

BABA

A fictional story

By: Damilola Paula Ojo

Baba said he was an artist and a few days after I was born, he'd carry me around his studio, showing me his favorite paintings. This continued till I was about 3 years old.

The first time Baba beat me; he said I told a lie. My mother said she had never seen Baba as hurt as the day he had to beat me.

I only see Baba twice a week Saturday and Sunday, I know the sound of his engine revving. As soon as I and my siblings hear it, we begin to chant the chorus our mother taught us from the balcony "Daddy, o yo yoo!!!". Once Baba gets in, we sprint towards his green Toyota with our faces plastered on both sides of the back window. As usual, the seats are filled with toys and snacks. This has been our routine for years and now I am seven years old.

I am excited about the school holidays, My friends Dupe and Aishat always tell me about their trips to different countries each year, this year Dupe is going to London and Aishat to Ghana. I am going to Abeokuta for the third year in a row.

I have never seen or been on a plane but I love the road trip to Abeokuta so much, the transition from seeing people, buildings, and cars on the road to just trees and then red tall mounds of clay. Once I see those mounds of clay, I can already tell we are close to Abeokuta.

Baba's bachelor's house is so cool, it's full of tiny and big artsy items. My favorite is the giant golden sun mirror.

Baba is so cool, he has these flat caps in different colors I and my siblings play with Baba's guitar while wearing one of his big white t-shirts and the flat caps I love the red one.

Baba came home today and it's a Tuesday, I and my siblings rushed to the side of the car windows and we found nothing in the back seat, This happened for two weeks continuously and we eventually stopped checking.

Baba lives with us every day now but spends most of his time locked up in his room. My mother

tells me he is busy and I should not bother him. The only time I get to see Baba is when she gives me the bowl of water for him to wash his hands while she serves his pounded yam and vegetable soup.

Today Baba drives in and then pulls out a big green mat from his back seat. He walks towards me smiling and when I ask him what the mat is for, he pats my head and tells me it's a surprise. It's 7 pm and I hear Baba calling me and my siblings. We rush down to see the mat spread outside while Baba is sitting on a stool. He tells us to sit and he begins to tell us a story. This becomes our nightly routine as I dutifully set up Baba's stool while my siblings roll out the mat. On rainy days, we host our meeting in Baba's car with the lights inside on. Baba reminds me to take note of the stories because I would be a writer in the future and he'd publish my books.

Baba gets angry each time my mother beats us, She tells him that's how she had been training us before he got back and there's no problem with it. Today he pushed her while she was trying to beat one of us. We feel happy that Baba would protect us from our mother's wrath going forward. Baba our hero!!

I see my mother ripping all the clothes Baba got for her while crying. Baba breaks the room door while trying to get in and begins to pull her while yelling at me to get out of the room.

Baba is becoming scary. I wish to only see him on Saturdays and Sundays now. My mother cries more often, she left the house today without packing a single bag in the middle of the night. I am scared so I call the only person I know Baba is scared of, his uncle. When Baba finds out he slaps me and seizes my pink Nokia C3. I silently pray my crush who I confide in about all the craziness doesn't call tonight. Baba will punish me for saving a boy's name with hearts when I am only 12 years old.

Today is my first day in Senior Secondary School and my mother is having a fight with Baba about him being unhelpful, She asked him to help iron our uniforms but he told her he was tired. After a while he finally decides to grumpily and as I take my slice of bread, he tries to talk to me about school. I reply with "Everything is fine" and make my way towards the door.

Baba drops me off at my university hostel and takes pictures of me while I complete my registration at the reception. I hug my mother and cry as they leave. I want to do my best because my mother said she has worked so hard to pay the fees and failure is unacceptable.

I try to have conversations with Baba and it's pretty difficult, he prefers to do the talking in every conversation. So, I naturally drift towards my mother. Baba calls her a witch and says she's trying to sever the relationship between him and his children.

I and Baba conclude the morning devotion, and as I am about to leave, Baba tells me he needs to discuss something with me. I stare at him and notice his eyes look teary, and his voice sounds shaky. "Your mother was diagnosed with cancer, but don't worry; we'll overcome this as we have with other challenges," he says. I stare into space for a while, and I don't notice when the tears start rolling down my cheeks.

Baba looks ill; he refuses to let us get a maid. He cooks and does everything for my mother. He loosens her hair, encourages her when it eventually starts to fall off, and combs her wig every morning. Baba can be lazy and mediocre, and he doesn't like stress, but he can bear anything when it involves family. I notice this as I hear him praying and worshipping weakly every night through my walls.

Today, Baba comes back home complaining bitterly about how difficult it is to access money from my mother's business bank for her treatment. After a while, he ends up suggesting he downloads a mobile app on his phone to access the money, and my mother agrees.

"You that I brought from the village? What do you know about a business? I gave you the money to establish the business, so it's not yours," Baba retorts when mother asks why he was using the business account for his splurge shopping.

"Where was Baba when this was happening?" I ask my siblings, and they say mother hid him and them in the toilet while the robbers beat her. I sink onto my bed and feel irritated. The image of the sympathizers I saw in the sitting room makes me even angrier, and I just want to go there and tell every one of them to get out of our house. I see Baba pitifully narrating the incident repeatedly to the visitors as they keep coming. There's a swell on his left eye, and from the information I got from my siblings, they eventually had to come out when they couldn't bear to hear mother get beaten.

I sit beside my mother, and she tells me she is sad her wedding ring was stolen as well. I think of how I used to play with it when I was younger and tell her I'd collect it when I got married. In that moment, I think of how I also wanted it as a form of remembrance if she had died from the cancer treatment. Now I feel a bit grateful it got stolen; having such an item in my possession would be a curse as it's a symbol of the state of this marriage. Then and there, I make a mental note never to date a weak man or one I don't feel protected by or safe with.

My mother calls me in school to inform me that Baba has registered himself for a six-week police course. There's a long pause before a confused laugh from my end. My siblings say Baba has endangered their lives multiple times on the road. He doesn't drive around with his driver's license anymore, and whenever he is stopped and tries to talk about his police rank, they end up violently pointing their guns towards him or embarrassing him because it's not recognized anywhere.

As I place the bowl of water for Baba to wash his hands, he washes them hastily and eats the pounded yam flour and vegetable soup. By the time he is done eating, he makes a comment about how terrible the pounded yam flour tastes and decides to start making his own.

Two weeks later, I see Baba with a bag of ground yam flour and sealing them in customized Ziplocs. I walk closer to take a look at the Ziplocs, and I read "BABA YEMISI POUNDON" written in an ugly green font. Two months later, while my mother and I are cooking, she asks me

to check the cupboard for pounded yam flour, and I notice we are two packs away from running out of the last batch of "BABA YEMISI POUNDO."

"If you leave, just go to your father's house from there, as this marriage would cease to exist," Baba tells my mother while she begs him with tears in her eyes to let her go to her school for a week to complete her final year papers for her BSc. Certificate. "Who would take care of your children for one whole week? You must be a clown to think I would let you go anywhere!"

Baba comes home the next week with a new car. He drives in, smiling, and proceeds to ask my mother to guess the amount he got it for. My mother lunges at him in a fit of rage, screaming at how useless he is. He dodges quickly before she can hit him, and she ends up tripping on the couch, her entire body landing on the floor. She stays there and begins to sob, saying she works so hard to cater for the family, save for future projects, and all Baba does is spend the money recklessly while denying her access to the funds. A few moments later, my siblings and I can hear mother wailing in Igbo about how they warned her against marrying a Yoruba man.

I read an article on reparenting, and they said to understand Baba, I need to know some things about his formative years. I realized I had never really asked Baba about his life as a child, so I go to the sitting room but sit in the dining area. I see Baba quietly staring into space while sipping his ginger tea. I consider how awkward this might be, knowing we have never really had a serious conversation in years. For a brief moment, I also think of how lonely he might actually feel sitting there. The rest of my siblings are with my mother outside helping her pluck the vegetables for soup and laughing heartily at her jokes.

"Baba, how are you?" I ask shakily. He turns back and looks at me with a shocked but genuinely happy face to know I was concerned. "I am fine, dear. Baba is getting old, and this weather is affecting my chest," he says while laughing lightly. I am about to turn back and walk towards my room when Baba asks if I am leaving. I say no and sit with him. We end up speaking for over three hours. From my conclusion of our conversation, Baba had a childhood where he was shamed a lot but believes he was being disciplined.

I run away from home, and I get a text from Baba saying, "If you kill me from heartbreak, you'll regret it every day of your life." I finally pick up his call, and Baba is crying while begging me to come back home. I return the same day, and he hugs me and makes noodles for me.

Baba tries to be cool, funny, or even engaging, but everyone goes back to their room whenever he comes in. Only mother tolerates him. I think he's going through his mid-age crisis because his fashion sense has been questionable lately. He's wearing random patterns together, being obsessed with faded outfits, and splurging on thrifted items.

Baba has also been finding it difficult to be among his peers in the elite society. My mother told him he needs friends who would motivate him and open him to better opportunities, but Baba finds a way to avoid the topic by telling her to stop talking and stating how irritated he is by her voice and constant nagging.

Mother said he loves being the best in the room and is threatened by other people being better than him. She says rich people do not like people with such a mindset. She warns us that it's a sign of a person doomed for destruction and calls it the local champion syndrome.

I have a job now, and I can't stand the pressure. I have random outbursts in anger, hide in the toilet for hours to avoid confrontation and my responsibilities, have a splurge spending addiction on dresses, get tired/bored easily, and have terrible financial management/discipline so I'm always in debt. I am stubborn and narcissistic, I think about 30 new ideas aside from my job to start every day. I end up quitting my job because of the local champion syndrome. I get angry when my friends get opportunities to be better than where I am currently stuck. I secretly hope we remain on the same level and even try to discourage others from chasing their goals by trivializing their achievements. I feel like a failure, and there's nothing I can do about it. I feel like Baba.

While Baba is preaching during our morning devotion, I stare at him and wonder if he also feels as helpless as I do. For the first time, I don't just stare at him, but I believe I can see him. I

believe he hates himself as I do, I believe he'd prefer not existing like I have wished sometimes, I believe he feels like a disappointment. I believe he has tried to change but failed or is too weak to see the process through. I believe he doesn't want to be mediocre; he wants to be something, someone great. He wants to stand up for his family, be a good man, husband, and Baba. I make a mental note to be more merciful in my approach towards him. Baba ends the story of his sermon by saying, "Though we communicate it in a different approach, there's no doubt that we love each other in this family."