

‘UNBOWED’ by Oyeyiola-Ourias Oyinkansola Adesewa

What does a 19-year-old do when she finds out her mother has cancer? Sleep. She sleeps.

She never expected that reaction but she had the longest and darkest sleep. Not as long as the roughly 24 hours sleep, she had at the age of 14 which scared her mother into thinking she was likely to lose her precious daughter who came as a gift during her dark life moment and a best friend for a friendless woman who has sacrificed her life in the name of family and scarred herself in the name of obeying the elders.

I know they won't admit, especially the uncles who fear my success and the witches who sniff my triumph from their bottomless pits, as Nigerians would refer to them as "village people". But prophecies have shown that I am the light my mother needs to overcome these heartless people who have made her less than who she is.

Trained by a single mother who struggles to make ends meet even with a first child with Cerebral Palsy, a woman of strength who lives for her children and makes herself the last priority, a woman who obeys the elders who talk foolishly and stupidly dispense advice to ruin promising lives all in the sake of "what an elder can see seated, a child can't, even when they stand". My mother who out of respect for these same elders falls for the whims of her brothers.

Growing up in Lagos Mainland where the hustle and bustle gets even more real by the day has been a training ground to take what life slaps at me with my full chest and my shoulder pads high enough for people to know my pride has and never will be let down. I won't let anyone see me break, I won't give them the pleasure of seeing my tears, I will remain protecting my mother who is too soft and too precious for the world she has been thrown into. I will be the venom when need be and the ray of sunshine when I am meant to be.

I had never broken. Even when we became homeless in my freshman year in college, I picked up the bags and said we will live. Even when the financial troubles came crashing in, I faced the two people I love the most and said we would survive. Even when I almost dropped out to take care of my family, my mother said "you will finish and finish strong". Even when family threw us out, I spat at the backs they turned at us and said there's no bloodline as disgusting as this and they will regret it. All these calamitous events kept spinning round our lives, but I held strong, there were more things ahead and much more achievements to be made.

I broke. On the day the doctor gave us the result of the series of tests, which was written in bold font, on the last sentence of the result where the test summary is written for laymen **ENDOMETRIAL CANCER**. My life froze, my ears echoed, a deep look at the doctor but I couldn't hear what he was saying, I turned to look at my mother beside me who kept smiling, holding back the tears about to fall. I abruptly stood up, "Adun, sit down please" my mother said. But I knew there was no point listening to this old man whose glasses sat at the brink of his nose, looking from under his glasses as he spoke. He spewed Lies. Nothing but LIES. I refused to sit back down, I just couldn't as she kept listening to all the lies the doctor told.

I didn't believe I could break. Getting back to the apartment, my mother approached me where I was seated, took a seat opposite me and held my hands. She said "I am strong, I'll come out of this", I simply nodded. I accepted this was a backlash life gave and if this was how life wanted to play this game, I'm ready to take it on. I snatched my hands back from hers and went into the room we stayed in. Laying on my back on the 6 by 4 inches student bed I bought when mother

complained of back pains, I looked at the ceiling of the apartment we squatted, 3 years of not having our own place, I looked around to see Ghana-must-gos filled with our belongings scattered around the floor of the tiny room, I sighed. This is not the life I planned for us.

The human in me looked for the tears of someone whose mom had been diagnosed with cancer but could not find any. So, I slept. It wasn't until months passed by, I found out it's not just when you cry that means you are broken.

Months went by as I tried to solicit for funds, reaching out to the people who I could, reaching out to the people I thought would always be there no matter the circumstance. I never knew the more time it took, the closer to the worst it was. I worked multiple freelance jobs while working my 9 to 5 or should I say 6 to 8 because remote jobs in Nigeria are not as remote as remote should be, all in hopes of gathering enough funds while taking care of essentials and needs in the house.

"Mom will be fine. She's stronger than you think. Adun, stay strong, it is the best thing you can have going on for her now." Daily, I tried as much as I could to encourage myself and pull out from the endless abyss, I constantly found myself in. I turned my hope and put all of my faith to God, the one person I know for sure would not leave. I may not be a strong Christian and my spirituality may have diminished during the fight back with life but I have a very strong Faith in my religion and belief that God is an OG and would always come through.

There is one person I had hoped would definitely come through. We may not be blood related but he watched me grow and nurtured me in the entertainment industry I found myself while much younger.

"Hello! Adun Adun, Adun of Lagos. How are you? I heard you are chopping life" He said over the phone call. "Ah Uncle Tami, nothing like that o. I have sent you messages and been trying to reach you but you don't pick your calls. I also want to know if the job you offered the last time is still available. I am really in need of funds and need to put all I can into getting mom treated" I responded. Uncle Tami is someone who guided me amongst the tearing wolves of the industry, so I felt safe with him and saw him as someone who would consistently turn up. Until recently, he had been trying to have us be alone in enclosed spaces and constantly inviting me to his place for a 'meeting' or to brief me about a job he has at hand, and for reasons unknown to me each time I feel uncomfortable and an incident occurs to prevent me from going. "Ehn, I have seen the constant messages you have sent and I understand that you are in need of extra income. But you are not serious, ehn. I know how many times I have told you to meet me in my house as I have a project coming up soon or come around to the hotel I am currently lodged, so we can softly discuss this project. And you will make a lot of money o." He further replied. This sounded funny and strange but even as desperate as I was, I did not make this mistake – after all he is a grown man and I am a grown young adult. "Uncle Tami, I am very serious please. I would really appreciate your recommendation for jobs or you put me on the project you are on, I have worked for you previously and you can also testify that my written works, set ups and work ethics are very professional and I am extremely good at what I do." I tried as much as possible to ignore the repeated request of meeting with me during the conversation. "Uncle Tami, look, I believe you can brief me on the project over the phone. You know mom's condition; I can't leave her". "Adun, come off it, you can't keep living your life for her. Grow up and make your own decisions. Anyway, you are still not serious. I have told you I can't brief you on the project virtually. I will be going to Ibadan in 4 days and I want you to come along. It is for a job, so get back to me if you are interested, we are spending 2 days there. I have a meeting now. Bye." I

was shocked by how straight forward he had said this but still he forgot to tell me how much the pay would be. I put this offer aside as I was not too comfortable with this proposition.

The road now seems nothing but unclear, coated with thick fogs; it seemed like no headway was in sight. I looked at my mother as she slept beside me that hot afternoon, the sun beams on her face as the curtains are drawn back, soaked in her sweat making her side of the bed damp. I pushed myself back closer to the wall to give her more space to be comfortable, I watched closely as a bead of sweat trickled down from her forehead. My mother did not deserve the unfairness life had placed on her. I knew she tried hard to hide it, but I knew she is in pains and I knew she was deep in thoughts, probably asking herself when death may knock or regretting decisions she did not make in her younger years, or beating herself up. She might not see it but there was hope. I got in touch with the doctor after my little episode at his office the last time and he assured me that as long as she gets a surgery done, there is a possible chance of escaping the major danger of the cancer cells before they spread to other parts of her organs. She could also ...

“Ahhhhh! Adun! Adun!” My mother screamed from her sleep as her eyes popped open, “Pains. Ahhhhh.” her hands finally find mine to grab and she squeezes them as hard as the pain she felt. I look at her in pity and confusion as I didn’t know what to do to soothe this pain she felt. We stay this way for a while till she finally calms herself. She stood up and went to the bathroom to make use of the toilet till I heard her scream, I dashed to the bathroom, standing by the door, I looked at my mother who slowly brought her head up to present her look of horror, “Adun, please check. There’s something between my legs – in my private. There’s something there. I can feel it. Adun, please check.” Her voice shook. I tried to calm her down, to avoid showing her how much broken I could get. I did a quick check and truly there was something strange hanging right from where her sun doesn’t shine. “We need to go to the hospital now.” I said firmly.

“Adun, no please. We don’t have the money for it.” “I’ll figure it out.” I really didn’t know why I assured her or where I thought the money would come from but I did, knowing well that I only have 10,000 naira in all three accounts I own. “Call one of your uncles.” She said. How could I tell her that the last time I spoke to her brother’s friend who watched me grow, he suggested that I am a big girl and I should go ahead to do with girls my age do to get money and I could as well come over to his place so he could show me how it is done. I couldn’t, so I ignored what she said and hailed a ride to the hospital, making sure she was well padded due to her continuous bleeding as a symptom.

I left the room for the doctor to do his thing. Getting back with them, he said something strange was brought out of her and he would need to send it to the lab for test. He gave me the cost of 50,000 naira, I had only 9,000 naira as I had to take out our fare for the ride. I managed to pull together the 50,000 naira for the tests by borrowing from some friends. We were told the result would be ready in seven days.

My mother lived those seven days in pain and tears. I tried as much as possible to suck it up and endure her late-night pleas to God. My salary couldn’t have come at the best time, a day before getting her result. The doctor made us know the test came out as just blood clot which needs a surgical procedure to completely be taken out. I paid instantly and the procedure began, I roamed the surroundings of the hospital praying for a successful removal and a success it was as she came out of the theater. The doctor informed us the bleeding would stop as the blood clot had been removed but it must still be tested at the lab. I paid another sum of Fifty Thousand Naira and I was left with very dry pockets.

Two weeks flew by quite quickly and it was time to get the result of the previous test, my mother no longer had continuous bleeding and was active, even though she began to lose weight quite fast. Entering the hospital, my mother being her very bubbly self, greeted all those she sighted right from the gate of the hospital grounds. I was not in for her smiles and greetings, I simply wanted to know what the test said. I had way too many thoughts swarming my little head and they needed to be released like airbags in the sky to clear my worries.

Again, I broke. As the doctor revealed the test result shows that it is currently a Stage 3 cancer and any further delay will result in slim chances of survival. He advised the best we can do is get her surgery done and know the next steps, if Chemotherapy or Radiotherapy will be needed for her further treatment. I looked at my mother beside me as she smiled while he spoke. All I could think of was to curl up in bed and sleep. Does this cycle really need a repeat?