

# A THOUSAND DEATHS

Harriet Edeyan Omoweh (Nigeria)



I had a feeling I couldn't continue to stay in the house when I saw our New Daddy going to his bedroom on Wednesday night, after looking strangely at someone, standing at the kitchen door. It was also the night I knew I was going to be a lawyer, judging cases for rich people with big money, sometimes for poor people too so that they could call me the big *oyibo* name I liked so much... what was it again? *Ehen*, 'humanitarian.' I really liked that word, because they said it meant you were a good person who helped people like the poor and widows. Even on that night, I already knew I would not do 'charge-and-bail' law at all. In my mind, it was rich people's case equals big money, poor people's case equals big fine *oyibo* name: humanitarian.

After all, didn't old wise people always talk about paying in cash or in kind? That was also the night I knew I would not be having any children of my own and that, if I got married, I would not be wearing a wedding ring. Oh! I would like to get married but I would hide the wedding ring to look for trouble.

I knew that the *Aproko* market people in our town, who instead of minding their small businesses, preferred to help other people manage their business with plenty words would talk about me. I could already hear them: '*Omo oni Erriga kwi ubiosa vwiyor re jo kpo ron vwe re*, Mama Erriga's daughter is married but wears

no ring. That child has been stubborn since she came out from the womb, with big dreams and funny ways. What kind of a wife hides her wedding ring? How does a husband cope with a wife like her?’ Ignoring them, I would come down from my car and walk past their stores, with big glasses on my nose, my head turning this way and that.

It was a night of revelations, one slowly easing into another. Like one of the latest films we used to watch back then with Papa. One scene introducing the rest, all done effortlessly. I later changed my mind about having children, but only a long, long time after the night of revelations.

I’d just finished massaging Grand-Mama’s ankle as she was always complaining of body aches. Sometimes, I think she did it deliberately, especially when she saw all of us going out. Me, I didn’t mind doing her massage with our special natural oil, brought by women of Ijaw-land from across the big rivers. It always smelt so dusty yet freshly tingly. I could never understand it. Grand-Mama had told me the oil was free from the white man’s wahala. She said it was good for *Ugboma-Eri-Vo-otor*, the body, soul and land. Even though I did not fully understand her words, they sounded nice so I liked them and liked using the natural oil too. I told her this, and then, she told me she sometimes hated being left alone by herself. I’d wanted to ask if that was why she complained of aches, but I didn’t.

Even after we told her she could watch television, she had promptly replied, “You know I don’t like this white man’s box. All these people talking inside have strange voices. Even the music sounds like a song by heavenly spirits, in some language humans can’t understand. In our time, if we wanted to relax, we went to the village square. We clapped, we sang and we made sure the songs were in the language

all of us understood: Urhobo, Ijaw, Itsekiri and others. Not these strange words I hear sounding like they are coming from the nose, not the mouth.”

Grand-Mama had a lot of interesting ideas about a lot of things. She didn't believe in using an electric blender but always insisted on millstones. She said the blender killed the taste of the pepper and the food, and that it was *Oyibo* magic. She believed it was wrong for young women to sit on the entrance to homes, that it would cause false labour in the future. She also said the same thing if you swept the house and didn't pack away the dirt immediately—you would be in labour for days.

Sometimes I felt she just wanted to teach me how to be a lady, but most times I was afraid she could be right so I sat properly in a chair, with legs crossed, avoided sitting at the entrance of the house, and I dutifully packed away the dirt whenever I swept.

She also believed speaking too much English was wrong as it was a borrowed language. She would often twist my mouth and say, “*Iyibo chapra chapra...* you, this girl stop speaking this English. You can never be a white girl even if you speak all their English in this your mouth.”

The last word would be punctuated with a tight pinch on my mouth, which would coincide with a tight twitch of her mouth. It was as if she wished she could pinch my mouth shut with her fingers so no English words could escape from it.

The only thing from the white man's land that Grand-Mama tolerated was the small radio her late husband left her and a broken mirror which she refused to call mirror but would always call

*Ughebe Oyibo*, which funny enough still meant white man's mirror. Grand-Mama claims that the radio was a boxed form of village town criers and traditional singers and that was why the languages were Urhobo, Itstekiri or Ijaw.

She did not know it was Ada who put in those channels so that we could watch the television in peace. I did not bother to tell her too. It was on this radio that we all first heard about the strange flying virus. I still remember her shouting that the white man had come again with their *wahala*. When the newscaster said everybody should wear a face mask and always rub a special cream on our hands, she surprisingly agreed after Ada, my older sister, explained that the cream had mostly alcohol. Grand-Mama would rub a lot of alcohol from Mama's drinking bottle. She also said that she would only wear a mask made from *adire* or pieces of *osebagbaniku* wrapper, the type she used to wash in rivers in Okitipupa in Ondo State before strange speaking boxes, dirty rivers or flying colonial diseases came into existence.

Ada had quietly told her it was Corona, not colonial disease. But that did not stop her so Ada made a mask for her using a piece of *adire* wrapper, so that everybody could once again have peace.

It was always a matter of keeping peace with Grand-Mama. Besides, New Daddy said we didn't really need expensive, special masks so we all agreed to wear the ones Ada made from *adire*. I felt it made us look like a close, cool family. Sometimes, Grand-Mama's strange opinion was not so bad.

Grand-Mama also believed that a woman who was not married could never gain respect. She said even in big cities where they drove big cars, they did not respect such women. I told her many

Nigerian actresses were unmarried and doing well. She said it was just *degen pose*, that was Grand-Mama's word for pretence.

“Check them! They wet their pillows every night and face trouble with people every day! Now go and don't disturb me with your I-too-know-questions!”

Her strong belief in marriage is how we came to have this New Daddy. After Papa died, she insisted that our mother should marry him because he could take good care of us. She said the care with a twitch of her mouth and we all knew we had little choice. Mama, though, tried to delay but things became hard. There was no more electricity to watch television. We started using the kerosene lamp. Many times, the lamp would flare up because we bought local kerosene cooked by the river-boys. It was cheaper but it sometimes flared. One time it flared and caught fire, burning part of Grand-Mama's wrapper.

She cried the whole week that it was better to kill her with poison than fire. Me too I cried because I was also secretly tired of not watching television, hawking with Mama, packing dirty rice from the floor of trailers that came to the market from the North because Mama could no longer buy rice, and buying kerosene from funny river-boys who looked hungry and stared at me like I was also a type of food. That week was when Mama agreed to marry New Daddy.

After the marriage, we got a new house. Our kitchen was full with foodstuff, and there was even a stocked fridge. We were grateful not to be drinking *garri* and eating palm-kernel nuts for lunch anymore. We all liked New Daddy. Everyone was happy that Mama was also now a married woman again.

Then after Papa's death, whenever we went to the market, that was almost the first thing people asked about. 'Ah see fine woman like this. Why struggle when you can find another husband?' The ones who didn't know us so well would simply shake their head at Mama's complexion that was now baked a dull brown from the sun, her sunken eyes and collarbones and ask, 'Why struggle alone? Can't you get married?' Mama never answered. She just tied the edge of her wrapper, balanced her tray on her head and kept walking.

So that was how on Wednesday night, I finished Grand-Mama's massage and was coming into our room. Everywhere was quiet, but then it had always been quiet since Papa's death. Quiet in the house, quiet between me and Ada, quiet when Mama used to serve us soup and we looked at it because there was no fish, and when New Daddy came and our soup became filled with meat, and even the expensive periwinkle, it was also quiet.

The silence of that night did not bother me at all, and when I saw New Daddy going to his room after looking at Ada who was standing at the kitchen door, it was the strange look that bothered me. Not the silence.

I stood watching in the shadows so New Daddy would not see me. He walked passed me, and his door closed with a click. I remained standing for some minutes and could hear Mama snoring from their room.

Many times, Mama took a sip of alcohol that did not seem to digest well in her intestines. She would then sleep and snore loudly. I was sure even if the whole house was on fire, she would not have heard.

Mama's snores were especially loud on Wednesday night, maybe because that was the day Papa died. I was now familiar with

the sound of her snores and her door locking with a click. Sometimes it was loud, sometimes softer. Sometimes I was in Grand-Mama's room, sometimes deep in sleep but the sound was there. Click. Click. Click. I didn't understand what the sound was telling me till that night.

The meaning was not clear maybe because it was a language that I was not yet supposed to understand, the way Grand-Mama did not understand the English sounds in the white man's box. That night, the click combined with other sounds and words to send me a clearer message.

As I got into my side of the bed, I turned facing the wall, careful not to lay on Ada's side as she complained it made it too warm for her. I closed my eyes and forced the sleep to come because early the next day I was to start work as a tailor's apprentice. I didn't want to, but New Daddy said it was for the best.

I desperately tried to sleep. When the sleep didn't come, I started counting in Grand-Mama's language: *ovo, ive, era, ene...*

I must have finally fallen asleep because the next thing I heard were quiet voices. I heard a strong voice and whispers. The strong voice said, "Sorry. Sorry *ehn*."

And then several loud grunts. I stayed very still, wishing I could disappear into the opposite wall with the painting of Genevieve Nnaji that Ada and I had bought at Igbudu market.

I lay there willing that breath would stop coming out of my nostrils, for fear even the sound of my breathing would be too loud. The grunts kept coming and the occasional 'sorry'. I must have died a thousand deaths for every grunt I heard that Wednesday night.

My mind could not believe what my ears were hearing. They always called me a child, *omotete*. But I was also a child who read a lot and I knew from my books that New Daddy should only be doing to Mama what he was doing to Ada! *Ewooo!*

After what seemed like forever, there were footsteps and then I heard our room door closing with the sound I knew was now crafted in my memories forever. Click. This time it was softer than it had been earlier that evening but it was unmistakable to my ears.

I laid still and pretended I was alone in the bed. My brain was busy revealing different things to my mind. I stayed that way for a long time and then the sniffles started coming. First quietly, then louder, until the side of the bed where me and Ada kept our heads without pillows started to feel damp. Suddenly I couldn't take it anymore, I needed all the sounds to stop!

The click. The grunts. And now these sniffles. I needed the now familiar silence of the house. I preferred it to even the softest of sounds.

I turned on the bed, angry.

"Ada," I called, "Why? How? Please, tell me!"

I was sure the plea in my eyes was as sharp as the torch the police pointed every evening at the market junction when stopping everyone including Mama for change. I was not sure Ada would answer me.

She took a pause and then looked at me, her usual brown bright eyes now red like the eyes of the men in our neighbourhood when they had smoked a heavy dose of the leaf New Daddy called marijuana. She looked much older than the beautiful sister I knew who turned 14 two months ago.



After a while she replied, “I do it because I’m made for it. This is what I am made for. New Daddy told me so. You hear?... and... and... if I don’t do it, we will have nowhere else to stay. Mama cannot take care of us. Grand-Mama is already sick so I’m helping take care of her too. Mama can also now be respected as a married woman. I don’t like people talking to her anyhow as they did after Papa’s death. Or you prefer our old life?” It was like she was reading a script for me.

I don’t know if it was because of her simple words or the quiet, peaceful way she spoke them, or something else I didn’t understand yet that night. My eyes stopped seeing Ada clearly because tears formed a shade in them. I remained there, looking and yet not seeing my beautiful sister.

My mind was trying to see more clearly, everything my eyes wanted to deny. Why was Mama drunk almost every night? Is that why New Daddy chose Ada? Should Ada drink to stop this? Will he then come to me? Did Grand-Mama know? Can we chase New Daddy and keep the new house or do we have to go back to our old life with flaming kerosene and dirty rice?

There were a thousand questions on my mind, and looking at Ada’s peaceful face I thought: if I died a thousand times just hearing New Daddy grunt like a pig on top of her, she must be dying one million deaths to give us this life! Can the big city lawyers, the ones they call humanitarians, help?

As I sat there, I got another revelation. I knew, whether the lawyers helped or not, I was going to be a big, big lawyer. One that would help Ada, Grand-Mama and Mama kick New Daddy out, and keep this new house and new life.

My tears fell harder. I reached out to touch her face and we hugged closely, rubbing faces. Our tears combined to form small rivers down our faces, before dropping down, breaking up into tiny, thousand pieces, on the new floor, in our new house to which New Daddy brought us to live a new life.

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GLOSSARY

<i>Aproko</i>	Gossip
<i>Adire, Osebagbaniku</i>	Ethnic fabrics/wrappers in Yoruba and Urhobo cultures, respectively
<i>Ewoo!</i>	An exclamation of intense surprise/disbelief
<i>Iyibo</i>	English language in Urhobo language
<i>Oyibo</i>	A Caucasian/light-skinned person
<i>Wahala</i>	Trouble/complication