

1.

"Please remove your clothes, and lay down on the bed"

The doctor's words hung heavy in the air, sinking into my mind like an anchor and twisting something that I had thought was never there.

What? Undress— as in strip— complete nakedness?

The room felt colder than it was when we walked in. I looked at the student doctor beside him for confirmation of what I heard but her awkward smile did nothing to reassure me. Her face reminded me of *Madam koi koi*. It was as though, if she smiled, she would burst.

The doctor and the student doctor were waiting but at that moment, I felt uneasy, so I pulled my gown around me and chewed my nails. I did not want to pull off my clothes. When I left the house this morning, I had thought I would only be asked questions and given some drugs. I did not know I would be asked to remove my clothes.

But I knew the doctor did not have the luxury of time. In the waiting room, where they call names and collect our cards, I had seen a pile of files on the nurses table. On the way here to the examining room, a nurse had carried a bunch of those files to his office. There were pregnant women and other gynecology patients waiting to be seen by him. He needed to clerk me now.

I did not want to look at their faces, so after undressing, I got on the bed, and turned my face to the wall. The wall which looked too white and seemed to want to choke me, as if it could see how embarrassed my vulnerable self was.

There were three major concerns; one, I had not worn my best panties. Two, I was not shaved and I could feel the eyes of the student doctor judging me when she saw my bush. Hair was something that was expected to be on the head and nowhere else. I remember how Jade had shouted and called me a dirty girl when she saw my underarms in SS1.

"Why do you have all that hair in your armpit?!"

My underarm hair had just started growing and I was proud of any physical development my body showed, so I kept the hair. But that could not control how stricken Jade looked and how her noise had attracted our other friends.

The next morning, I had stolen my Uncle's wife's shaving stick and shaved it all off. About a year later when I stumbled on porn, I saw that all the women shaved down there clean; baby smooth skin, no bumps, no darkened skin.

But who thought about thongs and silky skin when they have been bleeding nonstop for months? Still, at this moment, I felt I could have tried. I could have slathered on *Veet* last night. I

could have presented myself better. My third concern was that instead of my husband being the first person to see my nakedness, I got four prying eyes looking at me while I lay like a dead body in the morgue.

The student doctor muttered something.

"Hmmm?" I asked.

"Spread your legs," She asked again, this time more calm than before.

I had removed my panties and pad when I removed my clothes so I wondered if she wanted to see my bloodied bumbum. But I spread my legs and let the doctor insert his gloved fingers into my vagina, seeking answers in the most intimate of spaces.

2.

Exhaustion.

That is the word that describes how you feel when you've been sick for a long while. You feel anger, fear, worry, pain, disgust but exhaustion; that fatigue is the greatest of these feelings.

That morning, because I knew my appointment was by 10am but cards were gotten by 8am, I had woken up early, had my bath, wore a pad, dressed up and was putting water in the bathroom for my mum when I felt it gushing out of me. In minutes, the pad I had just worn had gotten soaked with chunks of blood.

I looked down and blood was already trickling down my legs. I felt exhausted over again and I did not know when the tears started falling. My mum chose that minute to walk through the passage to the kitchen for a second helping of rice when she saw me stuck, dripping blood and tears.

"What happened?" She asked, even though she could see everything. I just stood there and said nothing.

"Don't worry, go and clean up" She said with a sigh

By the time I came out of my room, my mum had wiped the floor and was on the phone with her prayer partner, recounting again her fears and requests.

The Doctor's questions brought me back.

"How old are you?"

"20" I replied.

"Have you ever had an abortion?"

Where in Nigeria would I get an abortion? Isn't it illegal?" I wanted to ask.

But just that morning, after the call with her prayer partner, my mum had asked me that same question. She had begged, and not merely asked— looking at me with eyes that begged for answers I did not have. She had told me she would rather I tell her the truth, than bleed to my death like a girl she saw on a Facebook video.

"When was the last time you saw your period before this one?"

"June"

"How long is your cycle?"

I did not have a cycle or maybe I had never just paid attention.

3.

I had started my period at the age of 13, 19 days shy of my 14th birthday. I knew I was a late bloomer since all my classmates were already seeing their periods and wearing bras, while I managed with stuffing socks into my sports bras.

The girls in Church Sunday School had laughed as they showed me their pink flowery bras and advised that the easiest way to get bigger breasts was to make boys rub them. I began to dream about bras, about how many I would buy and what colours they will be in. But much more than that, I wanted to see my period. *Always*, the sanitary pad manufacturer has been to my school twice already for sensitisation. I had two packets of pads waiting to be used. I just wanted that blood.

So when I started seeing brown discharge on my panties that week, I knew my time had come. The day my period started, I ran out to call my best friend, who laughed with me and joked about how I was finally a big girl. If you had ridden a horse inside of me that week, you would not fall. I was ecstatic, this was my moment and I was ready to live it. Seven years down the line, I was over it.

4.

It was like a relationship. Me and my period. We were in a toxic relationship. I was the beat up partner, the one who did everything right but still got abused. It was good in the beginning, my period and I had it nice. It came when it should and I did what I should.

"You have become a woman and now do what women do" my uncle's wife said to me the day I eventually told her.

We were in the sitting room and she was smiling sheepishly.

"No talking to boys and no unnecessary fondling, any small thing, you are pregnant *niyen o*" She warned.

I looked at her to be sure she was seriously recycling the same old stories we have read in books and watched in movies. African elders will never educate you about sex. They will rather beat around the bush and give exaggerated analogies than talk about this simple physical exercise. Sex was this deeply cloaked sacred thing that cannot be mentioned, but we kids were not deaf to the creaking of the beds every night.

She also talked about how my period was now a monthly due I had to pay, so I saved every extra naira I got, to complement the 100 naira she gave sometimes for *Ladycare*. I was an *Always* girl so even though it was costlier, I stuck to it and enjoyed womanhood.

That was before my period started doing hide-and-seek. It was a game I got tired of quickly even as a child. What was the point of hiding in dingy and uncomfortable places just so you would not be caught? I always made sure I never strayed too far, so I could be caught and we could move on to other interesting games, maybe *Ten Ten* or *Who is in the Garden?*

The first time I did not see my period for two months, I was worried, but then Google and my friends said I should calm down, that it was common especially in the first 2 years of just starting menstruation to skip periods or to have irregular periods. So I waited like a side chick waiting for her lover. I waited for my period to come and it took three months for it to show face. When it did, it came with pain; searing pain. It was more than a terrible feeling, it was deathlike pain, clenching and crushing my insides, beating me up, holding my breath to ransom, it was heat inside of me, cold sweats all over me. Iya Ayo, my neighbour prescribed 4 tablets of paracetamol but that did not work so I would lay face down on the sitting room floor, calling all the names of God and wondering why he did not answer any. It was later in university I discovered Buscopan and it became my best friend.

Much more than the cramps was the flow and frequency. Most girls said their flow lasted only three days, mine was 8 days with pleas and prayers. Then, it was heavy, heavy that I used 5 pads in a day. Heavy that I could be soaked at any time. Heavy that I wrapped toilet paper over my pads.

Then came the long spells of bleeding. It was like those old aunties who visited and spent a full year rummaging the house, never going back to their own homes. At first, because of the pain and discomfort, I was glad when my period didn't show for some months, then I became worried when it went away for too long. It was a necessary pain, I felt like Rihanna on *Love on the Brain*.

This was how it was year in, year out - my period would disappear for two months and then appear in the third month to stay for two months without ceasing. But I was not prepared for the one that started in August, 2020. I washed my bloodied panties everyday to the point that I started to smell of blood. The day Adun, my cousin came to visit and I fell while running down the stairs to greet her, my leg bruised and there was no blood.

In panic, Adun checked my palms and eyeballs and declared that I was anemic. I tried to laugh it away, but that was not something my smart, fourth-year medical student cousin would agree

to. So the next day, I dragged myself to UCH, did so much paperwork and finally got an appointment with the doctor who now had his fingers in my vagina.

5.

Symptoms.

The headaches, the rectal cramps, I googled that in fear the second day it started, it is called proctalgia fugax. So foreign, it is a word I cannot even pronounce, but whose feeling is all too familiar. It feels like your anus is gathering armies to fuck you, knowing you can't fight back. Then, there is soreness and tenderness of the breast - heavy like a log of wood just like when I just started growing them. The mood swings, the fatigue, the crying, the disorientation, the loss of appetite, the abdominal cramps, the diarrhea, the lumps of blood.

Those were everything I told the doctor in his office, after he removed his gloved fingers from my vagina, after I turned to the cubicle and wore my clothes.

Now, we are back in his office, he has my file open and he is asking me the same questions he has asked before, checking for a lie. But I have never had sex, I have never been pregnant, nor have I had an abortion.

Later that day, Adun will tell me, those were procedural questions that were necessary to ask, as many patients lie about their illnesses, sexual patterns and general health history making it difficult for doctors to diagnose properly.

"When will you get married?" He asks

"Marriage?" I did not believe I heard right. I was barely out of university. Marriage was distant, it was something that happened to older serious people, not something I looked forward to.

"Ah, see how you are looking shocked" He says, trying to make a joke. "You are not that young *na* and well, I am not saying you should get married tomorrow. All I am saying is that you need to be monitored. In the meantime, you will need to run some tests, scans and do a hormonal profile. Your symptoms are consistent with..."

At this point, I am far away. I am back in Lokoja. I am 12,13 again. Just a girl. A girl whose only dream is to be back home with her brothers and mother in Ibadan. Where did the time go? Where did the troubles come from?

