

FACELESS BATTLES

Foly Najoli (Kenya)



“How are you doing my little one,” asks Wambulwa in his strained Geordie accent. Ever since he moved to Newcastle, North East of England suddenly his tongue rolls differently. He probably wouldn’t think twice about changing his name to a McBroom or one of those strange English titles.

“Enhe! Just a little over seven years is all it took to forget where you came from?” I tease. “Mama isn’t just turning in her grave. I bet she doesn’t mind swapping places with Lazarus,” I add.

Ma’ Shukri though having converted to Christianity after she met Papa had always made sure that we all attended Sunday mass ever since we were young. And not just any kind of mass, it had to be the first service which began at 7:30 am. On such days we had to wake up early enough, finish house chores before heading to Church. Wambulwa or Bobo as we always call him at home and I served as altar boys at St. Concord Catholic Church few meters from home. Hence our Christian jokes that we seemingly carried to our mid-thirties.

“I am doing quite fine myself.” I respond. “How about you and my nieces? All good over there?”

Wambulwa had relocated to the United Kingdom after the company he was working for offered him a position in the world’s most revered financial hub. At the time, he was a well-known lead

strategist here in the big city, and he wasn't willing to move away to a foreign land to be a small fish in a big pond. It took a few weeks of convincing before he agreed to it. Furthermore, it was such a great career move, anyone would kill for such an opportunity.

“They are all well. Their mother says that Furaha is tired of staying indoors and misses her friends from school. Somehow her attitude is rubbing off on Amani who throws tantrums here and there. I really don't blame them because I'm just as tired as they are about the times we live in. They'll soon adapt, just as I did to the weather,” Wambulwa says.

And with that, we burst into laughter. We both know that seven years later, he still complains about the London weather. Wambulwa has always been adventurous, extroverted and free spirited which is the complete opposite of who I am. Just as is our physical appearance. I can't begin to count the number of times that Ma' Shukri introduced us to some of her acquaintances and almost each time they questioned my relationship with Bobo. Their shock was always evident in the words they said afterwards, it was all written in the bewildered look on their faces. We could tell from how they constantly looked at Bobo and me as if trying to find a distinct but common feature and in the end most would say “Yeah, I see it now, they have the same kind of smile just like their father.”

By the time Bobo was turning 15, he had been to quite a number of hospital wards than most boys around our age. Usually it was a small scratch, broken arm or twisted ankle. But the peak of all his intrepidity was Saturday 18th April 1998, a day after his thirteenth birthday. That afternoon we were playing in our neighborhood before he tried convincing me to accompany him check out a newly opened play area in the next neighborhood. “We'll be back

before the sun sets. Besides it will be a great opportunity to test the bicycle that Papa got me for my birthday.” Those were his exact words. An offer that I declined. Later that night, he would come home with a bandage wrapped around his head and a broken leg. But all this changed the day that we found Papa hanging from the ceiling in our old house. Bobo became quieter and has remained detached ever since.

Papa worked for the National Railway Company, and he was hardly ever around. Once in a while, he’d come home unexpectedly and leave without notice after conversations with Ma’. Over the years, the months he was away outnumbered the days we saw him at home. Never once did he stay long enough to read the letters that I wrote him. Suffice to say, my relationship with Papa was non-existent after he landed the job at the Railway. Still, I loved him, and he loved us and maybe his way of showing us and making up for the lost time was the gifts he’d always bring back home.

After Papa’s contract came to an end, it became hard for him to secure another job opportunity. Slowly by slowly our lives shifted. Staying in school was now a luxury we couldn’t afford and every so often we were sent back home for lack of school fees. Ma’ Shukri opted to take-up extra shifts at her workplace in order to fend for our daily needs, but even then the irregular allowance wasn’t something we could continuously count on. All this coupled with the rejection he faced from his most trusted group of friends, Papas only solace became the bottle. Cheap liquor brewed by most locals was perhaps the only way to numb his pain.

Three years after we buried Papa, Ma’ Shukri’s health deteriorated. I had just been admitted to Tigoi Medical College to pursue my Nursing degree. This was a dream come true – more like a ticket to

greener pastures. I remember the day we received the news of my acceptance to the school which came with a full scholarship offer. I was in Ma' Shukri's room helping her put away clothes that had been cleaned earlier that morning when Kinyanjui the grounds man came knocking. With him was a brown envelope addressed to me. That was the second time I ever saw Ma' shed a tear. And unlike the first time, I could tell these were the good kind of tears. The ones that are like a thank you note to the gods – tears of joy, they call them.

Six months later, I reported to school and truth be told, the first few weeks were difficult. Actually the first month was brutal to be precise. I might have missed around four lectures because my alarm never went off. Maybe I may have prolonged my lunch break unknowingly, hence my lateness to some lectures. College was such a weird place, it took me quite a while to adjust. Some days I'd only have one lesson and even then, my mind would drift back home to Ma' and Bobo. It therefore didn't come as a surprise when I was summoned to the administrative office after my Medical Microbiology class. I knew I was about to face disciplinary action for skiving classes, but I wasn't expecting to see Uncle Saiid seated in the boardroom alone. I mean it was only four lectures, well five at most but I was trying my best to catch up. In my opinion, it wasn't necessary to have Uncle Saiid come all the way from Kaduna village to intervene in the issue. A little warning, or perhaps a slap on the wrist to wake me up. Not that I was faulting the administration for doing their job.

Soon enough I learnt that just like a child doesn't come with a manual, life doesn't give any warning signs. And death in particular, creeps up on you and strikes when you least expect it. It is said that when all is going well is when death comes knocking at your

door. But in Ma's case this wasn't entirely true. This visitor didn't come knocking at our door, didn't even bother sending any message announcing their intentions. Common courtesy was a foreign language to death and clearly, patience was an attribute that he lacked since none of us invited him into our home. He simply forced himself in, and like a thief, left with our most treasured possession. Probably the only one that we ever had or rather the only one that we had left. Today would have been her fifty-third birthday and I can't help but wonder would life have been any different if she were here.

Most of my memories with Papa are quite blurred except for one when I had just turned thirteen. At around 9.00 pm, just after we had had *ugali*, mrenda and chicken – Papa's favorite meal, Bobo and I retreated to our room, where he helped me fold a paper into a makeshift envelope for the letter I was going to present to Papa before he left. We had just finished the final touches when we heard some commotion coming from the sitting room. This wasn't uncommon whenever Papa was around and with time, we had learnt to block out their conversations.

But there's something about the conversation that night that seemed off. It wasn't as loud as the ones they had before. Instead, in an even but terse tone, Ma' kept asking: "Why? Why? Why Nebarth?" I don't recall hearing Papa's voice that night. It was as though Ma' Shukri was having a one-sided conversation. That night their bedroom door was never banged shut as usual and when we woke up, Papa wasn't on the couch, when we crept in early in the morning to see if he was really watching the television or snoring at different

pitches, which would send us into such fits of giggles that our ribs would hurt. Even when there was a funny film on television, Papa couldn't keep his eyes open. The snoring always gave him away. Still I told myself that the next time I'd wake up earlier to show him my letters and other writings.

Lately, I find myself having one-sided conversations with Papa. In the past two months I have written to him more than I'd like to admit. Partly because the news reminds me of him or maybe I genuinely miss him. Last night there was a lady who lost it during a live news coverage on TV because she couldn't understand why they wouldn't let her accord her husband a rightful sendoff.

"They wouldn't even allow us to view his body," she begun.

"The priest wasn't allowed to give him the viaticum," She went on and on and on.

"The other day when I went to the shops, one shopkeeper refused to let me buy from his shop," Another chimed in, moving closer to the journalist's microphone, "My children can no longer freely interact with anyone by virtue of my association with the medical field. Why are we punishing them for something they have no control over?" There was nothing new or interesting to read in the newspapers either. That much, Odoyo, the newsie who sells across the street could agree with.

Long after the news bulletin, I could still hear the pleas in their words, the pain in their eyes and the weight of trying to comprehend what the world was reduced to. What their lives had been reduced to. There is a sense in which the whole episode reminded me of Papa's funeral. His was different from the burials I had attended. His was rushed as though the mourners wanted him gone as soon as yesterday. Only a handful of people attended the rites. He was buried before the break of dawn as was tradition.

During the sermon there were whispers here and there because we all knew, even I knew, that the thing that had claimed many lives in most parts of the country had finally found its way to Kaduna village. With Papa amongst the first drivers, it landed and was now living amongst us. This was the first time I ever saw Ma' Shukri cry. And like the women on the news yesterday, I knew their cries were beyond mourning. It had more to do with the uncertainty of the journey ahead and how those they trusted to be their shoulders in times of need chose to point fingers instead. Years after Papa's death, Ma' Shukri still carried the weight of his promiscuity in her system. But there's only so much that her body, now reduced to bones could handle. And even with the aid of antiretroviral drugs, her hope was becoming a fragile seed, and it was only a matter of time before she gave in.

“How about you Bobo how are you doing,” I persisted.

Bobo had made arrangements to come visit Kenya during the summer holidays for the first time in seven years as he tried to figure out his next career move. The company he worked for had downsized in order to shield itself from the declining economic conditions across the globe. They worked from home for quite a while but since the economy didn't seem to be revert back to normal anytime soon, the company decided to completely stop its operations for an undisclosed time frame. All his plans were halted nine days ago since Bobo had tested positive for the coronavirus. What troubled me

the most was his seemingly lack of concern about the severity of this situation. His calm demeanor and usual contagious smile across his plump cheeks.

“You worry a lot my little one. Do you remember what Ma’ used to say to us every time?” he asked.

Of course I did. They were the words we settled on as her epitaph. *Even as time goes by, all that I am to you I will still be.* And with that Bobo disconnected our video call just in time for my afternoon rounds at the hospital.

Today more than ever, I hope that I will still be who I’ve always been: for though I have travelled along this path long enough to know the stop signs, something about this particular journey has made the experience bumpier.