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FLASH STORIES**Ngozi Ezenwa-Ohaeto****Detached**

Nkili's husband died after 15 years of their marriage. She was just 39 years old. Her husband left her with five young children without any meaningful thing for the upkeep of family. Before his demise, her husband worked as an assistant head of the filling department in the state ministry of the complaint commission. At his death, her husband's account was almost in red. There was nothing to reckon with in the account. That was the first hit Nkili had. The little money Nkili received as his death benefit was spent on off-setting debts she accumulated to give her husband a befitting burial ceremony. Nothing was left afterwards. The eldest of Nkili's children was just 14 years old and in junior secondary class. The rest were in various classes in the primary school. They need to go back to school after their father's burial and that entails money. Nkili was devastated, heartbroken, confused and almost helpless if not for the meager salary she earned as a secondary school teacher.

"I will device a means of going about this so that my children won't drop out of school", she thought to herself.

"So, I'm now a widow"? She laments hitting her chest in a very sorrowful manner as if to hit home the reality. She broke down.

Nkili never thought in her wildest imagination that widowhood would knock at her door and enter her house that early with that COURAGIOUS AND UNMERRITED audacity. Not at her age. Not at the early stage of her marriage. In her quiet moments she found herself lamenting over the numerous uncertainties staring at her. Sometimes, she found herself raising solitary requiem for her husband. Sometimes too her lamentations become so devastating:

"What will I do, Chinedu"? "Chinedu, tell me who to run to for support in this harsh economy for the training of your children"?

"How do you expect me to single-handedly raise these children with the meager salary I earn as a secondary school teacher"? "How will the house rent and PHCN bills be taken care of, Chinedu"? Tell me Chinedu. Tell me.

She kept asking her late husband facing the blank white ceiling above her as if her husband is up there. Often she cried herself to exhaustion and fell sleep.

On the sixth year of her bereavement, Nkili's received a phone call from the village informing her that the roof of their family house has caved in. The house had given signs of collapsing before then. In fact, Nkili knew that it was a question of time. She had drawn the attention of the brother-in-law to it but he didn't seem to care. This was in addition to the already decaying window frames through which plant creepers, reptiles and scorpions find their ways into the house. It seemed everything in the house were in some kind of putrid agreement. Everything was decaying and the putrid odour hanging in the air was nauseating. It seemed all the rats in that village decided to gather in the house and commit mass suicide. The odour exuding from the dead rats' bodies was suffocating. Nkili could not contain the odour anymore. She ran outside.

"Everything in this world are in agreement to torment Nkili, I'm sure", Nkili lamented loudly and broke down crying.

Back to her base at the city, she ran to her principal, Mrs Ucheadi, and narrated her ordeal to her. Her principal is a widow too and understands clearly what Nkili is going through at the moment. Immediately she entered Mrs Ucheadi's office, Nkili broke down in tears. It was as if she has been waiting for this moment to off load the heaviness she feels in her head on Mrs Ucheadi. Mrs Ucheadi ran to her and held her and allowed her to let out the built up emotion and frustration.

"Don't worry Nkili, it shall be well", Mrs Nkoli consoled her as she patted her on the shoulder.

"I feel the world is collapsing on me ma "Nkoli said in between sobs".

"That's how it feels, Nkili, but trust me, it shall gradually ease off only if you don't kill yourself with cries before then. You should learn to take it easy okay", Mrs Ucheadi admonished her.

"What if there is any reason that could make me not to pay house rent any longer, I will have no place to take my children to", she told her principal in mist of tears that blurred her view. The tears fell to her cheeks.

She allowed them to flow freely as if that will flush away her present predicament. She hoped it would. Her principal consoled her and encouraged her to take a loan from the teachers' cooperative society and pay back gradually. That was what Nkili actually did and that was how she also renovated the roof of her house that collapsed in the village. There were some left-over roofing sheets after the reroofing of the house.

“Instead of selling them, I think it would be good to use them to repair the dilapidated roof of the kindred house, the ‘Obi’, that stands in our compound. At least, it will give it some facelift”, Nkili thought to herself.

She went straight to the oldest man of the kindred, Ichie Uwanatu, to express her intention. Chief Uwanatu was very happy that Nkili could think of contributing to community development not minding the numerous problems she was facing as a young widow. He gave Nkili his blessings and thanked her for the noble thought. Nkili then instructed her roofers to go ahead to work on the roof of the ‘Obi’ with the left-over roofing sheets before going back to the city.

She had barely arrived the city, her base, when her mobile phone started ringing. It was a foreign number. Nkili wondered who the foreign caller could be. She instantly did a quick mental scanning of all her friends and relations to know who the caller could be but arrived at nobody. She picked the call any way.

“Hello”, she answered.

“Is this Nkili, the wife of my late cousin Uzoma?” The unfamiliar voice asked.

“Yes, it’s me”, Nkili replied. “Who is on the line please? Nkili enquired.

“I am Chief Odinambu, calling you from America”. The voice said without any emotion attached.

“Oh, Chief, good evening sir”.

Uzoma had mentioned a cousin of his who lives in America to Nkili when he was telling Nkili the family history but Nkili never met Chief Odinambu. This phone call was the first time Chief Odinambu had ever called Nkili on phone. Not even the death of his cousin, Nkili’s husband, was a good reason to call her, not before or after the burial ceremony to condole her at her loss or ask about the children his cousin left behind.

Before Nkili could start expressing pleasantries, the voice asked again in a very calm but intimidating hostile voice;

“I heard that you are planning to re-roof the ‘Obi’. Nkili sensed the unfriendliness in the voice and remained calm at her end. She did not respond to the question, as she listened carefully to what may come next.

“Does a woman build ‘Obi’ where you come from? Nkili continued listening.

“Have you forgotten that you are a married woman, nwanyi alu alu for that matter. Nkili observed the stress Chief laid on the “nwanyi alu

alu” to draw home the point that Nkili was a visitor of a sort in the kindred.

“Your husband is dead and you are now a widow and should therefore be very careful how you carry yourself around”, Chief continued thundering from his end while Nkili continued listening.

“It’s not long your husband died and you’re already parading yourself around and challenging the men with money you got from sleeping around. If you know what is good for yourself and your children, do not ever get close to that ‘Obi’ again for whatever stupid reason you may have or get ready for the dance you are about to beat for yourself”, Chief Odinambu warned and switched off the phone at his end.

To Nkili, Chief Odinmabu’s outburst was like a fart expelled into the thin air that put the wandering house fly in a state of dizzy confusion trying to trace the source of it all. She sat down slowly on the sofa in her living room still holding the phone and looking at it as if the phone is Chief Odinambu as she tried to decipher the meaning to Chief Odinambu’s reaction to what she thought should make people happy.

“What wrong have I done now”, Nkili asked herself, still staring at the handset on her palm in utter bewilderment.

“A woman?” “A widow”, “sleeping around?”

“Yes, I know I’m a woman and a widow and understand what go with them in this village but sleeping around? “What have my children got to do with this? Why also threaten them?” “Sleeping around?”

Nkili found herself repeating all that Chief told her. She could not fathom anything from the whole baseless accusations as she continued to stare at the phone as if it could answer for chief Odinambu. She felt sudden weakness run through her body. She could feel some mental crippling which glued her to the sofa as emotion gradually built up in her head and overcame her with tears that freely dropped on her cheeks and flowed down to her blouse. She allowed them to flow as if they would wash away her sorrow. She cried herself to sleep as she often did in situations that remind her of her present predicament. This one was weightier.

Shattered

I am not married. In fact, I have passed the age of having children but not actually unmarriageable. I have a good job that takes care of me, my parents and my six other siblings. Call me the bread winner of my family and you won't be wrong because, practically, that is what I am. Our parents are both retired civil servants and they have not received their pension six years into our father's retirement and two years since mama retired. The state government they dedicated their productive years serving refused to pay them. The government rather keeps giving excuses and refers to them as dead woods that have out spent their usefulness to the society. My parents' pensions remained unpaid as a result.

My parents married late and gave birth to us late too. That explained why I was still in secondary school when they retired. I am their first child and my siblings are all boys. Luckily, I secured a job in an oil company after my university education and expectedly took over the training of all my siblings up to universities level. They are all graduates now and I'm so proud to be a big sister to all of them.

After their graduation, I decided to build a befitting house for my parents, a more modern house that can comfortably accommodate us all better than the two bedroom apartment my father built during his active days in service. I learnt he built it with a loan which took him almost fifteen years paying back. I plan to build a five bedroom house. My father, particularly, was very happy for that. He supervised the building ensuring that the workers did not make silly mistakes as they often do in most houses.

Once in a while, I travel home to see things for myself.

"Agu nwanyi", lioness, my father proudly extoled me. He continued;
"Anybody who says that women are worthless should come and see my daughter doing things most men could not do". "Ada agu yiri agu", the baby lion that behaves like its mother, he praised me and my mother hugged me with deep appreciation, as she proclaimed, "Nwanyi bukwanu ife", woman is equally useful, as she danced round the house turning her proclamation into song.

This happened often. But I was aware that mama and papa were worried that I was not yet married. Mama particularly was more concerned. She invited me one night in the room she shared with papa on one of the days I came visiting. I sensed that marriage would be the topic again. When I came in, papa was sitting on a small stool facing their almost damaged bed with unmistakable tell tale of age. I always quietly nursed the fear that the legs of the stool might give way one day while papa was sitting on it but the stool seemed resilient exhuming dignity in faithfulness to papa. It had kept faith with papa's persistent use of it. I have never seen mama sit on it. Mama sat

on the weak mattress facing papa. The two, mama and papa obviously looked worried.

“My daughter”, mama started. “I and your father are very happy on your achievements. We are happier because you are doing what most men in this village have found very difficult to do. You have ‘killed’ our fears concerning your siblings’ education and upon that, you are giving us a decent house. Only God will bless you my child. God will give you a good husband and good children”. “Amen”, I and papa chorused together.

“Ehm, nwam”, my child, Papa continued from where mama stopped as if they were rehearsing a script.

“It is true that you’ve done so well and done us proud and we are very happy about that but there’s something I and your mother have been worried about all these years.

We discussed it with you last year and you said what you said. We have waited since then and we have decided to talk with you again on it”, he paused a little to gather some breath.

“Nwam, my child, is it that the clipper is blunt or that the barber lacks expertise in the art of barbing”? He asked me looking straight into my eyes, though I didn’t know whether he expected me to respond to that. But he continued;

“We know that womanhood can be compared to the life of flowers. Flowers blossom in morning and become very beautiful and many people pluck them. Even insects perch on them sucking their juices. But in the evening, the same beautiful flowers will lose their blossomness and look like over exposed vegetables at sunset. Nobody likes plucking tired flowers and no insect perches on them my child”. I believe you understand my analogy because you are intelligent and educated as well.

“Our thinking is that time is running against you my daughter. In our tradition, if a woman is not married...”,

“she has no dignity no matter her achievements”, I cut in and completed the sentence for him. “Yes papa, you have told me that a number of times but will I force myself on men or will I manufacture a husband so that I can satisfy our tradition’s expectation? “ Look, mama, papa, I cannot force men to marry me. You know the problem I have. It is not that men don’t approach me or that I don’t possess what it takes to attract men. They do come to me but once they

discover that I am the family bread winner and that I have brothers I train in the university, they come up with excuse, they disappear and the relationship dies. I have experienced that often and have come to terms with that. My conclusion is that I may not get married after all". "You see, mama, papa", I continued looking them straight to their eyes while I talk. "I understand how you feel about the situation but I want you to understand that training my brothers up to university level is upper most in my mind. By God's grace, I have been able to accomplish that and they will get established, get married themselves and give you grandchildren. If you ask me I will tell you that I am fulfilled and happy and that's what matters most to me. It's not that I don't want to get married but what if eventually I don't, will I kill myself?,"

"God forbid", mama said almost immediately, snapping her fingers and circling her hand over her head believing she had snapped off the bad omen

"If I don't get married eventually", I continued, "that will not destroy my happiness and joy mama. Papa, it will not make me half a human being, it will destroy my dignity because my dignity lies within me, not in what our culture expects of me with all the inhuman boulders it littered on the way for women making the attainment of that difficult for them in most cases . If I don't get married eventually, it will not stop you from having grandchildren and you know it. So please, stop worrying over me, just be happy and pray for me to continue living happily".

After that discussion with mama and papa, I felt some relief because I know they will not call me for another meeting on the matter. It was the longest discussion I had ever had with two of them.

As if they were waiting for the completion of the house, my parents died in quick succession. In fact, they died within two years interval of the other's death. My father died first. It was a very painful experience but I was happy they did not die miserable. They died knowing that whatever happens, they have somebody who can ensure that the family they left behind will not suffer. Soon after, my brothers got meaningfully engaged. Some got jobs while some went into private practices and businesses. It was a big relief for me. They also got married and had children.

It was during Christmas break. We used to be home for the celebration and this time the house was fool with my nieces and nephews playfully running round the compound. They seem not to get tired of playing. It was a happy time or so I thought until one night. I came out to ease myself when I stumbled

on my brothers in the living room talking in hushed voices, almost whispering. I was alarmed.

“Is anything wrong”? “What happened”? “Did anybody die”? I asked in quick succession without directing my questions to anybody in particular as my heart raced so fast I had to hold it with my two hands in anticipation for any bad news.

I nearly wet myself. All this time, I was looking at their faces one after the other in search of answers to my questions but they all kept quiet. Some bent their heads down looking on the floor. It was like many hours of torture when suddenly, my immediate younger brother, Ken, spoke up;

“Ehmm, sister, it’s nothing, just go to bed, it’s nothing actually”, he muttered almost incoherently.

At that point, he looked like a child caught with his/her hands right inside his/her mother’s soup pot in search of what s/he alone knows.

“You mean ‘nothing’ kept all of you awake at this time talking in low tones as if you’ve all lost your voices”? I queried him, looking straight into his eyes.

“Yes, it’s nothing sister. Just go and sleep”, he said. “It’s alright. I will go back to sleep”.

I left them but I could not sleep that night again. My mind started a kind of summer sault I have never experienced in my life before now. What I did not think of is any calamity that my mind could not conjure up. It was that night that I understood in practical terms what Shakespeare meant when he said that Macbeth has murdered sleep and slept no more. That night, my brothers murdered my sleep and my eye lids could not blink again till dawn.

It was almost one year after that awful night that I learnt that my brother, Ken, cleared a portion of our father’s land in readiness for a new house he planned to build on. I had to travel to his base in another city to confirm the news.

“Yes, I want to build a house there”, he said. “That is very good news” I affirmed.

“But is it proper that I got to know about this as rumour from outsiders”, I continued. “Oh, well sister, I think you need to know this now. He drew up two seats and offered me one.

“I and my brothers came together last Christmas and shared our father’s property among ourseves so that any one of us who intends to do anything can go ahead without further delay since we are all family men now”, he told me as a matter of fact.

“What!” I muttered almost inaudibly.

“Ken, do you mean you all came together, deliberated and decided to share our father’s property without breathing an air of it to me”? I asked him in total consternation. He nodded his head in response and continued;

“We did not consider it necessary to disturb you with men’s affairs since you are not entitled to any of those”, he explained.

“I am not entitled to any of them, that’s what our culture stipulated. According to our culture, women do not benefit from land because they are expected to be in their husband’s houses”, Ken stated.

At that point, I needed to sit down to be well positioned while receiving the bombshell from my own brother who I trained through school and built house for.

“Ken, did I hear you well”? I asked him in utter disbelief while our brothers; Ebuka, Chike, Micheal, Ndubuisi and Onyema watch us while Ken played out their decision.

“Did you say culture, Ken”? I asked him in a voice so low I could hardly hear myself.

“Please, where was culture when I, a woman labored for years to train all of you through university education”?

“Where was culture when I built a house for our family and gave our parents befitting burial, Ken?” Ken Answer me.

By the way, What about the house in that house”? I asked again without waiting for his reply to the first questions.

“The house”? He asked as if he didn’t hear my question.

“Ehmm, we shared the rooms amongst ourselves too”.

“Is there anything wrong with that, sister”? Micheal came to Ken’s rescue when it seemed obvious he was losing his voice.

“Do you mean, Ken, Mich, you also shared the rooms of the house I built with my hard earned money without even the courtesy of informing me? You must have also shared the furniture, kitchen utensils and my room too”? I muttered to myself in total anger, burning frustration and disappointment.

I turned to leave his house and suddenly, I was enveloped in some kind of dark cloud. My legs could not carry me any longer. What happened next, I could not tell. I woke up the next morning in a hospital bed with bandaged head. I never recovered from the shock.

Dislocated

Mine was a family of men. I have four brothers-in-law and a sister-in-law who had got married long before I married my husband. Outside my children who, co-incidentally, happened to be all boys, four of them, the rest are full grown men. Some married, some potential husbands. My late husband was a medical doctor but at the same time a practical traditional man. He believed in communal life not minding the economic and emotional weight that go with it especially on me who must not make my in-laws feel that I put a divide on whatever that hold them together as one family. Being the eldest of them all, he saw himself as the father of the rest even though they are all married and have the family of their own, he still played the father role.

As the wife of the first son, I also became the mother of all. Our family was the point of rendezvous for all. Open for all at all times including my sister-in-law who visits at any time without notice. Not that I begrudge them of their filial affinity but it was never easy for me. I adjusted with time. This continued long after my husband's demise.

My story began the year my sister-in-law was diagnosed of esophageal cancer. It was a terminal one. My sister-in-law was a widow. Her husband died fifteen years into their marriage. It was a childless marriage but she was a business mogul with branches in most capital cities of our country. Haven been prepared by my husband for all kinds of mother role, I convinced my sister-in-law to relocate to our house to make it easy for me to take care of her. After her first surgery which was very successful, she went back to her business. Few months later, she suffered a relapse and we were back to square one if not zero. This time around, her condition became terrible. We had nights of groans, of bleeding and vomiting, some times of rushing to hospitals. It was a period of uncertainties and of trauma both for two of us and the nanny I hired to help out.

All this while, my brothers-in-law only visited at their convenience or call on phone. It continued, I mean my sister-in-law's condition till one afternoon. We were rushing her to the hospital as usual when she gave up the ghost.

After the burial, my brothers-in-law gathered and shared everything their sister had among themselves. I mean everything. None of them cared to ask about that person who nursed their sister till death. Nobody remembered that somebody sacrificed time, energy, resources and even risked her lives for their sister. Nobody asked me any question simply because I'm a woman. I was considered an outsider in my own husband's family where I gave my all for the good of all.

Shattered Destinies

My school was a village school sited right inside a clearing and surrounded by scanty forest. It has no fence. I was in primary four then though I knew I was much older to be in that class. I started primary school at the age of twelve when my parents had confidence that I could walk the distance. I happened to be one of the lucky girls who were allowed to go the school in our village, Gwaba. Our people still believed that it was no use sending girls to school. They believed that girls should stay in their husbands' houses and have children and take care of their husbands. Because of this belief, most parents did not send their girl-children to school but I was lucky to convince my father. I promised him that after my primary education I will get married even though I did not understand what marriage was all about. Why I wanted to go to school was because I wanted to be a nurse.

I used to admire nurses and their white uniform and I kept imagining myself wearing the uniform but I never told my father why I wanted to go to school. It was my personal secret.

One hot afternoon, after school, school children were going back home, some chatting while some played in groups. The sun was at its peak, standing almost over everyone's head. It seemed to have swallowed up our shadows and put them under our feet so we could step on them as we walk. It used to be fun walking home in groups after school chatting with my school mates. But this afternoon was different. It seemed the sun was out to punish some of us that go to school bare footed. The scourge of the sun was so much on our feet. It felt like it went for a baking training, came out from the oven at that very moment that school closed, and was eager to practice the skill of sand-baking it had just acquired. It was not easy walking barefooted on the sun-baked sand as I and my two friends, Hawa and Zainab were chatting unmindful of any lurking danger anywhere near us.

"This sun wants to kill us", Zainab interrupted our chat.

"I can hardly put my feet down", she continued.

"I will beg my father to buy, at least, a pair of slippers for me" Hawa added.

I did not contribute to that discussion. What was going on in my mind was what my father would say if I dare make such a request. My mother will surely be at the receiving end of his anger for sending me to school that will eventually be of no use to anybody other than incurring additional expenses for the family.

"I want to be a nurse", I heard myself say, "You said what?",

Hawa and Zaynab asked me almost at the same time.

As if in answer to their question, some boys, I think I counted five of them in that swift but chaotic moment that heralded their sudden appearance from nowhere. They charged towards us as swift as they

appeared. At a point it became obvious that they were after the girls alone. They caught up with about four of the grown up girls and carried us inside the bush. I could not identify the other girls the boys caught because my face was covered with a cloth but I could identify Hawa and Zainabs' mumbling voices as they struggled to free themselves and I sensed that their mouths were also covered with cloth. When we arrived at a point in the bush they put us down with my face still covered and I believe the other girls' faces were covered too.

"What do you think you go to school to do?" one hoarse voice asked but none of us could open our mouths. We were terribly afraid.

"After today", the voice continued, "you will never think of school again".

"No they won't try it again" said another voice in a rather surprising cool and relaxed tone as if he was not part of the kidnap.

And we were all roughly and crudely raped repeatedly still blindfolded.

At about 5.30am, we were led to the road, with our faces still covered. The same first voice spoke again now in a commanding tone, "When you hear a whistle you can run home".

I nodded. I didn't know how the other girls responded to the command. In about ten minutes a loud whistle sounded from inside the thick bush. At first we could not move. It seemed our legs were glued to the ground but somehow, we started trotting and later broke into run, blindly. I was the first to try loosening the cloth used to blind-fold me and noticed that it was not still day break but I was able to note that we were four of us. One of the girls was bleeding seriously. Blood was flowing freely down her legs. It was a bad sight. I helped the rest to untie the cloths over their faces. It was then I first noticed some dark caked blood on my own leg. I looked at other two girls and noticed the same. We could only look at ourselves in pity. None could muster energy to cry because we were exhausted from the all night trauma we experienced.

That was how four of us stopped going to school. By the evening of that day, the story was everywhere in Gwaba. I could not step out of our house to face people that have gathered in our house in fact finding mission. My father particularly was furious with my mother and I for convincing him into allowing me go to school in the first instance. He blamed my mother the most for not training me well.

"If you had trained your daughter well, she would have understood why girls are not meant for school, and that it is always dangerous for girls out there. Now tell me who will marry a desecrated girl"

He was beside himself with sorrow and my mother was obviously down cast. Soon I became ill. The illness used to come in the morning with nausea and vomiting and I lost appetite. The urge to throw up often woke me up from sleep. My mother noticed it first. I saw fear on her face as she looked worried.

“What is wrong with me mother” I asked her one morning after another round of throwing up. It was becoming daily occurrence. She asked me to sit down beside her.

“Amina”, she called my name in a voice that lacked any strength. “It seems you are pregnant”.

“Pregnant?” “How mother, why am I pregnant?” “Is it because of what those boys did to us”? Mother nodded in response. I started crying. Mother held my hands passionately and said,

“Don’t worry Amina, It is not your fault. I will take care of you Ok”, she reassured me.

It took mother two weeks from the day she noticed my condition to muster enough courage before she could break the news to my father. Father did not say or do anything in response as if he knew it would come to that. He never looked me in the face since mother told her about it. He kept avoiding sitting with me or discussing anything with me. He maintained his distance till the end of the pregnancy as if I had a plague .

Nine months on, I was delivered of two bouncing baby boys, twins. My mother was very happy that I had a safe delivery. She tried to make me feel comfortable and happy at home and provided anything I needed that was within her reach. My father’s attitude towards me after my delivery was that of aloofness. He seemed not be bothered but I knew that he was sad over my pregnancy and the outcome of it. On my own, I kept wondering who the father of the innocent babies were. I may never know him, or could it be them since I was raped by three men that unforgettable night? This is the burden that will go with me to my grave. My babies? Only God knows what their fate would be in a village like ours where children of unidentified fathers are stigmatized and tagged bastards and their mothers as whores.