

THE LAST BREATH

It was the same dream that I had been waking up to the past fortnight. My breath still came out in heavy pants like every night, my forehead beaded with sweat. The loose white shirt I wore to bed was now clinging to my wet stomach as I uncovered myself from the heavy duvet. I grabbed a towel ready to hit a midnight shower that had become a routine.

My hair was stuck to the sides of my forehead before I tucked it in my shower cap. Everything was slow after waking up from that dream. As I scrubbed myself I wondered if its consistency and lucidity made it a nightmare now. The current events in my life could be the reason for their sudden existence.

However, I've faced death numerous times in my life. What's another body buried in the sand?

Is this a forceful way for my ancestors to let me know of the curse that is currently sucking my family's life dry?

The shower fell along with the number of questions that came into my mind. It was just a ten-minute deprivation from my sleep though. My body was stiff as it transfixed itself in the robotic death position; staring at the off-white ceiling, eyes wide open with nothing but empty thoughts keeping my careless mind busy.

Why do I feel like this?

What's the difference?

The morning after was not any different. I felt heavy and fatigued. It was becoming vivid that I would not get any sleep until her body 'rested'. That made my blood boil. She didn't deserve my restlessness or thoughts, but as usual, she always got what she wanted.

"More tea?" Felicity, my cousin, asked.

She was sitting quietly across from me, looking like grief was treating her well. Her dainty shoes and the long cotton black dress made her look perfect for the current situation. Something I haven't been able to pull off this time.

I feel like a wreck and for once, I've allowed myself to look like one.

I would have never chosen Felicity's townhouse as my dining spot for breakfast. Its archaic inspiration from architecture was handled roughly. Furthermore, the inexperienced craftsmanship showed how hard her husband has been trying, and failing, to flaunt how rich he is.

My humility had to come first though. After all, Felicity knew *her* best.

"No. I wasn't planning on staying too long," I was quick to answer. "I just need to know how best to handle this cremation situation. You and I both know Baba would never agree."

"Ah, so you came for a reason to present to the family."

"She *wrote* you knew her best. I figured you would have the slightest idea why she wanted to handle it this way."

Silence reigned for a moment, my breath stuck in my throat.

"Are you insinuating that she let me know of her decisions beforehand?"

"No, I-" I stopped myself. Felicity sipped her tea, obviously waiting for my impatience to slip up. But I knew better. "You've both always been close. Maybe you guys talked about-"

"Death? Our choice of being buried? I apologize but our friendship never led to that. Quite frankly, I figured you'd be the one to know. Weren't you her last phone call?"

My heart skipped a beat.

Preferably, I decided to forget that *that* happened. However, everyone had to ask. They had to know what she said, what I said as if it could change things. Or maybe, it was so that they could point a finger at someone alive.

There was judgment in Felicity's eyes as she hardened her expression. I'm sure she felt triumphant for putting me on the spot. The pinch of faith I had in her assistance was clouded by despair. I didn't need to sit here any longer if she was going to misjudge me for a decision I was never involved in.

"I apologise for disturbing you. I'll take my leave now. "

My feet didn't wait a beat to let me glance and gloat at the offended look on her face. I was gone before she could offer to haughtily walk me out.

It's been six hours since people from home called. That worried me more than what I was planning to say to Baba about *her* decision for a cremation. Mama has been checking in every hour. Now, nothing. I filled my empty wine glass, something that I've done six times this past hour, waiting for a sign. I was not sure which one but all I wanted was a shift. A clarification. A reason as to why I had to keep doing this. Over and over. Fixing *her* messes, even with her gone. I was sick of it.

And it pained me that I was tired. She was my sister after all. I should devote myself, shouldn't I? I should be willing to follow her wishes. Meticulously. Without fail. Yet here I am, groveling and quietly complaining of her death. However, I can't help myself. It didn't matter what was going on.

That was not the way to go. She didn't have to choose that path.

As I sipped the wine, my feet dragged around the living room, my eyes staring at the dozen family photos plastered on the side cabinet. I picked up one, with her radiant and infectious smile across her face. A memory flashes in my mind of the times I envied her contagious blissful view of life. A brief darkness surrounded me, taking me back to that little insecure mindset that she always brought in me. My maturity chose to ignore it. I needed to get through this funeral. I had to.

My back and forth since I got home was me strategizing how I was going to convince Baba to let the cremation be done. If it wasn't for his constant stubbornness on the issue, *she* would have been past tense days before. A heavy breath escaped my lips as I hit the call button.

"*Kamakhuwa ke silo!* Good evening, my daughter."

"Good evening, baba," I continued in Lubukusu. Him speaking to me in native gave me hope that his bitterness was gradually being nullified.

"How is everything there, eh? Have you been able to sit with the elders?"

"Yes," he sighed. "And the decision has been made. She will be buried here at her native home."

"It's her dying wish. Won't it be unfair to take that from her?"

"What is unfair is making us adhere to those ridiculous desires when she is not even here. *Tawe!* She shall be buried here!"

"But Baba-"

"Child, I don't know why you're fighting this. You're not a parent so you may not understand. Your mama and I cannot be at peace when our child is buried on common land. She shall be buried here!"

"Have you thought about cremation?"

There was a silence on his side that was almost deafening. My blunt words must have hit him but there was no need to walk on eggshells over this matter. Her body needed to rest already.

"*Ta!* It's not happening. I refuse. And if you were a good daughter, you would have put this matter to rest the first time I said no."

I sighed. It seemed futile to argue on this.

"Don't put up a fight you can't win. There is a system for how these things have been done in our community and our family. Your *waandaye* is not going to change that."

My eyes closed briefly as I listened to Baba talk about his approach to the ceremony. I sat on the carpeted floor trying to gather my bearings. I desperately wanted him to fulfill *her* dying wish, personally I didn't know why. However, it was evident that a yes on *her* way would be over Baba's dead body.

"So? Is it settled? No more 'burning bodies' and burying my daughter in the city."

"I have to go, Baba. There are some things I still need to settle with her finances. I'll call you later to discuss it. *Bulayi.*"

"Goodbye. "

Hours faded with me slumped on the couch, thinking about everything but nothing in particular. The fear of the routine dream waking me again was deep in my gut. It's times like these I wish I had someone to take care of me. Nobody told me how lonely adulthood could be if you don't build a life with someone.

It crossed my mind every time *she* introduced her boyfriends to the family when I couldn't even keep one for long. The constant comparison never left my mind ever since Baba mentioned it once.

"Your sister is now engaged after graduation. My daughter, when will you settle down? A husbandless woman with money is worthless."

In his eyes, even after I strived and achieved perfection, I was still worthless. Maybe, he was right. Perhaps I should have been the one to go, not *her*. It would have been *easier* for everybody. I had nothing to account for anyway. Just my job as a neurophysician. She had a son. To my family, that was enough.

Death. What a short word to describe a difficult thing.

Did you hear what happened?

Murder. What a curt way to take someone's dream away.

The pills, I only heard about those. What did you hear?

Suicide. What a terrible way to go.

She stole them. From the hospital, she worked in.

Antidepressants, valium and penicillin.

Don't forget the alcohol she gulped it with!

I could hear the voices from every direction. However, no one's mouth was moving as I glanced at them. A respectful bow or a mumbled 'sorry for your loss' were people's choice of action.

Were they true?

I doubted it. Perhaps, it was my mind distracting me from the guilt. I didn't hold the burial the way *she* wanted, I couldn't even get her cremated. I disappointed her even in her death.

Tears didn't escape my eyes. My conscience never bothered to fake it for a show like Felicity perfectly did. That breathlessness stuck with me since I got to Baba's Home. While I was waiting to make my speech, possible ways of ruining it kept flashing in my brain.

I'm not ready. My heart is not ready.

It's too soon to let her go.

The grand lavender fabric that engulfed the white tents or the glass podium that Baba desperately wanted me to rent could not hide it. I did everything in my control to make sure it was all perfect. Still, I felt empty. I felt lost. The suffocation was starting to get to me.

The paper enlisting the program crumpled as I tried to pull myself together.

It's such a shame that the childless daughter was the one left.

"Are you okay?"

I gasped as I turned towards Felicity. Her hand softly held mine as she held eye contact. Even though she's been mostly civil, I could not stand her hypocrisy. One moment she offered to assist, the next she mocked me for accepting it. But even she couldn't distract me from the internal struggle I had against myself. Tanya's death was my *ruin*. Considering everything I have worked for all my life, her dying with it made me bitter.

"I'm fine," I mumbled as I took my hand away.

It's something that I have been feeling guilty about ever since I was called to identify Tanya's body. I was bitter that the one person I held as my lifetime competition was gone. The inability to bring her back from the dead and confront her for it weighed heavily in my heart.

Then I realized, I had wasted my years away. I wasted my happiness for pride. My love had become nonexistent. My understanding of it was gone. All because of a competition that didn't even matter anymore.

"I will now call upon Tanya's sister to make the final speech."

The master of ceremonies' voice repetitively rang in my ears. I felt everyone's eyes on me at that moment. I had a speech prepared. However, I have never felt more unprepared in my life. How was I supposed to summarize someone's thirty-seven years of existence in a speech?

As I placed the printed text on the lectern, all the words seemed foreign and blurry. It wasn't even because it was in Lubukusu. Nothing seemed enough to start this speech.

"*Mulembe*. Hello."

The crowd replied. They were all so dark. It felt like I was against them, not with them. Baba and Mama came into my vision, looking anxious. I hadn't said anything yet. What was there to say?

"Tanya is, or rather was-"

I can't. It's too soon.

My heart had created a fast rhythm and my hands uncontrollably shook. The *weakness* that I was displaying to everyone disgusted me. Vulnerability was not my quality it was *hers*. Transparency was not my specialty it was *hers*. Things I always used to state to her as her downfall. So why was I standing there, on the podium, filled with envy of her 'non-accomplished' life?

After all, I was the one with a doctorate, a stable and outstanding career, and a comfortable life.

Why did her life feel more accomplished than mine?

Even after all the errors she allowed herself to make, she was still on top.

Why did everyone still find reason to fault me for her own choice of last breath?

Why was I the answer to her problems, alive or dead?

Why didn't I pick up her call?

All of these questions didn't matter anymore. Whether she chose to make me detest parts of her life was meaningless at that moment. Tanya was not here to taunt me with her faults. However, even after all that-

"I miss her."

It was the same dream that I had been waking up to for the past three weeks. My breath still came out in heavy pants like every night, my forehead beaded with sweat. The loose grey shirt I wore to bed was now clinging to my wet stomach as I uncovered myself from the heavy duvet. I grabbed a towel ready to hit a midnight shower that had become a routine. However, this time it was different. Unlike the panic that hit me as I left the bed, I felt a pinch of relief. Finally, it was all going to be over soon.

I miss you, Tanya.

There was no more anger or complaint. The sorrow I had been waging on my shoulders came out in a painful sob as my throat ached. That moment was both painful and peaceful. A lightness in my heavy heart increased as my cheeks became wet with tears.