

NUMB!!!

“It’s your father” my school guardian said with so much sadness in her eyes. Just then my long awaited JSS3 holiday was about to be ruined. My father was ill and the worst season of my life was only just beginning. For anyone to understand my grief they must open their minds to the possibility of every love becoming something hurtful and that to love is also the ability to do same in absence. Came home from school to the news of my daddy’s admission in a local clinic within the area, which was shocking to me because he had never taken a pill as far as I knew. In my distraught, I had to go visit whilst smiling as lovely as frost on a windowpane in order to mirror my father’s ever strong personality but my heart was shattering to pieces.

Elimoore (as his friends would call him) was unwavering with the willingness to conquer the world every day. In that moment all I could think about was how I missed our morning routine of peeling oranges which consisted mostly of him screaming at me to avoid the knives and reminding me of why I most definitely will not be his favorite child.

“Licking orange in the morning will soften your hard stools Nne” he would always explain and then proceed to shave his non-existent beards.

Grief is a raw depiction of how much pain the body can internalize or not process (as it was in my case). Standing in the living room and watching the neighbors shed tears was stupid to me only because I did not think they knew my daddy enough to cry. A little voice in my head was screaming for all of them to leave our living room but that was all; never found the voice to say it out loud. Elimoore was discharged from the clinic after five days and we were so happy to have him home most especially my mom. All my sisters and I wanted to do was play with our father’s pot belly but mummy said to let him rest so he could recover quicker. Suddenly on that same night, there was a loud cry and people whispering “don’t wake the children up”. I got up quickly to see my uncles taking daddy away briskly and the last word I heard was “Ulogwu” which meant hospital. In that moment I began to regret my decision of letting my father rest, maybe if I stayed up and disturbed him he would not have to go to hospital again. My heart dipped, not in the

sense of death but one of not seeing my father again for the next few days. I mean that's the only thing hospitals are good for- keeping people.

My sisters were too young to understand anything going on. Like a diary, I had to lock the memories away until they were able to understand and hence I shouldered the responsibility of this pain all by myself; bear in mind I was only 11 years old.

When he did not return from the hospital that night we were all worried and then the uncles who took him to the hospital all came back at once. I knew something terrible had happened. Why were they all here? Who was with him in the hospital? These and many more questions ran through my already troubled mind. The words were finally blurted out "onwugo, Elias anwugo." he's dead; Elias is dead uncle Chi said. Oh my poor mother fell to the floor, she came unraveled, screaming and straining all her veins. I was so sure those screams went beyond to awaken the whole street because it wasn't long before our house was filled with neighbors and well-wishers. People latched onto her trying to restrict her from any self-inflicted injuries but she escaped from their

grip and ran across the whole parlor. In that moment, the self-contained bubble that my mother and we lived in burst open exposing us to the wild without protection from the only source we knew. Chills ran down my spine, hands went cold and my body was numb. I understood what it felt like for my dear mother since my daddy did everything for her and provided the easiest life possible for motherhood. How could it be that the only man she loved was dead? The screaming and wailing strengthened for hours until it seemed to start fading away.

Questions like “who has Kenneth’s phone number” “who is the next in command of the family we must call?” were directed at my mother and the answer every time was “I don’t know”. You could tell she was in shock. It was cruel to leave the decision making at such vulnerable time to a broken woman. Finally a call was put through to my Uncle Ken and mortuary plans organized for the next few weeks. Oh my strong father subjected to a mortuary, I could not still bring myself to tears. Both my sisters were asleep in the bedroom with our housekeeper and I was asked to join them. This felt like a relief at the time because I hoped that things

will go in reverse by the morning and the night will only be the figment of my imagination. Looking up to my mother for approval to go to bed, she looked at me with red shot swollen eyes filled with sorrow and gave a very simple nod.

The night was very long and filled with voices of people wailing intermittently whilst deliberations were going on in the background. I spent too much time moping about the room; the god of sleep had deserted me. The thought of the morning was jarring because eventually it would be harder than my already traumatizing night. Finally I got a wince of sleep and at the crack of dawn responsibilities sat waiting for me. Nwadinmma woke up first making babbling sounds; she was non-verbal and had no clue, Ogechukwu followed minutes later and immediately asked “sister, what is going on?” My heart sank, tongue became unbearably bitter as though I had just chewed fresh bitter-leaves and my heart was pounding. My sweet baby sister (Dad’s favorite child), how do I tell a six year old that the only man who adored her had passed? How will she assimilate death and grieving? I could not bring

myself to answer her question and so I ran, which was the only logical thing to do at my age. Asked her to stay in the room and not come out until told to do so. Upon exiting the room, I was met with aunties I had never seen in my life.

“Chai he was such a young man” one said “who will look after his young children” another replied. Neighbors were in our kitchen making tea and my mother lay sleeping on the couch which was a relief. It gave me a sense of false comfort as I thought a miracle happened overnight while I managed to catch a little sleep.

Every activity leading up to the burial from shaving all our hairs, making my mother wear white dresses, keeping us indoors and daily visits from all and sundry was so strange. The Igbo tradition is so cruel to women and the only protection we had was my father who constantly fought misogynistic traditions. Not having a male child was a criminal offence especially from a first son child as my father. Having a child with special needs like my sister made the fight more difficult. Daddy was not dealt an easy life but our little family unit was something he was proud

of and you tell from his words and actions that my mother was the love of his life true and through. The drive to the village with the corpse was filled with so many hiccups. My mother's sister drove us in her corolla while a bus followed behind with my father in a brown coffin. Few hours into our journey, the corolla broke down and took hours to fix before we were back on the road. People stipulated that the reason for the hurdles was because my father died untimely from unnatural causes, this sent shivers down my spine.

Back in our family home, daddy's things filled the room, his old Ludo game sat on the table, the ancient fridge he prided himself for installing stood in the corner and his extra-large clothes hung in the wardrobe. For a second, I touched his clothes and a blanket of peace gripped me. A very short moment but I believed Elias was there with me.

The burial rites and tradition in Nigeria robs families of the ability to properly grieve as they are riddled with a host of activities and obligations. A day to the funeral, there were men erecting canopies in the compound, smell of jollof rice sauce filled the air, women decorating

and young adults putting drinks away in coolers. My mother's only obligation was going to visit her husband at the mortuary, selecting his last attire and being indoors all day. On that afternoon, she returned crying. "Sisi, they said I will have to drink Elias bath water" she said to my aunty amidst tears. "Who said?" my aunty replied and stormed out of the living room in a little wrapper tied across her chest. The next thing we heard was Sisi having an argument with Ken in the middle of the family compound. She threatened to call my grandpa if they made my mother do anymore ridiculous things on the burial day and she walked away. My heart swelled with so much pride, someone that was not my father was fighting for mummy. Thereafter there was so much tension in the air and so my mom and her sisters made a resolve for us not to attend the wake keep that night. The nights were still as hard as closing my eyes only left me with images of Elias in my mind and for some reason this made me afraid; the resolve was staying awake and singing the hymns that echoed in the air from the vigil.

I still had not shed a tear. The morning of the burial, we had to wake up really early and dress up in new white dresses. For some reason the sun had risen very early with clear blue skies. The ambulance with the corpse arrived on time and my father was placed in the big sitting room that was specially decorated for this purpose. We were asked to come see him for the last time before the guests arrived. Suddenly, there was a scream; My Mom had broken down again upon seeing her love. “Elias kulie ohhhhhh” Elias wake up ohhh she shouted at the top of her voice laying her chest across the coffin and holding on firmly. Everyone moved aside for a minute to let her mourn. My uncle Obi held unto I and my sisters so tightly. I let go of his grip and ran to give my mother a hug. Daddy was dressed in his brown wedding suit, a purple tie and a white shirt with matching white gloves. His skin was dark, looked very soft but dry and leathery in appearance, he did not look the same. My father was about to be buried but I still did not shed a tear.

He was laid to rest in the family compound on the land apportioned to him as “Diokpara” first son. I was marveled by the people crying and

wailing even louder than the bereaved, these were people I had never seen before and my daddy had never spoken about. My Grandmother was sad, you could tell. Her first child had passed away. She sat in the corner and called out my name “Mma go and bring that enlarged picture of your daddy so you can dance with it” she said. I was confused. Dance? Picture? Why? My mother said I had to do it because that is what first daughters did when their fathers passed in igbo culture. There I was dancing, other young girls asked to follow me with a tray in hand filled with sweets, the picture while I shouted “Nnam oh, Nnam eh” my father oh, my father eh and people sprayed money on me whenever I approached them. Very humiliating that was but it raised me a black bagco nylon full of money which I handed over to my mom hoping it would at least make her smile; and it did. No one ever bothered to ask why I had not cried.

To be Nigerian is to know there is a timeline on your grief, anything out of the timeframe is you being a nuisance. The days that followed after we returned to Calabar were daunting. The house felt empty, all the

strangers who once filled the living room everyday were nowhere to be found. My mother still had to wear her hideous white gowns and stay indoors; our hairs were starting to grow again. My holiday was about to end and somehow things were still so strange. A change in the amount to times and quality of meals we ate, the little things daddy used to do around the house seemed so difficult, you could tell mummy was struggling to keep up with the lifestyle my father led. The blue 1980 Mercedes 300 still in front of the house sat not driven for months and mummy was thinking of ways to sell it just so we could feed. I had to resume school with little to no provisions and hope my uncles would pay my fees as the term progressed.

In school, I lied to everyone that my father moved away to South Africa for a long term job because I was avoiding pity situations. My guardian heard about these lies but never confronted me; it was my coping mechanism. Fifteen years later and life has not still been fair to me. We are still fighting the misogyny that is stolen landed properties, wealth misappropriation and outright wickedness towards my father's widow.

I still have not cried.s