

WHEN A MAN DIES...

A sister's tale

The day Lato died, it felt as if even the sky shared in our grief, shedding tears alongside us. A piece of my heart went with her that night, and it's almost as if the universe understood the depth of our loss. I can vividly recall the white tiles on the floor, once polished to perfection, now transformed into a canvas painted with vivid red strokes. Lato, she appeared almost like a mannequin, her head gently tilted to one side. Those crimson lines on her wrists resembled the markings of a crosswalk, each one telling its own story. Yet, she sat there, an embodiment of stillness, as if all life had faded away. The memory of clutching her cold hands, desperately calling her name, lingers as a testament to the void she left behind.

Exactly a year has slipped by since she departed, leaving me here on the edge of her bed, lost in thought over the roads we might have traveled together. Mere six hours before she left, she posed a question that has etched itself into my thoughts. Her voice lingers, asking, "Have you ever pondered why candles flicker out, even if they yearn to remain illuminated?" In that moment, her query left me wordless, and even now, I grapple with the mystery she presented.

Beside her bed, a photograph beckons to me. It's a snapshot frozen in time, capturing Lato's laughter and essence with a soft, timeless glow. As I gaze at it, the edges slightly worn from being held countless times, her presence comes alive once again, wrapping me in bittersweet memories.

Mama's words flowed through the air, like a gentle melody that wrapped around my thoughts. She often painted a picture of Lato's significance, a portrait where Lato's presence was the artist's brushstroke that colored our lives. In Mama's stories, Lato became the reason her womb embraced me, as if the happiness Lato brought had transformed our family's destiny. Through the highs and lows, Lato remained Mama's unwavering anchor, guiding her through days when her reflection in the mirror felt like a distant echo. Our home was infused with Lato's vibrancy, each room adorned with memories that whispered of her profound influence.

I was still lost in my thoughts when Mama came into the room. She was dressed in an all-white outfit. She took a seat beside me on the bed. Our hands found each other, fingers intertwining as we shared a moment of unspoken understanding. The quiet between us held a weight, a silent bridge spanning the chasm of our grief. This was the closest I've ever felt to her since Lato's passing. In a voice barely louder than a breath, she asked, "Do you think I loved her enough? Do you think she felt loved by me. By us?".

"She loved you, Mama, and she knew just how much you loved her," I responded softly. Her sniffles filled the air as she struggled to rein in her tears. "You poured your entire being into that love."

Mama's voice took on a nostalgic warmth as she continued, "I could still vividly recall the day I first saw Lato at the orphanage. It was as if destiny itself whispered to me that she was meant to be mine. We might have come together through unconventional means, but from the moment I saw her, she completed a puzzle piece of my heart that had always been missing."

I couldn't help but smile, a mixture of emotions welling up inside me as I listened to Mama's story unfold. "I'll never forget how Lato walked right up to me, like she'd known me all her life. And that mischievous grin of hers when I unveiled the treats I'd brought—it's etched in my memory," Mama said with a soft chuckle.

Our laughter danced between us, a shared embrace of the precious memories Mama held. "That's why I used to call her 'easy to please,'" I quipped, amusement tugging at my voice. "Little joys were her treasures. A cupcake could light up her world."

The echoes of our laughter resonated, carrying the essence of Lato's spirit with them. Yet, Mama's voice held a hint of wistfulness. "Let's visit her favorite spot, the beach," she suggested, nostalgia infusing her words.

As Mama headed downstairs, I lingered in her room for a moment. My gaze landed upon the bookshelf, where our well-loved copy of "To Kill a Mockingbird" rested. An impulse led me to pick it up, an unexplainable yearning to keep a piece of her close. The weight in my hands seemed heavier, as if the book held memories in its pages. Opening it gently, I discovered a sticky note on the first page, its words etched in ink:

"They say when something dies, it happens only once. But let me share this—I've felt like a part of me has died a million times before my real end. Each time I look in the mirror, I lose a bit of who I am. When I pour my thoughts onto this paper, it's like another piece of me fades away. And before thoughts of ending everything, there's a darkness that makes me feel like I've died countless times. Yes, I'm still here, but it's like I've gone through endless deaths inside me."

A mother's secret.

The drive to the beach was silent. I stole a glance at Fara, whose name, Fàràyìò luwa, reflected the profound connection I felt with God during her time in my womb. She had been remarkably strong, masking her pain. But I saw through her façade. Her nightly sobs and vacant stares since Lato's passing were impossible to miss.

Today, everything would reach its conclusion, the perfect moment to confront what must be faced. My loving husband took my hand and said, "I want you to find peace today. I'm immensely proud of your strength." I managed a weak smile in response.

I wore only white today. I also wore the beads I had kept hidden for years. They say go to the church with your problems and God will handle them so I listened and put my beads away. This GOD had failed me.

As we arrived at the beach, serenity enveloped me like a long-lost embrace from the past. The gentle caress of the breeze made me feel at home at last. Memories of Látórùnwa flooded my mind, and I envisioned her smiling and frolicking by the shoreline. Fara held my hand as we walked to the water's edge, and my chest tightened as I struggled to breathe.

"I know she's here. I can feel her. I would give anything to hug her one last time," Fara whispered. "I wish I had stayed in her room that night; perhaps she'd still be with us." She broke down in my arms, and I offered comfort, saying, "It's okay. I'm here for you. We'll take this one day at a time." My tears had run dry long ago.

"Do you remember that time we had that big fight, and I refused to speak to her for days? Those felt like the longest days of my life, as I itched to reach out to her, but my stubbornness held me back. She used to knock on my door, leaving gummy bears by the doorstep when she got no response," Lato said.

"I distinctly recall catching you sneaking them into your room one day. We all knew you were enjoying those gummy bears, but you'd come outside pretending you hadn't seen them. It was quite amusing." We both shared a chuckle.

"She loved us so deeply, Mama, and I just wish we had expressed how much she meant to us more often," Fara said, her words carrying a profound sincerity as she gazed into the water.

I glanced back to see my loving husband setting up a place for us to sit. I signaled to Fara to help him, assuring her I would join them shortly. She left, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

Walking towards the shore, I stared at the waves. Lato had left notes in her book. I despised myself for not protecting her, my own daughter. I couldn't fathom the horrors she endured at the hands of that monster. Where was I when he violated her? Where was I when he thrust in and out of her? Where was I when he threatened her into silence? Where was I when he held her against her will?

Now, I was here to atone for my sins. I didn't believe in waiting for Karma; I would mete it out with my own hands. Perhaps it's true that a man only dies once. I had killed him a million times in my mind, yet here he was, setting up and smiling. How had I killed him, and yet he remained? Every time he touched me, my skin crawled.

I waded into the waters, whispering,

“Osun O, Apena is here
My mother, Osun O
I pour out my heart to you
Come to my aid, Osun O
Hear my plea, Osun O
I offer a sacrifice to you, Osun O
Come to my assistance, Osun O
Mistress of the river, Osun O
Goddess of the waters, Osun O
I beseech you, mighty Osun
Send forth your sacred waters
Flow with justice, cleansing and pure
Let your rivers of wisdom wash away all injustice
Osun O, Queen of the riverbanks
Guide us with your benevolence
Like the river's current, swift and true
May your waters bring fairness and truth
To all who seek justice and your grace
I invoke your power, Osun O
Let your waters flow, let justice prevail
I ask for your guidance, your wisdom, your grace
Osun O, answer my call, embrace this sacred space.”

As I chanted, each word felt like a lifeline, connecting me to something greater than myself. Each chant was a prayer, a plea to the unseen forces that held sway over our world. I was on the fifth chant when I felt his hands on me. The sudden touch on my shoulder sent a jolt of electricity through me, threatening to break the sacred rhythm of my incantation.

“I’ve been calling out to you, but I got no response.” I opened my eyes to take a look at him.

Standing beside me, there was the man I had loved so deeply, the man I believed I understood as well as my own reflection. He had cradled me through my darkest nights when I battled with tearing myself apart, and he had seen the hidden parts of my soul I guarded so fiercely. But now, I questioned whether I ever truly knew him. I longed to unravel the shadows that had taken hold of him, the same shadows that had wounded me so profoundly. He had become stranger in the guise of someone I had once held so close.

He touched me again and each time he held me close, it was like a twisted dance, where he was the conductor of my pain and the composer of my comfort. His embrace was both a tormentor and a sanctuary, simultaneously inflicting wounds and offering solace. I intensified my chants.

As the waters responded to my plea, something within him seemed to shift. His grip on me weakened, and I could see a flicker of recognition in his eyes, as if he, too, felt the forces at play. The waters carried him away. I stood still.

Turning back to the shore, I saw Fara. We locked eyes, and in that moment, I knew she had found the notes too. Our gazes held a profound understanding, a shared secret that neither of us had dared to speak aloud and in that quiet exchange of glances, we both knew that our lives were forever changed. Tears welled up in our eyes as the weight of the moment sank in. No words were needed.

Farewell and beginnings.

I've finally discovered the answer to Lato's question: why candles flicker out, even when they yearn to remain illuminated. It's because they're delicate, vulnerable to the whims of the world, and despite their innate desire to burn on, they succumb to the forces around them.

My sister, however, was no mere candle; she possessed a strength beyond compare. She longed to be here with us, but even my love couldn't save her. Mama's love couldn't save her. No one could. I wish she had held on a little longer, though I know that's a selfish desire. My love for her was boundless. I hope she's found peace now, perhaps with an unlimited supply of cupcakes. I knew she'd want Mama and me to continue living in her absence.

Here I was, sitting in our favorite ice cream shop. Since her passing, I hadn't tasted mint-flavored ice cream, our favorite. Today, I decided to savor it, and it tasted divine. I couldn't help but mimic the way she'd enjoy it, with a giggle and a lip-lick. The cold sensation was both comforting and chilling. I turned to the waiter and asked, "Can I please have two cupcakes with candles?"

"Is it your birthday today?" he inquired. "We could sing you a song." I smiled and declined.

Placing one cupcake in front of me and the other in the chair opposite, I lit the candles and then blew them out. "This is for you, Látórùnwa. Your light will never flicker out," I whispered. With that, I took a bite of the cupcake and my goodness, it was heavenly.

When they ask about my sister, I'll tell them she had the brightest smile. I'll say she taught me how to move my stiff waist. I'll say she was the expressive one who showered me with kisses and told me she loved me at every opportunity. I'll tell them she never let go of my hands until the very end. She was home.