

CHAPTER 1

Musings

OKECHI

I peered through my window's narrow gap, greeted by the burgeoning daylight. The sun emerged from behind the clouds, much like my own timid ventures. With a serene smile, I reclined on my chilly tiled floor, embracing the comfort of my self-contained haven. Could a single lady relish Lagos life? Approaching my thirtieth year on this Nigerian turf, I grumbled a toast, "Here's to three decades as the Okafor family's Ada."

Amidst the dawn, the rhythmic thuds of Mama Caleb's mortar resonated, beginning her day at 5 am. Perched on the first floor of a three-story building, this urban existence was far from my vision of adult life in Lagos. I'd dreamt of a serene abode with discreet neighbors, but alas, "if wishes were horses," I'd have resided in Banana Island or Dolphin Estate. With a languid stretch, I rolled from my mattress, emitting a hearty yawn, met by the enthusiastic barks of my compound's dog.

"Lady Bella must be on her way to work, no wonder Lofa is barking" I mused. Grace, my neighbor, had earned the moniker 'Lady Bella' for her flamboyant fashion. Our initial encounter at the compound gate remained a comedic memory; Grace was about to drive off, clad in an elaborate ball gown and wedge boots that defied reason.

I had almost laughed out loud at the ball gown and wedge boots Grace had worn

“No time to think about funny neighbours now. Lagos traffic waits for no one,” I soliloquized.

CHAPTER 2

Scars Covered With Smiles

GRACE

"It's time to pray, Grace. Wake up," Siri's voice echoed through the small room, urging me to start my day. I groaned, hitting the snooze button on my phone, wishing I could stay in bed a little longer. However, I knew I had to get up; the entrepreneurial world waited for no one. I dragged myself out of bed and picked up my Bible from the bedside table; I held my faith close to my heart. Each morning, I started my day with a prayer, seeking strength and guidance from God.

"Father Lord, I want to thank you for the gift of life," I began, my voice soft yet resolute. "Thank you for the talents and creativity you've bestowed upon me. Please continue to guide me on this journey."

As I prayed, memories of my past trauma resurfaced. I had experienced a difficult childhood, marked by loss and heartbreak. I had lost my innocence at the young age of nine to my cousin and had to face the challenges of living with such trauma alone. The pain and loneliness had left deep scars on my soul, but I refused to be defined by my past. Instead, I used my passion for fashion as a shield to protect myself from the world's judgement.

After my prayer, I stood up and walked to my closet, filled with a kaleidoscope of outfits. Today, I chose a bright, flowy dress with intricate patterns and paired it with bold, red bottoms stiletto. For me, fashion was not just about dressing up; it was a form of self-expression, a way to reclaim my identity, and a means of coping with my past.

As I walked out of my apartment, I couldn't help but feel self-conscious about my appearance. I knew that my fashion choices often garnered attention and whispers from others, but I had learned to embrace the stares and judgments. In my heart, I knew that my resilience was my armour, protecting me from the world's harsh critiques.

On my way out, I glanced towards Okechi's door and noticed her hurry. She was always rushing, a laptop bag slung over her shoulder and determination in her eyes. Today, though, there was something different, something almost melancholic about her.

"Good morning, Lady Bella," Okechi greeted "Off to conquer the fashion world again, I see?"

I grinned, knowing that Okechi meant no harm with her remark. "You know it, Okechi," I replied "Fashion waits for no one, just like Lagos traffic. Let me drop you at the bus stop"

CHAPTER 3

Tick Tock Says The Clock

OKECHI

The constant ticking of my biological clock seemed to echo in my ears as I briskly walked down the corridor. The weight of turning thirty, the infamous "big 3.0," hung heavily on my shoulders. My family's persistent nagging about marriage was reaching its crescendo. Aunties, uncles, cousins - they all had opinions.

As I crossed paths with Grace, her bright smile momentarily lifted my spirits. I admired her strength, her unwavering passion for her fashion business. Yet, behind her radiant eyes, I sensed a depth, a history that she guarded fiercely. My phone rang as I entered my Bolt ride; I ignored the phone for a few minutes and on the third ring, I picked it when I saw that it was my aunty calling.

“Good afternoon Aunty Kelechi” I greeted

“ Ah! My girl, how are you ? I have been calling you since yesterday. Are you okay ? Are you at work now?” Aunty Kelechi asked .

“Yes ma. My phone was in my bag and I didnt hear it ring”

“Oh ! Pele! Well, I have something urgent to discuss with you. Do you have time to talk ?” She asked me. I was tempted to lie and say yes just to avoid having a conversation with her.

“I am free , ma” I replied her

“Okay. Do you have somebody ?” she asked me

“Like friends in Lagos ?” I asked her, feigning ignorance. I already knew the direction her

discussion was leading to .

“I mean, is there any man ? Like a serious man who wants to marry you? Not boyfriend and girlfriend thing.” She asked.

I thought to myself ‘Finally, the cat is out of the bag.’ I have been waiting for her to ask me this question but it just seemed as though she had forgotten my matter since my younger sister was the trending topic for the family; that one had gone and embraced motherhood without marriage ;an issue that had caused a hailstorm in my family.

“No ma. I am not in a relationship” I replied to her , I already sounded bored and tired. I wished she would just end the call and leave me alone.

Aunty Kelechi let out a sigh on the other end of the line. "Ah, Okechi, at your age, you should be settled down by now. Your younger sister has already brought shame upon this family, and we need you to set a good example."

I clenched my jaw, trying to remain patient. "Aunty, I understand your concern, but I'm focused on my career right now. Marriage will happen when it's meant to happen."

"Your career is important, but a woman needs a man to complete her," Aunty Kelechi retorted, her voice tinged with disapproval.

I fought the urge to argue. I had heard this argument countless times from my family. They couldn't comprehend that I wanted to build a stable life for herself before getting married. "I believe that when the right time comes, the right person will come into my life."

"You can't just wait for things to fall into place. You need to actively seek a husband," Aunty Kelechi persisted.

"I appreciate your concern, but let's not dwell on this topic now. Is there anything else you wanted to discuss?" I tried to change the subject.

Aunty Kelechi sighed again, realising she wouldn't make any headway with me at the moment.

"Alright, but remember, time is ticking. Don't wait too long, my dear."

"I hear you, Aunty," I said diplomatically. "I'll talk to you later. I need to get back to work."

After hanging up, I returned my attention to my laptop, but my mind was far from the tasks at hand. The pressure from my family to get married was overwhelming at times. I knew they meant well, but they didn't understand that I am not in a hurry to settle down just to please society's expectations.

CHAPTER 4

The Shattered Glass

GRACE

Reading has always been my refuge, a sanctuary where I could lose myself in worlds far from my own. The mere act of turning pages and immersing myself in the lives of fictional characters was a balm to my soul. Today's book club meeting, however, unearthed emotions I had long buried beneath my façade of strength.

As the discussion unfolded, I felt a knot forming in my chest. The protagonist's journey mirrored my own, a hauntingly familiar tale of surviving the unimaginable. Memories of my own past trauma resurfaced, and I struggled to hold back tears. With each page we dissected, I was reminded of the shards of glass that had once shattered the innocence of my childhood.

A painful reverie pulled me under, and I drifted into an exhausted slumber, clutching my sketchbook like a lifeline. In my dream, the scenes I had tried to suppress emerged vividly. It was as if the ink on my sketchbook had transformed into moving images, replaying the dark moments that had scarred my young heart.

My cousin's arrival had marked a turning point, but not in the way I had anticipated. He had come to live with us, a relative whose presence should have brought comfort, not terror. The night he stole my innocence became etched in my memory like an indelible stain. The pain, the betrayal, the feeling of being stripped of my innocence—it was a burden I had borne alone, my silent screams echoing through the years.

CHAPTER 5

Craving A Mother's Touch

OKECHI

Jumping danfos and crossing the roads like a psychopath wasn't the way I had envisioned my birthday celebration to be but who am I to complain about Lagos life ? I had plans to celebrate my birthday this year indoors ; bury my face in ice cream cake and drink enough orange juice to last me a year. As the korope rattled its way towards CMS, I couldn't help but remember the years of frustration and hurt caused by my mother's unwavering devotion to the church and our pastor. It seemed like our family always came second, and the church was the centre of her world.

Growing up, I often felt like I was competing with the pastor for my mother's attention. She would prioritise attending church activities, prayer meetings, and counselling sessions over spending quality time with us. Family outings were frequently cancelled or postponed because of church obligations. My father, a patient and understanding man, tried his best to support my mother's faith and devotion. But even he couldn't deny the strain it put on our family life. There were many arguments and emotional conflicts between my parents, which sometimes involved my siblings and me.

I yearned for her to be present, to listen to my dreams and aspirations, to celebrate my achievements, and console me during tough times. There were moments when I needed a

mother's guidance and warmth, but instead, I found myself navigating those challenges alone.

I recalled the times when I longed to show her my report cards, my art projects, or even just share anecdotes about my day, but those moments were often brushed aside in the name of her church commitments. It wasn't just the missed celebrations that pained me. It was the emotional distance that grew between us over the years.

Looking back, I realised that my craving for my mother's affection and attention wasn't just about selfish desires. It was about the fundamental need for maternal nurturing that every child seeks. It was about knowing that, no matter how strong my faith or how busy life gets, there's a place where I could always find solace and understanding — in my mother's bosom.

When I got home, I finally invited Grace over to my place to join me to celebrate my birthday. I was surprised that she accepted my invitation.

CHAPTER 6

Two Peas in a Pod

GRACE

Getting invited to Okechi's birthday dinner is still a shock to me, I felt an unexpected warmth. Rushing from work, I made a pit stop at Prince Ebeano supermarkets for gifts. I wanted my present to resonate. After my shower, I donned casual attire and walked to Okechi's place. A faint melody of 'Goodbye My Love by Ailee' trickled from her apartment, evoking a smile. Knocking, the door opened to her beaming face.

"Welcome to my abode," she chimed, ushering me in. The ambiance was delightful: white walls, chic wallpaper, cozy furniture, and a wall-mounted flat-screen TV.

"Still cooking," she informed, disappearing into the kitchen.

"No worries. My stomach's already protesting," I joked, settling into a chair.

"Kdramas?" I asked, spotting her Netflix choices on the TV screen.

"Oh, absolutely. Love them. The soundtracks, the stories," she replied, stirring something delicious.

"We're on the same wavelength then," I grinned. As she cooked, we delved into Korean dramas, our enthusiasm knitting a bond.

Sitting across, the clinking of glasses and the aroma of jollof rice mingled. As Okechi and I talked, the conversation flowed effortlessly. Our stories, though distinct, seemed to weave a tapestry of shared experiences. As the night deepened, our hearts grew closer, the pain of our pasts creating an unbreakable bond.

Okechi finally opened up about her struggles, the weight of societal expectations, and the battle for independence. In turn, I unveiled the scars of my past, the haunting abuse that still coloured my perceptions. As we exchanged vulnerabilities, a profound understanding blossomed.

OKECHI

Grace's presence at my birthday dinner was unexpected. Shared interests in Kdramas sparked through our discussions. Lagos' chaos, personal battles – we navigated it all. Unplanned, I bared my soul about parental pressure and my relationship with my mother.

"We've endured enough for a lifetime," Grace remarked, switching on the television.

"No doubt. It's liberating to share," I nodded, touching her hand in empathy.

"Thank you, Okechi. And you... your cousin's actions were horrendous. The pretence from your parents, it's heartbreaking," I comforted her. We held hands, united in empathy.

"Thanks," Grace acknowledged. "Your situation, the weight of being a first child, the marriage ordeal... it's immense. If only our parents would open up instead of bottling their pain. Mine acted like my cousin's abuse never happened. It took me years to even consider forgiving them. Turning 35 made me realise their struggle too, maybe they lacked a blueprint."

Grace's story, her strength and resilience, awed me. She stood tall despite her unfathomable past.

In her, I saw a reflection of my journey.

With tears glistening in our eyes, we embraced each other, a shared pain that had turned into a shared strength. In each other, we found solace, a sanctuary from the judgmental world outside. We were like twin pods, connected by a common thread of experience, understanding, and healing.

