

Family By Kanyinsola Olorunnisola

When my cousin, Ifeoluwa was wheeled away to prison for the third time, my father refused to bail him out. It was a Thursday evening, one of those weekdays when my father's epileptic determination to trim down his beer belly got him into his all-white gym costume. He was standing before the television in the sitting room, jogging on the spot as if he had to watch the news and brace himself for the treadmill at the gym just a ten-minute drive away at the same time. I watched from the dining table, bemused. The figure of this rotund man, with a severely protuberating belly, lifting his body up labouriously in attempted show of athleticism was surely a cause of the urge to laugh. For a moment, I was not sure if the deafening sound I heard was my father tripping against the chord with which I had connected the television to the DSTV or some stainless plates crashing down in the kitchen from the plate rack. But I could still hear my father's feet pounding on the ground and he did not hiss and say "careless girl, she will not arrange the plates very well," referring to Bose the house girl. So I knew it was neither of the two. My momentary detective act was cut short when the metal door that separated the living room from the compound opened and I realised that someone had been knocking. Three uniformed men walked in with stern faces. They were cops – or police men as my father would be quick to correct. "Don't let that American nonsense they call their brand of English cripple your common sense," he had once said to me. The police men asked for my cousin and told us he was under arrest for robbery. Their stiff quick-worded demeanour seemed repeatedly rehearsed. My father's jaw dropped in shock and I was confused – not with the police men, but with my father's curious reaction. He was not supposed to be surprised. No one was supposed to be. Even the police men looked familiar. One of them, the tall particularly shy one who weakly masked his nervousness behind a "tough man" face looked like one of the sergeants I had seen when we first bailed Ifeoluwa out of prison three years ago. It was not his first time being arrested, as I earlier stated.

The first time, he had been involved in a street brawl. Celebrating his admission to University Of Ibadan, he had taken my father's new Jeep out to a club with a couple of friends. But not before bribing me with a strawberry cup cake from Sisi Bimbo's shop down the road just to keep my mouth shut about it of course. But when father came back home unusually later from the studio at night, Ifeoluwa was yet to return. I ran out of lies to tell and I am not sure if it was because the after-taste of the cup-cakes had worn off my tongue, but I just spat out the truth. My father was furious. I had never seen him furious at Ifeoluwa. Maybe at the barber whenever he mistakenly cut his beard too short, or at the driver whenever he ran a red light, or at an employee at his news broadcasting company for dressing "too American-ish" or even at me for not greeting him with my hands perfectly stretched out on the ground. But never at Ifeoluwa. Up till then, they had maintained a perfect "tip-toe" relationship, in which Ifeoluwa tried to shut himself into oblivion whenever my father was around except to greet him, polish his shoes, help him change the TV channel and occasionally, exchange very brief words with him on the same topics: school, health and sports. The latter was a lame attempt by my father to pretend their relationship was more free and casual than it really was. Their conversation was so monotonous over the years that I could predict what each person would say next to the other. Perhaps, Ifeoluwa was trying to compensate for his own father's failures. By dying in a fatal car crash with his wife, Ifeoluwa's father had burdened my father with the responsibility of raising both me and Ifeoluwa all alone. My father had paid his school fees, clothed him and fed him for fourteen years. That was perhaps what Ifeoluwa was trying to ensure continued by keeping his relations with my father very minimal and therefore, bringing about reduced fight. But I thought that would end that night, with my father flaring up and swearing he would kill Ifeoluwa when he came back home. But we got a phone call soon enough, informing us that he had been in an unconventional street fight. Apparently, he had smashed the lights of a carefully-parked car near the bar. The owner turned out to be a rich twenty-something-year old guy who walked majestically, flanked by huge bodyguards. They had attacked him but according to the police report, he put up a good fight. So good was he that it turned to a huge street affair. I imagined my tall cousin holding his own against Spartan-looking men, like he childishly did when as kids, ironically triggered by the WWE's bold message: DO NOT TRY THIS AT HOME, we would carelessly recreate scenes from the wrestling shows we had seen on TV. We often channelled our inner Triple Hs and Hulk Hogans.

My father had paid his bail, saying he could not afford the tarnishing of his own image to go on longer. He had severely warned Ifeoluwa with twelve strokes of the cane. But that had no effect on him at all as he was arrested again the following week. This time, he had robbed the house of Prof Obinze, the eccentric Physics professor who kept a 1960s-themed 'afro' and walked about with calculated steps, muttering the law of thermodynamics to himself, ignoring other people as if he was recharging his mind and communication with the neighbours would get in the way of that. As children, Ifeoluwa and I would make jokes about him and try to guess what happened inside his house. He lived three blocks away. He was unmarried with no offsprings. I wondered if it was mere curiosity that dragged Ifeoluwa into breaking into Prof Obinze's house. With his friend and course mate Bogun, they stole the professor's TV and shoes. My father threw punches at him when we reached the police station. One of the policemen at the desk shook his head and said, "see how you've made your father so angry and said, Ifeoluwa." He shook his head. "What is the meaning of your name? God's love? Are you reflecting God's love?"

"God's will," he snapped. "The translation is God's will and this man is not my father. He is my uncle."

I could not believe my ears. Ifeoluwa had never said the words "not my father" in reference to him at all. His tone seemed to bear a sign of finality – an end to their carefully-kept relationship. I gasped for air and staggered back but my father looked oddly calm. It was like the infuriating words just melted his anger. He was silent, watching Ifeoluwa intently with the eyes of a laboratory scientist observing a specimen which was finally exhibiting expected but unwanted signs. He paid the bail and we drove back home in silence. Total silence. For some reason, my father was trying to pretend it never happened. It must have been eating him up inside because the next day, he went into the kitchen and broke all the ceramic plates and glass cups. He barged out of the house and did not come back until the following night. Ifeoluwa could not care less and I found myself being the one tip-toeing around my father. I did not want to be the one upsetting him. Even when I got my SSS2 final exams result, I did not show my father out of fear he would tear it apart before reading it and would then tell me to get out of his sight. I felt guilty. It might have been because I somehow felt responsible for my cousin's actions or the resurrection of the numbed guilt I had been feeling for years for killing my mother at childbirth.

While on campus, Ifeoluwa descended into a lifestyle characterised by drugs, alcohol and addictive partying. He often told me about it whenever he came back for the holiday. He seemed proud of his new rogue personality. I wanted to be angry with him, to feel the urge to rip his head open and scream at him, "You disrespect my father! He pays your school fee and gives you monthly allowances, you ingrate! Show him some respect!" But I was slightly happy for him. He was now a freer person, being himself openly. But after the third arrest, I now feared he would never get to do anything openly anymore. In fact, I feared he would be holed up in a tiny cell forever since my father was now refusing to bail him out. He had stolen from a friend who lived off-campus. He no longer needed Bogun's expert guidance. He took on this operation on his own. According to the police, he had unhinged the door and packed a laptop, a pile of textbooks, two phones and a music box. But someone had silently witnessed this theft. My father stood in front of the policemen, jaw dropped, in his all-white gym wear. I stood up from the dinning table and called out for Ifeoluwa. He walked out lazily. His tall lean body, chapped black lips and blood-shot eyes created the appearance of a substance abuser, which he was. He was still in his boxer shorts. He had been sleeping. He stretched loudly and unashamedly until he saw the men in black uniform. He seems dazed. He looked around for an escape route but the police men got him before he could count to five. He was dragged to the station but we did not follow. My father said he would not go see him and forbade me from going. I promised I would not go. After all, my father had the final say.

I went three days later. While my father went to work, I sneaked out and visited Ifeoluwa in prison. He looked surprised to see me alone. He was grossly leaner than I remembered. It had just been three days. I wondered if there was a fat-sucking insect in prison. As if he could hear my thoughts, he laughed and said, "You should see this Tade guy they just brought in yesterday. He was like Big Show when he came in. Now, he's like Wiz Khalifa."

"So, how do you think you're getting out of here?"

“Me I don’t even care. I’m enjoying life here.”

“How can you say such a thing? You’re in a prison with bulky bullies and you’re eating rotten food.”

“Cousin, you watch too many movies. Prison isn’t really like that, you know.”

“Cousin? You’ve never called me that,” I was finally breaking. “It’s like a screw has turned loose in your head. Those drugs have changed you. You now call my father your uncle and now I’m no more your bro. It’s ‘Cousin’ now? You might as well leave our house forever. Father pays your school fees, gives you pocket money and everything you need. Yet you are quick to point out that he isn’t your real father. You’re a real ingrate!”

He was dumbfounded. He looked at me twice as if searching for a proof that he had been hallucinating. I expected him to reach out to slap me but he was very quiet. He then stood up and walked towards his cell, accompanied by the tall shy policeman.

I walked home feeling light-headed. My father was waiting at the door. He was still in his *agbada* or boubou attire. As I walked past the gate, he called me towards him. I walked quickly before him with a confidence that startled me so much that I was unnerved. But it seemed I was divided into two distinctive personalities: a gentle one with common sense and the confident one with devil-daring audacity. The latter was taking over.

“I went to see Ifeoluwa. And so what? I’m not denying it. He’s my brother.”

“No, he’s not,” my father said with a loud voice. “He has made it clear that you do not share a father.”

“He’s your brother’s son. You gave him more trouble looking after you as a child than Ifeoluwa is giving you now. The least you could do is bail his son out of trouble.”

I walked away before my father could rebuke me or hit me violently. I locked myself in my room and expected him to break down the door and drag me out for what he would call “a due flogging”. But he did not come home. I thought of my mother who I never met. I thought of my helpless wounded father. I thought of my childhood days with Ifeoluwa debating how much of Jet Li’s stunts were real. Then I cried myself to sleep. When I woke up the next day, I went to the sitting room to see Ifeoluwa beside my father. Both wordlessly watched the news. I immediately knew what had happened. If I felt a small triumph, my brain did not interpret it to me. I felt sick. We never spoke about it again. Not for years did we breathe a word about it. Ifeoluwa and I hardly spoke. Until he packed out of the house a few months after his university graduation, I hardly looked him in the eye. I did not hear from or about him again until I heard from his friend Bogun that he had been involved in a failed armed robbery attempt that led to a shoot-out with the police. He had joined his father and my mother. He is with his real family now, I guess.

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