



The Funeral

EMIEH JOY

PART 1

I looked around me conscious of people's eyes often darting towards my direction, this was accompanied by constant whispering mostly amongst the women. This people who claimed to be mourners that came to pay homage to my late mother were gossiping. I knew both the subject of the gossip and what the gossip was about. I was told three days ago that as the only daughter and first child I would have my hair cut for the funeral.

“Cut whose hair? I asked Nnenna. I never knew her before now. How would I when we rarely visited my step-father's village. From what I heard, she is the head of the kindred's women Association.

She gave me that look of rebuke you would give to a child constituting a nuisance. I too stared back with an equal look of defiance. She saw that her intimidating looks seemed not to work on me and decided to go the mellow way.

“My dear, this is the way it has always been in this village. When a parent dies, the females in that family are expected to have their hair cut as a mark of respect to the dead. When your father died, may his soul rest in peace, your mother had her hair cut. Maybe you were too young to remember but your own will not be different”. I didn't fail to notice the way she stretched the words ‘your father’ and rolled her eyes. I wouldn't blame her, after all the late chief was not my biological father.

“Mama, I don’t know what you are talking about but I am not having this my hair cut for some absurd reason. I don’t see how a hair cut portrays respect. Besides what does it matter? The dead is already dead and long gone. If my mother had her hair cut during her husband’s funeral, that is her choice. You don’t come here to impose such things on me”, I said choosing to use ‘her husband’ instead of ‘my father’.

“Shh”, she hushed me placing her index finger vertically on her lips in a bid to silence me. “Don’t say that again, in fact don’t let another ear hear what you are saying”.

I already knew I wouldn’t have that hair cut so I decided to save her the stress. I gave her a sly smile and dismissed her waving my head. It was a ‘No’ for me. It didn’t stop other women to come bugging me with the same issue. If she was the one sending them or they were doing that on their own accord, I didn’t know and didn’t bother to ask. Two days ago they came, yesterday too, they came.

“*Hapu m aka*. Leave me alone. I said I will not. If that means disrespect then so be it”, I said walking out on Mama Uche. I almost shouted at her. She was the last to come see me pertaining that issue till this morning. What really irked me was that each of these women seemed to come with one mission- to chastise me. None of them asked how we were faring, none except for Nneoma asked how the preparations for the funeral were going.

“Rubbish”, I muttered to myself when she left. Using my two hands, I rubbed my temple. I was exhausted. I haven’t rested all day. I looked at the wall clock hanging against the newly painted wall. It read 4:35 P.M I looked around me, the sitting room was a mess as people have been trooping in and out. I would have swept it but I had been busy monitoring what was going on in the kitchen. I could feel the slight head ache. I felt like crying, I wished there was a strong shoulder to cry on. I didn’t know if I should cry because of my mother whom I never shed a single tear for since I received the news of her death or because of the huge responsibilities I had been bearing on my shoulders right from childhood or because of the contempt shown by the villagers. Maybe one of these days I will have to let out the pent-up emotions. Just then chukwuebuka walked into the sitting room. There were four of us. I was the first and the only daughter. After me came Ifeanyi who I was four years older than. Chukwuebuka was the third. According to people he was the one that looked like our biological father. “His carbon-copy”, they would say. Mother confirmed that as well. Samuel the last borne was not around. We called him his English name not because he did not have a native name. He had one, a sweet name which I would even prefer to my name Nkechi but he forbade us from calling him that. It was his name only on his documents. He had just one reason, ‘Chinwendu’ according to him sounds so girlish, an adult like him therefore shouldn’t be addressed by the name. I wouldn’t blame him, it was mostly females that were given the name ‘Chinwendu’. We had to do

his bidding, instead of calling him by his native name, we fondly called him Sammy. Sammy had his nursing exams to write, coupled with the fact that his school was outside the country. The truth was that we didn't tell him about mother's demise. He would be mad when he finally gets to know but we wouldn't risk breaking the news to him at this crucial point in his life. He might want to come home and flying him in and out of the country might end up destabilizing him. He doesn't need the distraction now that his exams were at the corner or so we thought.

"The man that did the painting came not long ago. He said he has come to collect the remaining half of his money", Chukwuebuka said.

"What is even the problem with him. I told him even before he started the painting that we would pay up the remaining money after the funeral and he agreed. Why come now to pester someone's life?" I said looking up to him. He shrugged his shoulders.

"I explained things to him and he consented. He knows fully well that there is just one bank in this town and that is not my bank. I don't know how the whole town of Umuechina would be using just one bank and even the only automated machine there rarely pays. Imagine the small Uzodim town having four banks all to themselves. The royal highness is doing nothing about it, members of his cabinet are dormant, the town's people are nonchalant about it", I said shaking my head.

“I would have to go and tell him off. After tomorrow we would have to go to one of the banks at Uzodim and make some withdrawal so we can pay off this people and have our peace”.

“Wait, tell...” Before I could complete my sentence he was out of earshot. I wanted to tell him to tell Ifeanyi to put on the generator. Everywhere was so hot and there has been no power supply for the past days that we came home. “Too bad, I wonder how they cope with all these”, I muttered to myself. I made to stand up but I could still feel my head throbbing, I then decided to place my head on the cushion headrest. Before I knew it, I dozed off.

“*Onye oshi!* Thief! So Udeonu this is why you have been hovering around the kitchen all day?” the noise woke me up. The lights were on, obviously Ifeanyi had put on the generator. At first I couldn’t make out the direction of the noise. It didn’t take me long to figure out that it was coming from the kitchen. The raised voice of one of the women as she said, “You came to steal ordinary meat, *anu!*” confirmed that the noise indeed was from the kitchen. I immediately found my foot wear and made towards that direction. The scene I met at the kitchen was a pitiful scene of a haggard looking man being verbally abused by the women and being pushed from one corner to the other by some youths who seemed to have been on the verge of drinking themselves to stupor. It was the eve to the funeral, the wake-keep night. It was like a rite that on evenings like this, the young men keep up late drinking themselves to stupor amidst other activities

being done such as digging of the grave in readiness for the next day. This is not without music blaring in the background. Instead of using the kitchen in the main house, we decided to use a makeshift kitchen. It was made in the open compound with planks, bamboo and raffia palms. It was made this way so as to allow more air and also to permit the women that cooked to move in and out of the kitchen at will. It also gave us privacy to our own house. Since it was in the open, with the noise and various activities going on, ‘Udeonu’ decided to use the opportunity to steal his target. Unfortunately for him he was caught. Just like my people would say “*chi ya amughi anya*. On that day, his gods were not awake. Clasped in his hands was a large chunk of meat. Looking into his eyes which were red I could see hunger, shame and the battle for survival. Instinctly, I felt for the man.

“Please leave him. I pleaded with them. I am sure he didn’t intentionally do this”. At first they looked at me with shock. They gave me the look of someone that was not in her right sense. They then decided to ignore me and went back to what they were doing, dragging him, only that this time it got worst, they had started hitting him. I knew I had to do something else things would get out of hand. I had my phone with me. I immediately put a call across to Ifeanyi. He came with his friend Buchi and with little effort disentangled the man from the little crowd which was about to form a mob. I could have just dismissed him but I had him come into the main house, offered him a glass of water. At first he hesisted, “Don’t worry”, I said. “It’s

not poisoned. I couldn't have poisoned the whole water in the water dispenser just because of you".

He then collected the glass of water and quickly gulped it down. I could see him still suspiciously watching me from the corner of his eyes. Apparently, he was not at ease. Gently, he placed it on the side stool.

"Please don't hand me over to the police. I don't know what came over me", he was speaking too fast, the words sliding with ease out of his mouth. "I have a family to fend for. I do menial jobs. Where I went to work today, I was not paid. My wife has to cook soup today and expects that I buy meat for the soup. If I go home without the meat, she won't let me rest and I stand the chance of being starved for three days. *Nwanyi ahu siri ike*. That woman is tough". He said wiping sweat off his face. I still had my eyes fixed on his face, maybe that made him think his explanations' were not enough and so he went on...

"I promise I won't do this again, allow me go. This is just the devil's work".

"Here we go again" I said rolling my eyes. I decided I have had enough. How easy it is for us to call the devil at any provocation. I mean why not be specific about our problems? People steal. Why? Because of hunger, because there is poverty, because the state of the economy is bad, because people can't control themselves, because people are not contented with what they have, because people desire

to live lives they can't afford, because the people in seat of power don't care about the poor masses and because people have to survive and think that is the only choice they have. Do I even care what or who sent him to steal? No I don't and that wasn't why I called him in. I only wanted to help him in my own little way.

“Wait here”

I brought my purse, gave him a few wands of notes. “You can also have the meat”, I said pointing towards the tray on the table on which the meat he was about to steal was placed. He opened his mouth wide as if to shout but quickly recollected himself. He shut them and with obvious excitement stood and hugged me.

“*Daalu nne m.* thank you my daughter. God will bless you for me. All my life I have not come across such a good heart”. He collected the chunk of meat.

“ People will be saying evil against them but they are actually good people”, he soliloquized on his way out.

I smiled to myself, at his last statement. They don't like us, I knew it. It was written in the way they talked to us, in the way they looked at us, their body language said it. Why would they accept us? After all, we didn't have the same blood as their son. We only came from nowhere to squander their son's wealth and then ended up killing him thereby leaving ourselves with a large portion of his wealth. Unknown

to them, we had access to their son's wealth but we too were victims in our own way.

Looking through the crowd of villagers who came for the funeral, I searched faces. I didn't really know what exactly I was searching for but some part of me was curious to know if there were actually some people who were indeed mourning the loss, not just pretending to. Maybe five, perhaps ten genuine mourners. My mother might have done some terrible things as a mother but she wasn't that bad, at least not to other people. If I should say positive things about her, I would say she was a giver. Some say we all have that trait of helping people but I really wished she did more than that for us, for her children. There were wailings when the casket was brought in but then a lot of people these days put up the act of crying just to blend in with the current situation. One of the women cried so hard and threatened to jump into the grave dug for the corpse, it took two men to calm her down. According to her, my late mother was the only help she had in her times of need. Mama Nneka, I knew her. She had visited our house a few occasions to see mother, I never knew the reason for the visits just as I never knew the reasons for so many things that went on in that house in the past. I was not close to my mother none of us were except for Sammy who was some steps closer to her. If there was any amongst her children that would really miss her, it would be Sammy. I tried to get close and finally gave up trying.

Mama Amara cried but the next minute, I caught her dragging a parcel of food with the lady sitting near her. I looked at Ifeanyi and Chukwuebuka, their eyes were still red. They cried. Up until then, I haven't shed even a drop of tear. It was expected of me to cry, I knew but I just couldn't help it. It was not like I was suppressing the tears, the tears just refused to form let alone flow. I wanted to force it but then gave up. Who cares what the villagers think or say anyway? They will always talk even though they know nothing about the real story. Not even my brothers knew the real story. I mean they knew and experienced a part of the story but there was still that part to it they knew nothing about.

From my position I could almost see everything going on in the compound. The funeral service was over. Food was being served in disposable plates. Bottled drinks were also shared. This was the time you would see the women swing into action raising their voices as they dragged basins of food. Condolence visitors were trooping in.

"Ndo nu. It's a pity", Maazi Uka said dropping a brown envelope on my laps and turned to leave before I could even thank him.

"I sympathise with you and your family. Do take heart"

"God alone knows why it happened. He gave and he has taken"

So did they troop in and out. I felt the headache creeping in again and was already contemplating going indoors to rest my head, thank God it ended on a good note.

“You look really tired. Maybe it’s time to retire for the day. You have heard it enough. And by the way forgive my manners, I’m sorry about your loss. Accept my condolence. Your mum, I don’t really know her personally but if she has an amazing lady like you for a daughter then she must have been amazing herself”

I looked up to see the light skinned man towering over me. He spoke with an accent a little different from the one used around here. He wore a cologne that oozed wealth and the pair of shoes on his legs was surely not the type you would purchase in the local market. Whoever he was he surely didn’t grow up nor live in this village. The face wasn’t familiar. Who was he then? I then noticed he was smiling at me. Wait, was he ogling me in the middle of my late mother’s funeral? Maybe those that said I disrespect the dead by not having my hair cut should hear this. What impetus.

“I am Chijindu. Your late step-father’s nephew. Came back day before yesterday. You probably didn’t notice me yesterday but I did notice you. I Saw the manner with which you handled the awkward situation that night, I must commend you. I’m sorry though I wasn’t able to come introduce myself”. He said stretching forth his hands to help me to my feet as I was about to stand.

“Thank you Mr. Chijindu for the wonderful speech. Condolence accepted but I must add that I am perfectly fit to help myself to my feet”, I replied, shoving his hands aside as I stood to my feet.

“I’d prefer you use Chidi. I would be more comfortable with you calling me that”, he said, once again flashing those set of white teeth.

“Unfortunately your comfort is not my priority now”, I said looking him squarely in the face. The smile still didn’t wane. I slowly sidestepped him and walked into the house.

PART 2

The day following the funeral, I couldn't get up from the bed. I was so tired, my legs felt sore and my eyes were heavy. I just decide to give myself a little bed rest. I lay back in bed and reminisced on the events of the past days. Memories of my mother came with mixed feelings. I am yet to figure out why she did some of the things she did. Before she got married to Chief Ibe she was everything we wished for in a mother. But then after the marriage she changed drastically. She became a stranger that only offered us financial support.

Our father, my biological father was her first love. They were both young when they got married. I was the first issue of that union. Four years down the lane came my brother Ifeanyi, later Chukwuebuka and lastly Samuel. I was still very young then but not too young to know that we had the full love and attention of both parents. We were not so rich but atleast we had 3 square meals a day, we wore good clothes, we had a roof over our head and we went to school. If there were other things life had to offer aside from this basic things, I knew not then. I still have a picture of our medium sized bungalow. Painted yellow on the outside and a light green on the inside, this house had with it the good times. Entrapped in that house was the happy moments. The moments when my mother would bath us herself, make my hair, prepare us for school, tuck us in bed and tell us bed time stories. The days when my dad would teach us and help us with our school assignments, when he would feed us himself because mother

was tired. Mother and dad would stay up late in the night with any of us that fell sick, we pray together as a family with dad teaching me and Ifeanyi how to say ‘our Lord’s prayer’ and on Sundays we would go to church together. My dad was a jolly good fellow, he was a disciplined man himself but I wouldn’t say he was strict with us. He had our best interest at heart and would do anything within his power to protect us. Once he threatened to go and confront Ifeanyi’s teacher for spanking him. According to him, the red mark on Ifeanyi’s buttocks showed that the teacher was too hard on the little boy. It took pleas from my mother to dissuade him. But then everything was short-lived when he died. I was twelve years old then. I was broken by his death but then I witnessed my mother begin to wither. It seemed her whole world crumbled with his death. She wouldn’t eat, the house became a mess, she wouldn’t look at us, she cared less if we went to school or not. Her sister came to live with us but left a year after my dad’s burial. She got admission to study in a Polytechnic in their town and so she left. Within the period she was with us, I had to learn many things; to cook, to take care of my younger ones, to keep the house in order. It was tough on me but I knew I had to be strong for my family, for my younger ones, for myself. With time my mother started recovering or so I thought. She brightened up, started taking care of herself. I thought she would regain herself with time but unknown to me things would never be the same again. She was a secondary school teacher before my dad’s death but with his death she resigned. One year after, it became obvious that if nothing was done,

we would totally run out of finance. No one asked about our survival, my paternal uncles cared less. They were rather busy fighting each other over my dad's land, a land that does not belong to them. With my mother's partial recovery, she started looking for a job. She later found a job, working as a secretary in a consultancy firm. Mother became only conscious of herself and unconscious of other people around her. She would take her bath, eat, make herself up, look good, drop some money and then leave for work without asking how we were faring. If we were unkempt, that was not her business. She wouldn't carry little Sam unless he cries profusely, then she would carry him, buy him biscuit and then drop him on my laps and that was it. I hardly had time for myself as I was almost running everything in the house. She used to be the one to go to the market but later left that too for me. Once I was so tired of waking up early, making breakfast, sweeping and preparing my younger ones for school, I decided to stay in bed and know what her reaction would be. When it was time for her bath, she walked into our room, merely looked at me,

“You haven't prepared for school? You are very late today o, or is today public holiday?”

I did not respond. I continued staring at the ceiling.

“Anyway I will drop some money on the table. I don't know what you people will eat when you come back from school but the money should be enough for whatever it is”.

That was when I turned to look at her. she didn't meet my gaze. She silently walked out of the room. She didn't even bother to know if I was sick, who does that? I mean what kind of mother would treat her children with such disdain?

A year later she came back one day with a pot-bellied man and introduced him as his friend. Things changed a little with her. She became a little more warm towards us. At least she asked about what we ate and asked after Sammy. Her wardrobe changed as she stocked it up with new clothes, shoes and accessories. She left us more money than she used to. I knew she was up to something. She wasn't promoted at her place of work, where then was the extra money coming from? She started coming back late and some weekends she would tell us she was going to a friend's place and would stay the night there. She came back one day from one of her weekends-away,

“I will be getting married next month”

That startled me. I was bent on the table writing my school assignment. I was in Junior Secondary then. I sat up straight. Feigning I didn't hear her the first time, I asked,

“You said what? Were you talking to me?”

“I will be getting married anytime soon”

“How come? To who?”

“You know Chief Ibe. The...”

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