

CHACHACHA

I was a child when my late father beat the living daylight out of my mother.

Nine years have passed, but I still shake my head every time my mind wanders toward that memory. Then I immediately get busy. Sometimes it works. Sometimes the memories stare me in the eye regardless.

I recalled my late father's eyes meeting mine as I played on his lap in the evenings when he returned from work at the State Education Board. I remembered sitting next to him in the passenger seat during the weekends when he would drive to Asaba for events. The most precious of them all would be the memory of him stroking my curly hair and calling me *Chachacha* instead of Ochanya.

"*Nwunye nna ya*", people called me.

My response as a little girl was a tighter grasp on my father and burying my face in his side.

Of course, I was my father's wife. I didn't know any other person who was. And just when the good memories were starting to carry me away, that one memory crawled in. I was only six years old.

"Why would you be drinking more than one tin of milk per day?" My mother asked. She had just wrestled the tin out of my hand. "You won't be getting a third one. Go and do your homework", she added.

Rolling on the floor, pressuring my tear gland, and shouting until my father's return from work was my next resort.

"You foolish woman! Do you now value a mere tin of milk over your daughter?" My father's eyes flashed as he closed in on my mother till the wall was holding her. She clutched her palms together. The sound of her breathing was like a countdown. Countdown to something unknown. She was trembling. My mother was trembling, looking everywhere but his eyes.

"Of course not, but this would be the third can of milk she would be taking today. I would not have her think that she could always get whatever she wants anytime she likes—" My father's slap brought the explanation to an abrupt end. My mother cupped her left chin with her palm. There was nothing special about the slap. Collins and I had seen that scene countless times before.

"Did you just call me a bad father—"

"Okiro please don't take it that way—"

"How then should I take it? Tell me how?" He screamed as he took off his belt.

"I will never... ahhh!"

The thick brown belt swung several times in the air, making my mother's flesh the landing pad. His feet pounded her until the kitchen floor had a feel of her blood. Collins breezed to the sitting room. Watery mucus found its way out of his nose as he ran. Somehow my legs were still waiting there, examining the spectacle with a slackened mouth and bulging eyes. This sight didn't look like what could produce the third can of milk. This was the first time I would witness my father go beyond the usual slaps and insults.

"Chachacha, come here", he said. He extended his right hand to me in the sitting room. "Mummy", I muttered, counting my steps toward him and slowly settling into his lap. While we watched TV, my gaze drifted to his face now and then. Will my mother be okay?

The family nurse arrived at night. I watched the women in the backyard from afar.

"Oh my God! Madam, what is this? Were you robbed on your way from work? Robbers these days are heartless!" She carefully removed the blood-stained rag that used to be my mother's cotton blouse. Her eyes bulged upon seeing her back and belly.

'Oghene Me!'

"It was a kitchen accident," my mother replied. She plastered a smile on her face and played with her nails. The middle-aged nurse in turn narrowed her eyes. She paused for a while, scrolling up and down her back.

"Madam, this certainly is no kitchen accident...well except you fell into a grinding mill. This looks more like..." She stopped as she noticed the tiny trail of tears flowing down my mother's cheeks.

For close to five minutes, she cleaned the wounds scattered all over my Mother's body with her lips pressed.

"Madam—"

"Please Nurse, don't say anything. Just treat me. Treat me please!"

The nurse's right hand paused in the air with her mouth ajar. Then slowly, she lowered her hands on my mother's back. She continued the treatment in silence for a little while.

"He will kill you at this rate, mark my words. If he gets away with this, he will surely do it again—" My mother caught the nurse's hands in hers.

"Men like this don't deserve to be in society", she whispered. My mother shut her eyes and swallowed hard. The nurse nodded without breaking eye contact.

"At least not until they discover the proper use of their muscles." She leaned close again and continued.

"But if you ever change your mind. I can help you arrange—"

Their discussion halted with my father's entry into the backyard. The nurse eyed him and blocked my mother's face with her plus-sized body. He went to and fro the yard and returned to the women. The silence was heavy, so he spoke first.

"Well done, Aunty Nurse," he greeted.

"Mmmm," came the reply. She turned her back to him and continued.

The house was as silent as an abandoned market for days. My mother couldn't go to work at the local government secretariat for a whole week. She was still nursing her wounds at home when the news of my father's sudden death in a ghastly car accident reached us.

"Wipe your tears, Ijeka. The Lord has fought for you", one of my aunts said.

"The God that answers by fire," My aunt looked at the ceiling and clenched her two fists in the air. "You will be my God. At least that monster will no longer sit on your money. You can now start living like a human being", she added.

Nothing prepared my mind for all the things my mother would do after my father's death. First, she decided to travel to Asaba for therapy every Friday almost immediately after traditionally mourning my late father. My six-year-old mind never understood why it was my paternal grandmother who picked me up from school every Friday.

"Mama"

"Hmm"

"Where is my mummy?"

"She went for... what is it called...therapy".

"What is therapy?"

"I don't know oh. Maybe a hospital or something like that".

My mother kept at this therapy for almost four years. Tell me what kind of wound or sickness requires a four-year treatment. I never asked her. The words just wouldn't come together.

It was only after a few years that I stopped trying to make sense of her *therapy*: some illnesses were perhaps not where people could see.

Then it happened: my mother started smiling, then giggling. The room went silent the first time Collins and I traced a cackle to her throat. Collins covered his mouth with his hands and exchanged glances with me.

"Mummy, are you fine?" Collins asked. "Is my story really funny?"

"It is". The cackle continued. Then we joined in. She was most likely all right. What were the odds?

"Ochanya darling, do you need anything?" She ran her hands over my hair. My stomach tightened, my head shook. I blinked continually as I found my way to my room as quickly as my not-so-little legs could carry me. It still had a picture of my father. His lips spread to reveal a set of clear white teeth—just as I loved to remember him.

Then she started saying strange things.

"Ochanya darling, you are indeed beautiful". The voice came from behind.

"Your beauty reminds me of your grandmother. Gold in a golden plate", she said. My stomach tightened at her near-whisper of a voice. Her arms were folded. Her head rested against the kitchen door post beside her. Only the Lord knew how long she had been standing there. Something about her smile reminded me of actors in horror films whose smiles veiled impending chaos. She adjusted her glasses on her nose bridge and let her eyes bore into me some more. I pushed aside the pile of rinsed plates with a slightly raised nose.

"Ugh...thank you Ma".

Then she started sitting in the Veranda.

Day by day my father's picture in the living room faded while she went from place to place, visiting friends.

Then the news came with the December harmattan: after having hosted her female friends from Asaba and environs, my dear mother had deemed it fit to bring home a man in broad daylight.

"Collins and Ochanya, meet Mr. Kamsiyochukwu. He sells Textiles and owns a poultry farm in Asaba. He has been my friend for a while now". My mother dabbed her palm on her skirt.

"Friend?" I asked. They exchanged looks and faced me at the same time.

"We will be getting married soon, God willing." Her voice was a bit shaky. Mr. Kamsiyochukwu, unlike my late father, was taller and less muscular.

"Oh" was Collin's response.

"You are welcome, Sir. My name is Collins."

The two men exchanged a strong handshake. I stood there, with my lips tightly pressed. My nose flared.

"And you must be Ochanya", Mr Kamsiyochukwu said. It took me a while to remember who the statement was directed at. His hand had since been extended.

"Yes"

His neatly manicured nails caught my eyes, but my hand would have no part in this handshake. My mother came in between us and lowered his hand.

"You know what? He's just passing by. He will come visiting another time, Right?"

Mr Kamsiyochukwu gave a slow nod with a smile that revealed his diastema.

Mummy finally got herself a man with Diastema. And here I am, still wondering if my crush would ever look at me.

"Nice to finally meet you, Ochanya and Collins. I hope to see you subsequently".

"Let me see you off. You are running late already". My mother hurried him through the front door.

My eyes followed them outside. My mouth too. Collins' eyes met mine. I swallowed. He shrugged. That night I retired to my room earlier than usual, with too many thoughts in my head.

My eyes darted at the door when a knock sounded on it.

"Ochanya darling", my mother called. "Do you have time to talk?", she added.

The knock came two more times. No response.

As expected, the news spread, and Obidi town ran mad.

I was walking back from school one afternoon when Mr. Kamsiyochukwu's Powerbike sped past. My Mother's slender frame was balanced behind him. Her hands clutched his shirt with her eyes almost shut as the wind carried her pink chiffon dress here and there.

Something went down my throat.

The two women walking before me watched on till the motorcycle was out of sight.

"Bia, what has gotten into that woman? I thought she had a car. Is this how that man will keep on raising dust with that machine everywhere he goes?" The taller woman asked. The shorter one let out a short hiss.

"She has abandoned her late husband's car and is now riding *Okada* with that Kamsiyochukwu man".

"Just when I thought I had seen it all. A forty-three-year-old woman—"

"It's actually forty-two —"

"Whatever! A forty-two-year-old mother of two can no longer hold herself". She dropped the words one after the other and gave a loud clap afterward.

"Is an old woman like her not supposed to uphold her late husband's house and honor at this stage of life? What else is she looking for?"

"I wonder oh."

"We should have noticed how much Ijeka has changed. She has been smiling a lot lately."

"Hmmm! Adulterous woman. They must be doing something together, or what do you think?"

"Is it what I think it is?" The shorter woman jumped on a spot and tapped the taller woman.

"Did you know she even took her man friend to see the Reverend?"

"Ehn ehn?! So what did he say?"

"That man gave his go-ahead. I heard from a church member that the two have started attending premarital classes."

"Oh oh! My ears in my lifetime!"

My heartbeat increased as I walked home with longer strides.

"Mummy!"

I searched her room and other likely places in the house.

"She just stepped out again. Our new neighbor in the next compound gave birth yesterday. She went to visit them. What is it?" Collins asked.

"I will wait for her"

His eyes followed me till I took my seat on the sofa. Different scenarios of how the exchange will go floated through my mind. I sat there for almost an hour without changing my school uniform. My mother entered with her usual jaunty demeanor.

"Ochanya darling, are you just getting home?" My mother asked. She joined me on the same sofa.

"Have you eaten?" My nose flared as I stared at her.

"Ochanya, I am talking to you—"

"Mummy, can't you hear what people are saying?"

"Who? What are they saying—" The smile had faded from my mother's face.

"People are talking about us, Mummy. They are saying you are disrespecting my daddy. That you have brought a man to his house. Don't you care about us? Are you not ashamed of—"

"Shut up!" Collins' scream pierced the room.

"Who are you to talk to Mummy like that? Are you mad, Ochanya? Are you mad?!"

"Collins stop!" My mother's tight hold on him prevented him from pouncing on me.

"You will not shout at your sister like that. Do you hear me?"

"Mummy, I'm not shouting. I just want...I just want to..." He collapsed on the sofa behind him and covered his face with his palms. Tears flowed through the openings between his fingers.

For a few seconds, we only heard our heavy, slow breathing.

"I don't know why you hate me, Collins". Tears crept down my cheeks. "Everybody hates me"

"Ochanya, you know that's not true—"

"I didn't know, mummy. I didn't know that Daddy would treat you like that?" I sniffed and wiped the tears from my eyes. My mother's mouth fell open. She slowly sat on the sofa.

"Ochanya..."

"All I wanted was a third tin of milk. I didn't know he would do you like that".

"Come here".

I crashed into my mother's embrace and buried my head in her shoulder. She tightened her embrace.

"Mummy I'm sorry", I mumbled.

"Shhhhhh!"

The room was quiet again.

"It wasn't you, Ochanya. It wasn't you". Her soothing voice came through. She wiped her tears with the back of her hand and started to pat my back.

"Let no one touch my Ochanya. Let no one judge my baby".

She continued till I dozed off.