

“No! Temi!!!”

I heard a loud shriek a few seconds before I saw stars and temporarily lost my senses. The huge crash caught me off guard for a few seconds and when I could finally focus on what was happening, what I heard was my mom’s gasping voice and her final words.

“I’m s-so h-aap-ppy you-uu can li-vve on-nn...”

*“No! No! Mom!!!!”*

I woke up with a start and curled myself into a ball. My head in between my knees, I rocked back and forth like a pendulum, humming my mom’s favourite song. It was the same as every other night after the accident that had claimed my mom’s life, and drastically changed what I once knew as life.

Knowing fully I wouldn’t get any more sleep, I stood up from the tattered mat I had slept on and limped towards the window.

*‘Only if she didn’t...’*

Shaking my head, I discarded that thought. What difference would such a wish make? What happened had already happened and there was no remedy for spilt milk. It was better to think of the present.

With that reminder, I turned away from the window only to inhale sharply. I held onto the wall for support and tried to straighten my back.

*‘I mustn’t be found out or it’ll be a worse punishment’*

Singing slowly and lowly, I drew strength from the song my mother had composed for me and took a few tentative steps.

“Practice makes perfect Temi; Mama taught you that,” I told myself as I gritted my teeth and continued to practice walking.

It was a school day and it was unacceptable for me to miss school. I practised walking till daybreak and successfully walked with a slight limp.

“Click!”

The sound of the door being unlocked put me in a state of vigilance. I steeled myself for what was about to happen. Slowly, the door opened and I held my breath while clenching my fists.

Although the door had been opened, no one came in and I couldn't help feeling more tensed. In what felt like an hour, but was actually a few seconds later, I heard the brisk and clinical voice of Agatha, our housekeeper.

"Miss Temi, you've been ordered to stay here for two weeks. I will be unlocking the door each school day and Mr. Anthony will take you to and back from school, after which, you are to return to being locked in this room. Please prepare for school."

She left the door open after delivering her message and I waited for a minute before slightly limping towards the door. I limped out of the room and to the servants' general bathroom that was across it, to prepare.

I cleaned up as fast as I could then limped back to the room where I wasn't surprised to have found my uniform placed haphazardly on the mat. After dressing up, I limped out of the room and out of the servants' quarters.

I stopped for a minute to breathe in the fresh air but it did nothing to soothe the hole in my heart. Rather, my emotions mirrored the cloudy weather; dark and tumultuous emotions swirled within me but I frantically pushed them down and limped towards the blue Toyota Camry in which Anthony sat in, waiting to drive me to school.

The ride to school was the same as always, Anthony was as silent as a graveyard while I battled with my never-ending thoughts. But this time, unlike usual, I was finding it hard to reign them in.

I don't know if the recent lashing had hit something deep within me but I couldn't find it in me to be as indifferent and uncaring as I used to be any more or maybe, it was the threat of taking away my mother's albums.

"We are at your school, Miss."

Anthony's stern deep voice brought me out of my thoughts and I took my bag and stepped out of the car with a cold, collected face. As I walked towards the school entrance, I passed a group of four girls.

“See! Senior Temi came to school in a new car today, her family must be very rich.”

“Didn’t you know that before? She’s the only one in her class that isn’t in the school hostel. I heard it’s because her mother said she couldn’t trust the school with her daughter’s meals and care.”

“No way! That’s so arrogant. No wonder she’s so rude.”

“Yeah, also look at her clothes. She probably put them on in a rush, look at how messy they look despite having been ironed. She lives such a pampered life that I envy her.”

“Yeah, me too!!” The other three girls echoed and I laughed wryly.

*‘Haa! What I would do to exchange my life for yours’*

That thought was my undoing, it made me remember all I had tried my best to forget while preparing for school and my negative emotions and thoughts began to run unbridled in my mind. The mere thought of returning to my hell after school made me feel like throwing up. I couldn’t take it anymore. I felt the need to run away, to go anywhere but where I was.

I turned around and marched past the confused but scared girls who had talked about me but was doused with cold water when I saw the door to the driver’s seat open and Anthony come out to lean on the car, his arms folded across his torso and his eyebrows pinched into a frown.

*‘What the hell are you doing, Temi? Don’t risk it all, you’ve just got 5 more years max to suffer it all. What’s 5 years compared to the 9 years you’ve already been through?’*

Trying to be optimistic and hoping he wouldn’t call me out on my lie, I walked back to Anthony. “I’m hungry.”

Anthony stared at me deeply for a minute before reaching into his wallet to hand me a N1000 note. I was perplexed about his generosity but you don’t look a gift horse in the mouth. I turned around instantly and limped back to school, hoping the cash he had given me meant he wouldn’t comment on my blunder to my stepmother.

Getting to class, I noticed something different about the atmosphere. Everyone seemed excited and they talked in groups. Unconcerned, I headed to my seat at the back of the class and settled down to study.

Since we were in our final year, we were exempted from assembly and sports, all we had to do was prepare with dedication for our Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB), National Examinations Council (NECO) and West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE). Although some of us had written the General Certificate of Education (GCE) some months ago, we were all preparing for our WASSCE so I was a bit shocked to see the rowdy room.

Just as the bell for the assembly rang, our class teacher, Mr. Yusuf came in beaming. “Okay, Aina Kehinde and Taiwo, follow me.”

Excited shouts and murmurs started after they left the class. Unable to concentrate, I put my book down and listened for information.

“Our JAMB result must really be out then! After such a long wait, we will finally know our results!”

*‘What!!!’*

I couldn’t believe my ears. After I was punished yesterday, and before I was escorted to the servants’ quarters, I had all my gadgets impounded so I had no means of learning the latest news.

This was my one ticket out of my hell. Although my father treated me with indifference at best and violence at worst, he never stopped my education for fear of ruining his reputation, or at least that’s what I thought because my stepmother had asked him numerous times to stop wasting his money on a ‘disgrace’ like me.

I waited patiently and anxiously till it was my turn.

“...Badmus Temiloluwa!”

“Here Sir!” I shouted and tried my best to speed walk towards him.

I followed Mr. Yusuf to the Principal’s office where the heads of the school sat, and upon hearing my result, I was in a daze throughout school. I couldn’t even remember how I got home.

All I can remember was the loud slap I got upon getting down from the car. A heavy slap was enough to wake me up from my dreams but if that wasn’t enough, then when my body slammed against the opened car door before falling to the ground like a lifeless doll had to do the magic.

“You useless idiot! You want to bring a bastard into this house? I won’t allow it!”

*‘A bastard? What is Daddy saying?’*

Standing up, I looked at my father and then at the gloating smirk on my stepmother’s face and knew that she had done something again.

“Moreover, your school just sent your results to me. You cheated again ba? Someone who got an F9 parallel some months ago can’t ever dream of having a 298 in her JAMB. I have no hopes for you anymore. You’re quitting school and I’m going to dispose of all your gadgets and musical instruments. This will help you learn your lesson.”

“What? No! No, Daddy! I didn’t cheat, you can’t do this to me!” I screamed as I lunged at him and held tightly to his clothes, but he threw me aside and reached for the bag in his wife’s hands.

It was too late for me to react. Moreover, my body was too beaten up, I couldn’t do anything other than watch them burn. My years of composing music with my mom flashed through my eyes as I watched the fire burn and I fell to my knees in grief.

It was at that point, that I had such a crazy thought... *‘Why don’t we go together?’*

Without thinking twice, I used my newfound strength to leap into the fire.

It’s been a month since I ran crazy and a month since I’ve seen anyone but Agatha. I heard I’m getting discharged today but I can’t find it in me to care. I died that day in the fire and now, I’m just a body ready to be played like a puppet, or so I thought.

Agatha came to help me get discharged and Anthony drove us back home. I could feel their eyes on me, gauging my thoughts but I really didn’t care about anything anymore and continued to pretend to sleep.

“Miss!”

After about thirty minutes, I was rudely pushed awake by Agatha. I hadn’t even known I had fallen asleep. I turned to her, saw the sharp glint in her eyes and sat up.

“I’m so sorry I turned a blind eye to all that had happened, but I can’t watch you kill yourself. I kept these for you. It’s your mother’s unfinished songs. Go and become who you need to be, start your life again. I

don't have much but please manage this. Anthony and I raised it for you." She said as she pushed a bundle into my hands.

"But what about..."

"Don't worry, they don't care about you and think you are crazy. Go now before we change our minds!"

With newfound passion, I grabbed the bundle, ran out of the car and crossed the road to the other side. I didn't care where I was, I just continued to run for my life.

I ran till I couldn't run anymore, then I stopped and checked where I was. I wasn't familiar with the area, but I spotted a kiosk and was about to walk into it when I heard someone call my name. I tensed and turned around to find a shocked ex-teacher with his hands around a lady. He turned to her and said something before running over to meet me.

"Temi, what the hell are you doing here?!!" He nearly roared as he pulled me to a corner.

"Mr. Gbenga, your language isn't quite right."

"I'm sorry. I'm just too surprised to meet you here. What's going on?"

I looked at him and didn't know what to do. Should I tell him the truth?

"Look, obviously you've got some things going on. I just want to help. You wandered into a place no good girl should be and you are lucky I found you first. I'm no longer your teacher but as someone who was once your teacher when I was a corper, I'd feel horrible leaving you in distress."

I looked at Mr. Gbenga and held in the tears I felt were about to drop, "I'm homeless" was all I could say. He looked at me, patted my back, and then, said something that changed my life.

"I know you like singing. I've heard you sing quite a bit when you were in school and if I'm right, you're 19?"

Not knowing where he was headed, I nodded my head and he smiled. His smile lit up his face and for the first time, I saw him for the handsome man he was before shaking those thoughts away.

“I own a bar and have singers but I need a composer. It’s a classy bar and the security there is tight. There’s boarding and meals, all you’d have to do is perform sometimes and write songs for my singers. Will you join me?”

I held tightly to the bag in my hands and closed my eyes. Did I have a choice? But even if I did, I’d still want to follow him and follow my dreams. There’s nothing I’ve wanted more than becoming a singer and great composer like my mom, so I opened my eyes and nodded.

He let out a deep relieved sigh and took me to his bar. There, he left me in the hands of his assistant and I was shown the bar and my lodgings. I also met with the other girls and started my new life as a composer.

I stayed in his bar, composing songs for three years and just like he said, the security and environment were safe for all his girls. Yes, we were his girls but some of us took that word literally and got burned badly. I saw girls leaving year after year when they didn’t get what they wanted; Mr. Gbenga’s love and yeah, I still call him Mr. Gbenga despite him telling me to call him Charles.

We got pretty close over the years but I never stepped over the line he asked me to. I was too scared about the effect any slight change could have on our relationship and my career. Luckily for me, I got scouted by a record label during my third year. It was a miracle and was all thanks to him.

The day I left his bar, he was there waiting for me in front of the bar with his hands in his pocket. I smiled and waved at him but his expression was hard for me to read. At that moment, I felt the need to hug him. I had been battling with my feelings for him all along and if I was going to leave forever, I needed to do this for myself. I dropped my suitcase and ran to him. He caught me and hugged me tightly.

“Don’t forget me, please…” He whispered and I smiled. I won’t ever forget him and what he did for me. He changed my life and taught me what it meant to breathe again by supporting my music career.