

And when Mama finally tells you about Baba, the man you curse us all out for, the hero you write letters to heaven to release, the legend greater than any fable told, what did you expect? He was, after all, a man, one who valued women for as long as they proved useful, a daughter just another unnecessary mouth to feed. Would he have loved you? One would never know, but if you ask me, you were better off without Baba's love or whatever crumbs of his twisted version he had to offer.

I remember when I first noticed it. When I first saw beyond the old children's song and the few minutes of jumping Baba would engage with us as he came back late each night, too late to spend any reasonable amount of time with us, early enough that we weren't yet in bed. I had tried for weeks to cheer Mama up. I knew there was something wrong; I just couldn't figure it out. One day, she was my mother, bright, sunny, happy, or maybe just content. I doubt Mama ever really knew what happiness was. And then one day, she was not. Her spark died, and I could see that where flames once were, she had nothing left but smoke, and pretty soon, even that had given way to the darkness. Her fuse became shorter; everything irritated her, every day was a fresh opportunity for me to mess up. I never ran out of ways to disappoint her, I could never clean thoroughly enough; I could never cook as well, I could never care for my brothers well enough, not minding that they were older than I was. I did all that I could and took on more than I should because I sought to find the switch that could ignite that spark again. They said a daughter was a mother's first joy; I took that to heart and set out to be Mama's Angel of joy.

Mama was the most beautiful woman I had ever set my eyes on; her smile could light up a city. Her dentition was beyond perfect; you would think she arranged every tooth herself. She had caramel skin, shiny and smooth, though all I've ever seen her use has been Shea butter. She had a beautiful head full of hair, full from edge to edge, so long she was charged triple the price each time she got a perm. She was tall in a way I often heard was perfect for women with curves like hers, so perfect she often looked unreal if you didn't know her. Mama was beautiful by every standard imaginable. I was constantly in awe of her, so it made no sense when I walked into our room and parlor space one afternoon and watched her eyes cry as if on their own as she had her hands resting beneath her chin. It made no sense that this perfect person was so lost in thought, obviously disturbing, that she had not noticed me come in or heard as I stood by the doorway sobbing as I watched her. I walked up to her, and using my little hands, I wiped her tears away while still crying. She looked at me in a way that still haunts me till date, a look that one too many women carry around with them. I was eight years old, and that evening I made Tuwo for the first time as mama could not put herself together. I still have a scar from my cooking that day; it was barely edible, but no one could complain, not when we all knew we were in mourning, the death of what we would await tomorrow to know.

It had been a few weeks; things were fairly normal again. Mama still didn't have her spark back, but there were no more tears, at least none that I had seen. And then Baba came back home early on a Wednesday afternoon. I saw him first because I was out playing, and I knew to hide. He hated it when we were unproductive, and being out in the afternoon playing Ice and water or Tag was the very definition of unproductivity. I was worried, because he wasn't alone, and we

weren't the type of family that had visitors. He was with a woman; she looked young and regal, her skin was shiny, and oh, she had been blessed with melanin. She had the richest complexion I had ever seen, and she was with Baba. Why? And why was she going into our house? This was ours; we kept the world outside, outside. I couldn't just play; I had to know so after a while, I went back home, and just by the passage that led into our "face me, I face you" apartment, I saw Mama sitting on the floor crying again with no sound. And instantly, I hated that melanin goddess. I didn't know who she was, what she did, or what business she had with Baba, but I knew she was sent of the devil, something bad, something evil, because she was the reason why my mother was crying until even her nose began to cry.

The melanin goddess's visits became quite frequent, but Mama never cried again, and she always made sure we were too busy to be bothered about whatever went on in that room. Pretty soon, it was not just the melanin goddess Baba brought back; there was Baturiya. She was so fair I could never be convinced she was Nigerian; she had hair as dark and thick as Mama's, with holes in her cheek I heard the neighbors called wushirya, each time he brought either of them home, I heard Baba laugh so genuinely and freely in a way he never did with us; they would giggle at whatever he was saying or doing to them. And so, even our evenings with Baba became rare and far in between.

On one of our lucky evenings after Baturiya left, I watched Mama serve him Tuwo and Kuka with the only dry fish left in the house. I was livid because even the fish had been a sympathy gift from a neighbor. I looked forward to whatever piece would have made its way into my portion of soup, only to be denied that. He didn't offer us a piece like he would often do previously, I was upset that he could sit and eat our only protein when it was only a few hours earlier that he devoured a whole big newspaper wrap of balongo with Baturiya, calling me to dispose of the paper and onions that were left uneaten, onions that Mama could not afford to buy, she had to pick through the skin discarded by a neighbor. We ate in silence until I broke it, asking him why he has never tickled me like he did his visitors. I had never heard a silence as loud as the silence that enveloped our tiny apartment that evening. He quietly washed his hands, removed the belt he still wore, and had my brothers hold me down while he flogged me. He didn't stop until Mama started crying, and when he did, he declared that I was done eating, and maybe hunger would teach me the respect Mama had clearly failed to; he denied me a meal he didn't have the decency to provide.

I didn't eat until the next afternoon; he threw away my portion of the morning koko away. It broke Mama's heart, but she did absolutely nothing about the situation; she never spoke about my abuse either, she never stood her ground as he ordered her to starve her 8-year-old. That was the first time I knew that my mother was fallible, that my hero with all of her strength could be a man's puppet; He's to have, he's to control, he's to hurt. She was my mother but never my protector because she hadn't figured out how to protect her own self.

As Baba's madness, as I had grown to refer to it, found new ways of expressing itself, the intensity of the darkness I could read in Mama's eyes grew. Her fuse became so short it was almost nonexistent; her laughter became so rare it was like a celestial event. She became even

busier as Baba provided less and less, and she could not watch her children starve. He'd still eat at home, and as if that was not enough, he brought his nephew; an extra mouth, to come live with us.

John, that was Baba's nephew. He came when I had just turned 9; he was a bully. My brothers loved him, for he could play rough with them, climbing trees and breaking things, getting into all sorts of trouble. I hated him from day one, first because he was an extra burden to Mama, another reason to stay up late worrying, and then he was loud, lousy, scattering the place, and irritating me as he went. John never listened, and that made my mission to make Mama happy and find her spark switch a lot more difficult. He would soil as I cleaned; he would break as I fixed, and he was infuriating. He was older; I expected much better. My frustrations only grew as my brothers began to mirror his every step, and the onus to keep a clean house was left on my little shoulders. It was me getting scolded for every stain and broken piece, and it would seem that with every day John was still in our home, I was further away from getting my mother's joy back.

Some woman from church helped Mama get a job at a private clinic across town; the pay was horrible, but little was better than nothing, and it had become evident that if we depended on Baba for provision, we would starve. With the new attendant job, my mother wasn't home as often, so I took it upon myself to make sure she came back to a clean home, even if it meant I had to sweep every other 15 minutes. Soon, her job kept her away at night too, and at first, it was okay, but Baba began disappearing at night too. One of such nights when there was no Mama and no Baba, with my brothers sleeping as though they were dead, John came into the room as I slept. I felt a sensation on my skin and tried to swat his hands away like an insect, but it kept coming back and climbing higher. So I opened my eyes, and just as I moved to scream, he stuffed my mouth with his dirty, smelly T-shirt, pressing it with his hand. He then showed me his other hand, where he held a sharp little knife that I had come to know as his mango knife. He proceeded to paint me a very vivid picture of how he could kill one or both of my brothers, depending on how upset I made him, and nobody would even know because he would kill me too. As annoying as my brothers could be, I didn't want them dead; I loved them, and it would break Mama's heart. But more importantly, I didn't want to die either; I had so much to achieve, so many dreams I am sure would make Mama happy. So, I nodded slowly, an agreement to silence, and he did what he came in to do. I had no idea what he was doing; all I knew was it hurt, but I had to bite down my lips for silence. I had to pretend my bloodstained wrapper was nothing and my paranoia about my brother's safety was just love and care. Every night it was just the four of us, John would visit, soon those visits included him slapping me around and pulling on any hair or skin he could because my pain seemed to amuse him, and every morning after his visits, I would put on a bright smile as I saw Mama before we went off to school. I wasn't ever really a happy child, but even the little joy I had had been snuffed out of me, and I couldn't even share. I was a nine-year-old, carrying a weight no child should, and my voice had been taken away from me.

I was ten when Baba died. I do not know why, I did not care enough to listen to the whispers. I did not care enough to cry, and I was glad that his dying meant John leaving us. Mama could

barely take care of us three, plus herself; there was no point in trying to keep him in a bid to make her in-laws happy. She could never do good enough anyway. I was 11 when Mama had you.

It was uncle Ahmed after John left. He was the neighbor that seemed to care; he went to her and offered to tutor me after school while she got my brothers engaged in carpentry and electronic repairs. You had Nana, the woman who looked after you sometimes for several days if Mama was busy at the clinic. After him, it was Brother James from church; he hadn't gone very far when I found my voice again.

He was touching me in a way I had painfully come to know; the dance was all too familiar, so I began avoiding him, and he had the effrontery to report me to Mama. When I told her I didn't like him and he had begun moving funny, She scolded me, accused me of lying, of being possessed, and of evil spirits driving away anyone that showed me a little goodness. I was 12 when I found my voice, only to realize it was just static noise to Mama.

I never spoke again, but I also never let go without a fight again. I was 12 when I decided it was time to work on getting my own spark back; it was time to dream for me. I was 12 when I decided there had to be more than one type of woman, and I was going to be the opposite of whatever Mama was, I loved her; I still do with everything I am, but I will not become her. I will not hand over the keys to the car that is my life to any man; I would not let him treat me any less than who I decide I am, a woman; human, equal to him.

Now she wonders why marriage scares me, why I run the other way when someone approaches me with those intentions. I will never be the broken woman whose dreams and ambitions are swept under the rug, never to be cleaned because of a man, while taking responsibility for anything going amiss in her family, because God forbid a man is held accountable for anything.

I never want to lose my light again, I never want to have that look I saw on Mama's face, I never want to know the pain, the welcome to womanhood, the acceptance I see us fall too quickly into. I watched you cry for him, building up a person that never was, making a Saint of the man responsible for this chain reaction. You should be grateful he was long gone before you came; it afforded you a childhood; it afforded you dreams; it afforded you a life I could only wish for  
kanwa

TAAVE PATRICIA

**Glossary**

*kanwa*- little sister

*Tuwo* -a Hausa word which means stiff porridge or swallow usually served with soup.

*Baturiya* - European, an extremely light-skinned woman.

*Wushiriya* -Dimples

*Balango* -spit roasted/ fire roasted meat on brown paper

*Koko*- a Hausa word for pap

*Kuka* - a soup made from powdered baobab leaves eaten with Tuwo.