

Misconception

By Sefi Atta



Illustration: Wole Lagunju

People

say I was hot-headed in my twenties. I don't ever remember being hot-headed. I only ever remember calling out to my voice. I could hear it; but I was sure it could not hear me. In my country, women are praised the more they surrender their right to protest. In the end they may die with nothing but selflessness to pass on to their daughters; a startling legacy, like tears down a parched throat. Wise daughters won't drink.

The first time I spoke to Niyi about marriage, I'd discovered my mother was scavenging our trash bags for my used sanitary towels and taking them to church for prayers. Her

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priest had said I would remain childless otherwise. She was still a member of his church, a senior sister now. She lit candles in the mornings and evenings to pray, mumbled to herself and hummed church songs. Her front door was padlocked by six o'clock and her curtains drawn. I would go out to see Niyi just to escape from her, from that house where I often felt shackled by afterbirth. It was hers now, since my father relinquished it. That happened three weeks after I moved out of his house into hers. I received a transfer letter from him with a covering letter accusing me of de-camping. I replied, thanking him for raising me and reminded him that I was never given a chance to decide what camp to be in, in the first place. I apologized for my rudeness meanwhile. Really, I shouldn't have called him a liar.

My mother began to boast to her church friends that I'd discovered my father's hypocrisy first-hand. "She has seen for herself. The man has an outside child." I watched her disappear every Sunday, only to come back and accuse these same people of meanness. I pretended to listen. I understood that she hurt more because she'd sacrificed more in her marriage. I finally understood why she turned her mind to church with such fervor. Had she turned to wine or beer, while my father was out chasing other women, people would have called her a drunkard. Had she sought other men, they would have called her a slut. But to turn to God? Who would quarrel with that? "Leave her alone!" they would say. "She is religious!"

I had watched my mother worship. Seen how she waved her hands and exaggerated her smile. Whenever she shouted Amen! I thought she might have well have been saying Nyah nyah nyah nyah! She had tricked us all. Her fixation with religion was nothing but a life long rebellion. Faith had not healed her and I hoped that the birth of a grandchild would.

But when I told her I wanted to marry Niyi she said they had madness in his family—oh yes. One of his aunt was always washing her hands, and another, "pretty thing like this," had a baby and would not touch it for days, "imagine that." I told my father the news and he, too, suddenly became religious. "Not allowed!" he said, raising his forefinger. "Not allowed by the Pope!" Niyi was a divorced Catholic, so he would not give his blessings. Not until Uncle Fatayi persuaded him would he agree to the wedding, then he lectured Niyi about how this second marriage of his would have to work. That ended any father-son relationship they could have

developed.

On the day of my traditional engagement, Niyi presented a dowry to my family: aso oke and gold trinkets and I knelt before him, according to the rites. I did not want a dowry, I did not want to kneel. Niyi who had been reluctant to participate in rites that would proceed as if he were twenty-one, without a child of his own, did not want to be there at all. During the ceremony my parents argued, and a week later, at the civil ceremony, I almost suffocated from the ill-feeling in little Ikoyi registry.

I did not shed a tear over leaving home. I, who normally cried. After the night party, when a bride knelt before her parents and they blessed her, she was supposed to cry. An entire wedding party waited for this moment, so that they could say "Ah, she wept. She wept, that girl loves her parents no end..." But I'd always been suspicious. What were the tears for? On cue, like that? One bride, almost forty, gray hairs all over her head, crying. They had all but given up on her. What was she crying for? I was not bitter. We had healed the way most families did; enough to hold us together from one day to the next, but liable to split under any great stress, like nuptials. I still had not met my father's outside son, my half-brother. At first it was about letting my father know I hadn't forgotten about his deception. Then it became about being loyal to my mother. After a while, it was really about having other things to worry about, like work.

At the time, I was still working for Ministry of Justice, and supplementing my income with the odd business incorporation. After we got married, Niyi introduced me to some of his friends in banking, and I found a job in credit control. I was not prepared for my new environment, handling large sums of money within tight deadlines. On the one hand, I had hustlers from treasury pushing me to pass deals; on the other, management cautioning me to check credit lines. The treasury boys would come ten minutes to cut-off time, tallying exactly how much the bank would lose if I didn't make haste. I would get heartburn just from arguing with them. Then, one day, I mistakenly approved a deal with an insufficient credit line and management hauled me in for a reprimand.

After work I drove home crying. Niyi took one look at me. "You have to be tougher than this, old girl," he said. "Tell them to go to hell if they pressure you like this. You can't let people push you around."

"You don't know what they're like," I said.

He pulled my nose.

"Stop it!" I shouted.

He patted my head. "That is what I want to hear."

I was able to face work the next morning. From then on, he led me through similar rites. Months later, when the company secretary left, I stepped into her position. At work I consciously tried to imitate Niyi. How he said 'no' without moving his head, how his eyes, once locked, wouldn't shift. At home he had me howling with things he would do and say with that look. He played pieces on my piano and dared to call them jazz. I thought they sounded like a petrified rat scurrying back and forth over the key boards. I would ask if he had finished calculating his actuaries. He walked around with nothing but Y-fronts on. On more than one occasion, he turned his back and pulled them down. To check.

He had hemorrhoids; at least two episodes a year. I told him it said something about his personality, a hidden weakness in his gut. He said I should get used to it all, the pessaries and the ointments. I would eventually grow accustomed, to this and other marital surprises, but there were times his brows knotted and I knew that silence would follow. That happened whenever he was reminded of the time from which he still harbored grudges; against his ex-wife and against their friends who had taken sides; against his own family. That I would never get used to.

After he left his father's firm, his brothers avoided him for fear of offending their father. Only his mother would sneak visits to him, then his wife left. The day she found a boyfriend, their son stopped calling. Now, years later, although they were all on speaking terms, Niyi swore he would never forget each person's role. Whenever he wanted to speak to his son, I would be the one to call his ex-wife, he was wary of his father and brothers, he protected his mother like an egg.

Toro Da Cruz. She was one of those women who swallowed her voice from the day she married. A trained nurse, yet her husband and sons, all lawyers, thought she couldn't grasp the rudiments of Offer and Acceptance, so she acted like she didn't. She called Precedence 'Presidents', walked around with her underskirt hanging out. Whenever she tried to join in their legal discussions, they would tease her, "What are you talking about? Look at you! Your Saturday is sticking out of your Sunday. Pull it up."

They would laugh as she adjusted her underskirt. If they mentioned the word hungry, she ran into her kitchen and began to boss her houseboys around in no time at all. Soon she would summon me to help. I knew that she watched me botch kitchen duties, dropping things, recoiling from hot handles, slicing my fingers.

"It's hot in here," I would say.

"Don't worry," she would say.

"The boys should help."

"Boys? What can boys do?"

"They know how to tease you."

"Ah, who else can they tease?"

Once, I tried to trick her into a confession. "Ma? Don't you ever feel lonely in here, Isn't the kitchen the loneliest room?" She looked at me as if I'd offered to strip. "Enough now,

Lara," she pleaded. "Enough."

I continued to stir her stew, imagining her in a mortuary, on a slab, disemboweled; dry hands bloodied from ripping out her intestines; underskirt hanging down; husband and children saying how nice she was. Everyone said my mother-in-law was nice. I wouldn't believe them until I'd heard a true word pass her lips.

Her husband was a man who liked his stews prepared the traditional way; meat fried black in thick groundnut oil. And he loved his wife so much he wouldn't eat stews prepared by anyone but her. Forty-five years later, he had bad arteries and her hands were as dry and shriveled as the meat she fried. Francis Abiola Da Cruz, Esquire. The first time we met he asked, "You're Sonny Taiwo's daughter?"

"Yes, sir," I said.

"Good breeding always shows," he said.

Later, I asked Niyi: "I'm a horse?"

"He's a horse," Niyi said. "An old nag."

He was one of those Senior Advocates of Nigeria, though he was now out of touch with the Law, and with reality. He would ask his sons to dial if he needed to make a phone call. He sat in the back seat of a car, always, even when one of his sons were driving. He would stop speaking to me after I challenged him on a point of law, and I would disagree with him just for the sake of it. I did not care much for him, but my brothers-in-law, I loved. They would all troop into my house, all four of them looking like Niyi with the same dark skin and thin nose, and I would kiss each of them feeling a rush of libido and motherliness as they greeted me, "Lara of Africa!", "Obirin Meta!", "Alaiye Mama!" It was like welcoming my husband four times over. I didn't even mind sitting with them as they scratched their groins and christened women's parts: her forwards, her backwards, her assets, her giblets. And about Sheri: "She's em, very talented, you know, Hyuh-Hyuh-Hyuh!"

I knew. They were petrified of women, though they denied it. "Who? Who's scared of chicks?" "Sneaking," I said. "Lying. Lying on your last breath. Then you cannot even face somebody to say a relationship is over? That is petrified."

"If you say so! Hyuh-Hyuh-Hyuh!" Scratch, scratch, scratch.

Sometimes they brought girlfriends who disappeared by the next visit. Sometimes they played hide-and-seek games with them. I once asked, "Are you boys waiting to marry your mother, or what?" "Of course!" they answered, including Niyi. "Well, em," I said. "Don't you think you should drop your standards a little?" "No," they said, except Niyi.

Niyi bullied his brothers the same way he bullied me, but he could easily become vexed in the middle of our playing. Then he would call me aside and warn, "Better watch what you're saying. Next thing they'll be calling me Woman Lappa." I thought he was paranoid. I thought it was too bad. He was the very person who had encouraged me to be strong at work. It was like asking me to fly within specified perimeters. I would have shouting fits about it and he would remain totally silent. He said he wasn't used to arguing that way.

It may have been my redemption, since my husband needed a wife he could pity, in peace. Later that night, he called me aside to say, "Why did you have to say that in front of my brothers?" "Well, why can't you ever get the drinks for once?" I answered, "Why can't you go to the kitchen? What will happen if you go? Will a snake bite your leg?"

The Da Cruz were one of those Lagos families, descendants of freed slaves from Brazil who once formed the cream of Lagos society. Unrelated to any of the Lagos Cruz, they considered themselves well-bred because their great-grandfather, Papa Cruz, was educated in England. In his time, Papa acquired a huge estate which survived the slum clearance that wiped out most of the Brazilian Quarter in Lagos. Some of the buildings now looked as if a giant fist had come down from heaven and punched them into the ground. Those that remained standing were rickety Latin-style houses with tall shutters and wrought iron balconies. Nothing had been done to improve the drainage system: gutters and pit latrines dating back to colonial times. They were occupied mostly by traders and market people.

Papa Cruz's only son, Niyi's grandfather, had twenty-six children by three different women who died before he did and there had been several documented court cases over his estate. Each faction of Cruz occupied separate pews in the church they attended. It reminded me of my mother's church: incense, white robes and chants. When the collection tray passed, they gave very little. Oil wealth hadn't touched their palms and civil service wages were paltry. The men tilted their noses heavenward, the women fanned their cleavages laden with gold and coral beads, their *aso oke* reeked of camphor balls. They had all the pride and lack of ambition of a generation that wealth would skip, and ignored each other because they thought it was common to quarrel openly. That was how they settled differences: Aunt Efun, The Pretty One, locked herself in a room for days because her father wouldn't let her marry a Protestant. Niyi's father stopped speaking to him for a year after he left Da Cruz and Partners. Niyi, himself, would ignore me for days.

The first time this happened, we'd argued over drinks. His brothers were visiting and I had just returned from work. As usual, he asked, "Lara can you get these animals drinks?" Niyi claimed he was totally inept inside kitchens. His favorite trick was to feign panic attacks by the door, clutching his throat and keeling over. Normally I humored him, because we had househelp, but this evening, we had no one and I only wanted to stop trembling from lack of sugar in my blood.

"You have hands," I said.

"I beg," he said. "Show some respect."

"Go to hell," I said.

In my twenty-nine years no man ever told me to show respect. No man ever needed to. I had seen how women respected men and ended up shouldering burdens like one

of those people who carried firewood on their heads; necks as high as church spires and foreheads crushed. Too many women, I thought, ended up treating domestic frustrations like mild cases of indigestion: shift-shift, prod-prod and then nothing. As far back as my grandmother's generation we'd been getting degrees and holding careers. My mother's generation were the pioneer professionals. We, their daughters, were expected to continue. We had no choice in the present recession. But there was a saying, and I'd only ever heard it said by other women, that books were not edible.

It was an overload of duties, I thought. Sometimes self-imposed. Aramide, who lived with her in-laws for the first year of her marriage, complained that they were making a cook of her outside work. (Her in-laws were the formidable kind you had to kneel to greet.) Now she was working for an oil company and her husband, a pediatrician, was working at LUTH. They lived in an apartment provided by Aramide's employers, their good car was Aramide's car—people sneered at her husband because of this. Yet, Aramide left work each day, perspiring through traffic to get home in time to cook.

"I don't know why she's doing it," her husband once confided. "She's exhausting herself." But Aramide said she had to. "To make him feel like a man." "He feels it between his legs," I said. "You will learn," she said.

'Learn' was my cerebral passage to womanhood; wisdom, which came from truly accepting that I was less than my husband and being at peace with it; attaining a calmness of spirit. It was the expectation of calm that bothered me the most. How could I calmly defer to a man whose naked buttocks I'd seen? Touched? Obey him without choking on my humility, like a fish bone down my throat. Then whoever plucked it out would say, "Look! It's her humility. She choked on it. Now, she's dead."

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"Well, why can't you ever get the drinks for once?" I answered, "Why can't you go to the kitchen? What will happen if you go? Will a snake bite your leg?"

He did not speak to me for two weeks and I contemplated leaving him for that alone. But you don't leave a man because he sulks, and I wanted a family and I'd seen how he grieved for his. I knew him down to his breath in the mornings. When we were not quarreling, I liked to watch

him writhing to one whiskey-voiced woman or the other, like the one he called Sarah Vaughn. I could not tell one scat from another, but she said just about everything I wasn't prepared to, using ten words:

Sometimes I love you
Sometimes I hate you
But when I hate you
It's becau-au-au-ause I love you

Months later I got pregnant and shortly after had a miscarriage. I was at work when I felt the first contraction. By the time I arrived home, it was too late, I had passed a blood clot. I cried until I soaked my pillow. Nothing is worse than the loss of a child, even if the child is never born. If a child dies in your care, people understand that you feel responsible. If a child dies within you, they immediately try to absolve you: it is God's way, there is to be no mourning. You never understand why.

I got pregnant again. This time, the baby grew out of my womb and could have killed me had it not been for one smart doctor. I had to have an emergency operation. My doctor told us my chances of having a child after that were reduced. "But keep trying," he said. A year later, we still were. Niyi's relations began to press, "Is everything all right?" They looked at my stomach before looking at my face. Some scolded me outright. "What are you waiting for?" My mother invited me to her vigils. My father offered to send me abroad to see doctors. I asked why they harassed women this way? We were greater than our wombs, greater than the sum of our body parts. Aramide suggested I tried fertility drugs. Didn't I know? Everyone was taking them. They were? "Of

course," she said. "One year and nothing is happening? Six months, even."

"Six months!"

She began to name a few women. One who didn't have children. Another who had two, but both were girls. One who did it to trap a man. Where did they get the drugs? "Doctors," she said. Infertility specialists? Um, she didn't know, but they treated infertility all the same. Where did the doctors find these drugs? Black market, she said, or something.

Multiple births, laporoscopies, drug cycles. She gave me details, asked, if I wanted a telephone number. I only wanted to be left alone, I said. At least my husband had a son of his own. No one could accuse me of ending their lineage.

I never once doubted that I would become a mother. Not once. I just didn't know when it would happen, and was not interested in being a guinea pig until then; not after I'd seen what my mother put herself through as the mother of an only child—native medicine, modern medicine, it was all the same.

Two more years passed and we were still trying. I agreed to see a gynecologist who specialized in infertility. Niyi made the appointment and I stuffed my head under a pillow as he spoke to the receptionist, but he refused to use a fake name. "It's not a VD clinic," he said. We arrived there and saw the amount of cars parked on the street, walked in and I saw that some of the women were as old as my mother. I was one of the few with a man by her side. The infertility specialist arrived an hour later, chin up, stomach forward. He grunted in response to our greetings. I ducked a little like the other women. Didn't even know why. GR

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