

The silence in the room was a sharp contrast to the pounding palpitations of my heart. My heart's valves seemed broken. I heard the very loud drop of some pin when it fell in the middle of the *Let's Talk!* Studio as the expectant audience – and interviewer – awaited my response with abated breath.

The first time I saw her, I was shopping with my soon-to-be-sixteen-year-old daughter. Unlike the typical mother-daughter dynamics, we had a very close relationship. It was one of my blessings. I watched with mother's pride as she bounced around the mall, care-free and effervescent, choosing items we would use for her birthday cake. Baking together was just one of our favourite bonding activities.

My gaze shifted from Andrea's smooth, smiley face when I saw the movement of a shadow. And there *she* was; just beside a wooden shelf laden with baking sodas. Hidden to all but me. She smiled. I didn't reciprocate. I was overwhelmed by her presence; tried and failed to think of possible reasons she had to visit me that day.

"Mum! Can we like try mixing three flavours together? Like, so that you taste all three when you take a bite?"

Andrea's voice filtered into my subconscious, and I smiled. She couldn't talk without filler words. I found it cute, but her dad – my husband – found it irritating. "That isn't elegant." He would say. My daughter's call was a happy distraction and I averted my eyes from the very captivating young girl. The girl from whose glory I had fallen short of.

Since then, she became a regular visitor. An unwelcome one.

I'm not ignorant. I am every modern woman's dream: A wife, mother and at the top of my career. At least, to the women who wanted these things. At forty-four, I still met the conventional beauty standards: a very symmetrical face; fit, slightly curvy body, clear and light skin.

The combination of wealth, smarts and beauty would typically have the entire world at one's feet. I had all these. But the world was far from falling at my phalanges because I didn't have the most important appendage of them all: a penis.

Not that I wanted the world at my feet but. . .

I fantasized more often than I could ever admit about having 'battle-tested' added to the list of alphabets that followed my name: *Anurika Okoli, OB/GYN, MD, MBA, battle-tested*. Retrospectively, all these titles are representations of the different battles I have conquered. But was a cultured battle the same as an open-field battle? One subject to the elements of this world?

And why worry about battles when there were wars to be fought?

Growing up in Port-Harcourt to below average parents, I saw firsthand their relentless struggle and commitment in ensuring that my brothers and I received the best education they could afford.

“Education is the key to many doors”, they said often. So often that I knew doing well in school wasn’t an option. It was *the* option.

And so, I did well. Extremely well. This made me their favourite topic, the lifter of their heads, especially among their peers who thought them to be subpar. It made me happy, but it also made me victim to their stringent expectations. Every suitor was below par, and everything was done to keep up with societal appearances.

It was all about “Gini ka ndi mmadu ga-ekwu?” *What will people say?* It was all about putting on a show for the Ummnas and the Umuadas. And as the first and only daughter, I was to let them have their way, a willing victim.

The irony of most situations I found myself in at home wasn’t lost on me. As the girl, the only girl, I didn’t – shouldn’t – have as much say. But when I stepped into who I had become, the financier, I had the final say on decisions.

Before it used to be that the boys would decide on something together, then they would expect that I foot or contribute to the bills. I rebelled, of course and it changed.

But sometimes I wished I didn’t. Sometimes I wish that I had let things be.

My role on the management board of the Obstetrics and Gynecology Division of the Federal Ministry of Health was ripe with challenges. One of them being arguing often with my male colleagues who wanted to do nothing but hear their own voices.

It was true that I didn’t want to only be the financier of the family but was it that bad? Was it my hurt pride that made me want to have the final say? Did I make my voice loud at home because it was silenced at work? At least at home my ideas and thoughts were respected. At work, however, the decisions that affected Nigerian women’s health were done mostly by men – in my presence. And I couldn’t say a word. The few words I said were either dismissed or accepted only when another colleague had reworded them.

Maybe I fought for my voice to be heard at home because it wasn’t heard at work. At least my money could afford me ears that will listen. On the board, where everybody had both money and connections, I was the poorest because of how I came out of my mother’s womb.

A girl. A curse.

It didn’t matter. What mattered was that I had picked the wrong fight.

The first time I delivered a baby, a boy, it filled my heart with joy. Nevertheless, the level of joy reduced with subsequent parturitions and soon every patient – woman and baby – became a stat in my book. It shames me to say but all of them became a tally in either my ‘alive’ or ‘dead’ column. I cared about my patients but the real reason I wanted them alive was so I could keep getting referrals.

I loved the honour it brought my name. I loved the awards and recognitions. I loved that I was the go-to for women of high status, women who were catered to beyond imagination and who frankly didn't need my expertise. Not that those women didn't need a professional, they just didn't need *me*. They were not my calling. Their wealth and privilege were keys, accesses to the very best this world could offer. Their wealth's source, inconsequential.

I loved being part of that sphere by proxy. Connection was currency, after all. It was a world the girl who sold onions and other food items in her mother's shop couldn't believe she would ever be in close contact with.

My parents were right: Education is key. By virtue of my academic excellence and career, I was rich. By virtue of being married to my husband, a serial investor, I became a bonafide member of the upper class. But even among the upper class, there was an even higher rank. The inner caucus.

I didn't really want to be part of them, but it was nice to be *seen* with them.

If I were only but an arm candy, I'd have still been a high-class socialite. And therein lies my issue: I didn't need to cater to these women to be a classmate. My husband's name covered me.

Then why did I deviate from my original plan? How and why did I forget the poor women who gave birth to their young in their shops or houses just because they couldn't afford to go to a hospital? I was in the position to potentially help millions of women. But what did I do?

Nothing.

My younger self would be disappointed.

And I believe she began to be disappointed immediately I said yes to the man I married. That little, strong-willed girl would never have agreed to be with a man she didn't love. She made so much noise about quitting a marriage immediately she was hit or cheated on. But here I am. Countless infidelities and a Ph.D in concealing 'stair falls'. It became easier to go with the lie, with the flow. I inherited my parents' mantra and displayed for the public.

When people found out I didn't take my husband's surname, there were mixed emotions. Some mockingly called me 'woke'. Some others hailed me. *A twenty-first century woman*.

Very funny. Truthfully, not adopting his surname was in fact, the only decision I have made since I got married that my husband, Gregory Osondu, accepted.

It was eighteen years after I said "I do" that I realized it was because the first and original Mrs. Osondu was very much alive. And still married to my husband. Unbeknownst to me, I was a second wife. The homewrecker. Gregory's secret life unraveled when a woman called me, threatening to go to the press if he didn't continue sending her money.

Yes, February 11th 2018 was when I knew two things: that my husband regularly sent money to a strange woman – his wife – and their children. And that I was an utter fool, an embarrassment.

When he came back from work that Saturday, I relayed the message and he just looked at me and said “Hope you know this doesn’t change anything? Keep your mouth shut.” And went upstairs to the room.

But it changed everything. For one, he became meaner. Two, I hated myself for even suffering numerous abuse from a man who had never been mine since the beginning. Three, I disliked my parents even more than I already did. Four, I became a person I didn’t want to be: bitter and full of anger.

So, I was stuck with ‘Okoli’, a surname I didn’t particularly feel proud of. But there wasn’t even a better option. Which was why unlike my colleagues who would rather be referred to by their surnames, I preferred to be called Dr. Anuri, instead of Dr. Okoli. Thank God ‘Dr. Osondu’ was never an option.

It was that wretched year that I saw *her* first. Somedays, when I was so depressed, she made me feel good, a salve to my weary soul. Other times, she made me feel guilty. Nevertheless, her presence was always marked with mixed feelings which typically geared towards the negative.

She didn’t do anything to make me feel bad. But her presence was a reminder of who I wanted to be, who I was not. My favourite game was pretending that I didn’t know she was in a room with me. It was a game she usually played along with. But when I ignored her for long, she got angry and taunted me with words I wrote in my diary in my teens and twenties.

She often beckoned on me to look at her, to acknowledge her. But I couldn’t. I had fallen too short of her glory. She still possessed the same kind of fecundity she had always had. The type I have lost and have made no move to find. I tried to hate her for that. But I failed.

I worked so hard trying not to be a disappointment to my parents that I was okay disappointing myself. If I let myself think too much, I would realize that all the enigmatic girl wanted was for me to trace back my steps. She wanted to give me hope that I could still be who I wanted to be. But I wouldn’t succumb to such thoughts.

Last year, when my resentment for my husband reached its boiling point – when he told me, again, that he had gotten another woman pregnant – I snapped. And that night it angered me that he could sleep so soundly while I rolled and tossed. So I tilted the jug I always had in the room toward his sleeping form, making sure the scorching water burnt the aim. I have never heard anyone scream the way he did that night. But I didn’t care. After all it has been years since we had sex. Even longer since we began hating each other.

He thrashed violently, raging with unbridled anger. “You witch! How dare y – Ahhhhhh!”

That was also the last time I spoke to my parents. Gregory Osondu was dead to me and so were they.

At least, that was my prerogative at the time.

Till date nobody knows what happened in that room. Except her. She was there. Her disappointment was almost tangible.

Guilt ate at me from the inside, but I did what I did best: smile for the world.

Now, in the penultimate row of Let's Talk! studio, I saw her. She was also waiting for my response. Probably more impatient than the others. Something in me knew that I needed to tell the truth for both our sakes, consequences be damned. It was this truth that would lead me back to myself. It was this truth that would lose me from my chains and give me the strength to accept her guidance.

I could taste liberation as my throat bobbed in trepidation at the words I was about to vomit. Words that will be tossed and churned in the media the minute they got out of their birthplace.

Do you have a word for your younger self? That was the question.

If I were more conscious of my surroundings, I would have seen the worried, confused faces of Ronke, the interviewer, and the audience as I looked my younger self in the eyes, her youthful face now saddened by the mirror of her adult life.

With my gaze intent on her, I replied, "Ronke, that's a very good question. One I hate answering." Nervous, unsure laughter rang throughout the room. "However, if I could, I would tell her the truth."

"Which is?"

Silence.

"That it is a man's world. And for a woman to have a piece of it, she must fight. So, I would tell her to fight for her dreams; that she would fall a million times and it only takes aggressive strength to stand stronger and taller after each fall. I would tell her that the means should justify the end but often, the end will justify the means. And in some cases, there would be no correlation between the means and the end."

I didn't know when tears ran down my face. But as I looked at her, I saw that she too had tears in her eyes.

"I'm sorry." I whispered to her. And she nodded. She heard me. Of course she did. She was me after all. She quietly stood from where she sat and began leaving. I knew I had to follow her. She would be my beacon; my path back to my calling and probably my parents. And maybe, even love.

So I stood and followed.

NigeriaBlog: Watch as renowned Dr. Anuri Okoli go crazy on TV!

9jWomen: This is why we can't trust these women: Men's world my foot!

Gossip9ja: Days after Dr. Anuri walked out of Let's Talk! she files for divorce from her husband of twenty-three years! Is love a scam?

