and proceeded to tell me that he bought me many gifts since he adored me. Twisting the curls of my all back between his fingers, he whispered again that I followed him to his car in our miniature garage to get it. I did as I was told.

I always did what I was told because I was trying to please my parents to atone for all the times I caused them pain as a sick child. My doggedness also prevented them from reminding me about how much money they put into caring for me, and how I made them bankrupt.

While I stretched to pick the box of gifts, including a dollhouse that I would never play with since I was a teenager, he came and stood behind me. He rubbed his body against mine and began lifting my skirt. The garage was tiny and could fit only two cars, and had only one window through which light came in, so it was almost dark. I felt him enter into me and I cried out.

I never complained or went against orders; especially ones related to Uncle Tony because I blamed myself for his presence in our lives. My sickness as a child made my parents bankrupt, and Uncle Tony took it upon himself to get my father back on his feet. They were indebted to him because of me.

When he was done, he put on his pants and walked out of the garage like nothing had happened. My hands were still on the boxes and tears mixed with snot from my nose rolled down my face. This however, was the beginning of my terror, because that one time fertilised an egg.

My mind travels to when my mother found out that I was pregnant and forced several concoctions down my throat while wailing about how I had brought shame upon them. I begged her not to tell my father, but she went against my wishes and did so when I wouldn't name the father of the child in me. I knew they would do nothing about it when they heard his name, so I didn't bother. I had complained about his sneaky touches over the years, but was chastised instead.

The night after my mother informed my father, he had tried to suffocate me in my sleep. I was awoken to a pillow over my face, and while I struggled to breathe, I heard words over me like whispers. "I should have taken your life years ago when you made me and your mother bankrupt with your illness. Now, you have brought us shame. Who would marry you now? What would people say about us if they hear what you have done?" I swung my arms and legs, but the pillow only tightened around my face. It didn't take long before I gave up; when

I went limp, he withdrew and scampered out of my room. In addition to the pain in my abdomen, the unending bleeding, the sores in my private part, I now had a twisted neck from trying to escape death by the hands of my father. This happened two days ago.

I come back to reality, and sigh heavily. I unfold my arms, leave my eyes shut, while garnering the courage to stand up from my bed. I wince at the unbearable pain mostly at my abdomen, and mildly at other parts of my body.

The room is quiet, except for the pitter patter of the rain outside my window. I wonder why it is raining in February. I open my eyes, and immediately my earlier thoughts are pushed to the back of my mind. There are bigger issues than rain falling in February before me. Nothing in my room is as it was the night before. The sheets are changed, the wall paint is different, my mother's bags of garri, rice, and tubers of yam, that made my room smell like a food store room, are gone. I rub my head to make sure I had not hurt it and was not seeing things.

Had I gone mad from the excess pain? Had my parents given up on me and whisked me to my grand aunt's house like they always threatened?

I get up hastily from the bed. I had to find out where I was. The slippers by the bedside are very big, and so are my feet. I was definitely out of my mind; I had started seeing things. I turn to the halved mirror hanging on the wall beside my bed, and I shriek back and fall to the bed. I let out a sharp wince as falling to the bed applied pressure to my already aching body. I sit in bed, and stare at the image in the mirror. The mirror reflects a taller lady, not a 13 year old. Her breasts are bigger and rounder. Her hair is cut into a short afro and her face is longer, thinner, but more beautiful than mine. I bob my head to the left and she does exactly as I do. I stick my tongue out, and she follows suit. I stretch, and her long arms go into the air at exactly the same time. I shriek again, but this time, I try not to cause myself pain.

This lady isn't mimicking me; it is as though she is me. I stare silently at the mirror, at this person that seems to be me; I am afraid, but I cannot bring myself to run away. I also notice that the image in the mirror has no scars or open wounds like I did. I feel in between my

thighs with my hands, and the big sores are all gone; I am no longer bleeding. I am even more afraid now. Had I slept for years and grown up in my sleep like the movies? Was it the suffocation that drove me to a coma? Was this a dream? While racking my head to answer these questions, and finally deciding that it was a dream, I notice a yellow piece of paper sticking out from behind the mirror. It looked like it was being hidden from people, but also as if the hider needed someone to find it. I stretch to pull the mirror off the wall and then the paper.

It read, “check the drawers of the cupboard beneath this mirror for a blue notebook and skim through it. Also, stick this paper back where you found it. No one must see it”. I do as the paper says.

I was used to having really adventurous dreams. In fact, I needed such dreams now in order to escape the events of the past few days, my reality.

I find a soft cover blue notebook in the last drawer; under a pile of jewellery. If the person was trying to hide it too, they did a horrible job. I open the book to the first page and it read; “First things first, you are not in a dream”, I roll my eyes, then keep reading. “This is your reality. Azuka, I know today must have started hard, but nothing is as it seems. Whatever you feel, did not happen a day or two days before, it happened a while back. You are currently 19, and the Azhanti Curse is upon you”, I close the book and laugh loudly at myself. I am definitely out of my mind. My curiosity, however, didn’t allow me to leave the book close for up to 10 seconds. I open the book again: “You remember the story father always told you? The story he would not shut up about? It is real”.

I knew about the Azhanti Curse, but I was obviously smarter than the person who wrote this book, as I also knew that it was a night time story my father told to bond with us after days of being away on “business”.

“I hope you haven’t gotten to the point in your life where he has never told you the story?” The book continues. “I hope you haven’t gotten to the point where you do not know how to

read? I wonder how old you are today. I wonder the horrible memory that plagued you as though it were a recent experience. I wonder what you have had to relive. I hope you are not back to the days when you were sick and you heard father hope and pray that you die? I wonder if you will cry as hard as you did those days. I hope you aren't reliving the memory of the fire accident. I hope you aren't back to the days Uncle Tony raped you? I pray it is not the memory of the days following the abortion. I hope you never get to relive the endless pain that came with it". I pause to wipe tears away from my face. The writer knew. It was the days following the abortion.

"If it's the day after the fire you woke up to, the pain is not real. It's all in your head. Turn to the mirror and check yourself. There are no burns on your skin. If it's the day after the rape, the pain is not real either. It's all wicked memories. According to the Azhanti curse, death is at my... your... our doorstep".

"That we are cursed is a secret; you cannot tell anyone. You know the repercussions of people finding out you are plagued by the curse? The stories are real. Skim through the rest of the book to read about your current life. Every version of yourself you have woken up to have kept records of each day they woke up to. You are to record what goes on today as well. It helps the person you wake up to tomorrow know what they are in for", I take deep breaths as I skim through. I am even more afraid now. The record from one week ago says people have come for my introduction with big gifts. I wonder who marries a 13 year old who has the blood of a child on her.

This dream is getting out of hand.

I lay on the bed and hope to wake up from this bizzare dream, but my mind wanders. I think about the Azhanti Curse of forgetfulness. According to the stories my father told us, it meant you were on your way to open up the door and let death suck you in through its gaping mouth. The Curse was, to us, a mere story our father called "Our history. The history of the Azhanti Clan".

“Grief”, my father would start and take a dramatic pause before continuing, “is considered a hurricane that sweeps away strength. According to the Azhanti Town gods, grief, rather than death, is the real thief of joy, and a robber of time”.

The way my father told the story was the same all the time he told it. This was why we believed it was more of a folklore than some history we were tied to.

“How did the god’s come to this conclusion? You may ask... It goes back to a long time ago; even before I, your father, was born. Azhanti was a town that flowed with wine, women, and fat cows. Our women glowed under the sun and our children blossomed into strong. Our fruits were rich and our stomachs were never empty. The Zaza people drooled over our success and planned to steal from us. While men slept, they sent Jujus to plague every first son in the village with leprosy. While our people tended to the sick, they attacked and slaughtered our cows and children, and then went ahead to uproot our tomatoes and berries. They whisked away our women, and by the time we heard their screams, they had already retreated over the barriers that separated us and had raised their gates so high that all we could do was bang on it and march around it for days while singing our plea chant”. He always told the story with so much vigour.

I turn in my bed as I think, and stare at the ceiling and its black patches caused by the leaking roof. At least, that didn’t change.

“This tussle left men in our clan weakened for days. They grieved for so long, and some even took their own lives by drowning in the Oshi River or driving an axe through their stomach. In no time, a clan with people as many as the trees in the rainforest, had very few men left. Weak, grieving men. They had thought the Azhanti clan would go extinct”, he would say and smile widely and wildly.

According to him, those who were left, retreated to the Town’s shrine and sought solutions and protection from the Lords that linked them with their gods. “The Azhanti Lords

announced that they couldn't make us stronger, and refused to do anything supernatural to bring the Zaza clan down. However, they made us able to resist death for a long time, and foresee death when it finally came to board us on its bus. Any member of our clan who is close to death would lose his memory bit by bit, and would eventually go mad. A point will come when they would lose their senses of speech, touch, and then they would recognise nobody. The Lords made sure that the signs would be clear so as to give those around them time to dispose of them physically and mentally; time to grieve over them while they were alive. The Azhanti curse of forgetfulness helped members of the clan at that time filter out men who were not fit to go to war against the Zazas. It also cleared a man of his stained mind and soiled hands to enable him to descend into a peaceful and eternal rest. What better way for the living to be at rest than for them to know that their dead loved ones are cleansed and at rest as well?" He would ask, not requiring an answer as he would move on. "It was an instrument of war that still protects every member of the clan", he would say as he approached the end of the story.

I thought it was a selfish story because death was already horrible enough, why make the sufferer go mad? Forgetting in bits means living in other bits that remain. Forgetting the present means living in memories of the past; good ones, and the ones that you tried to suppress. It focused on the living and did not allow the person close to death enjoy his last days. Whenever I stated my opinion to my father, he would say "that is the whole point. The dead are unimportant, why dwell on them?"

I fold in my bed. If this was what was happening to me, it means that death is at my door, and for every memory I relive, a step is being taken towards opening the door. This was really bad. I hope that it is a dream; a really long dream.

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