

Crumbs Tumbling Off the Whole

I'm not a person who can be trusted with memories.

- Bassegy Ikpi, *I'm Telling the Truth, but I'm Lying: Essays*.

I can't explore myself—my identity—through endless chunks of memory: events, truths, lies, and sentimentality. I can't begin some perfidious search for pieces of myself. My memories is fragmented, a blurry recollection of the lives of former versions of myself who've transformed into me. They aren't ripe with detailed facts and defined action. My memories are distorted, preserved by impressions of emotions and indents of words. I wonder, sometimes, if they're a record of how things were or of dreams I wished were real.

I remember how my mother reacted when I asked her about birth control. It was during my second semester of senior year. I hadn't known how many birth control options were available. The pill I heard of from my novels and TV shows. I had discovered the IUD when I was thirteen after searching up the term while reading a dystopian novel. The rest were new.

From reading about female condoms to the shot, I had spent hours pursuing information on the suddenly plentiful garden of devices for sexual health protection. I knew there was more to sexual health than abstinence, keeping clean, and avoiding the bodily fluids of others but I didn't know how much more there was. Or how little there was for men, given that their bodies have been preferred for scientific study for centuries. Research has only yielded condoms and the male birth control shot for men's protection. Yet, even with the relatively safe side-effects compared to women's contraceptives, the shot is still protested because "who would want to

temporarily sterilize themselves and have horrifying side effects? No one who could call themselves a true man.”

Amongst my outraged thoughts about the switch of misogyny from preventing adequate medical care for women to enforcing it to preserve women’s fertility, a dull urge arose. I wanted to run to my mother for clarification and for guidance—as I often do with interesting facts and questions beyond the scope of my friends and I.

So, I went to my parents’ bedroom, walking into the calming brown accents and leaning on the large mattress, letting it absorb the little anxiety I felt before, asking her about IUDs. I brought it up jokingly, knowing that it would be received better than a more direct conversation. I forgot my mother knew me well enough to see my question for what it was.

She wasn’t happy. “What do you need to know about that for? Are you having sex?” She asked. “No, I was just curious,” I replied. “Don’t come to me with this again, Ezi,” she hmped. I laughed before leaving the room. I wasn’t surprised by her reaction, though a little hurt. If anything, I was shocked she knew about IUDs, my brain actively disconnecting my reserved image of my mother from the sexual education she would’ve gained as a mother.

My mother married my father in her late-twenties, and he was all she ever wanted, romantically. As a good Nigerian woman, she hadn’t dated or done anything else that could be seen as sexual with a man, even though I know she had several suitors following her and her sisters around. For her, sex is for marriage and anything hypersexual, sometimes even within a marriage, is deviant and sinful. Despite my, purposeful, blinders as my mother’s daughter, rationally she knows about sex, its variations, and necessary contraceptives. Expanding beyond motherhood, she is also a nurse with her own master’s degree.

Maybe, if I tried and explained myself, explained in terms she's familiar and comfortable with, my mother would talk with me—she's done it before, as most good parents eventually do. Stepping out of their comfort zones and learning how to communicate with their kids, challenging their preconceived understandings on various topics. But, I think, for my mother, teaching me about sex and anything related to it, means allowing me to drag myself into failure. I think that's where the problem lies: she doesn't want me to vandalize my body with whatever deviant things I could learn if she lays all her own sexual knowledge out for me. Telling me about IUDs and STDs and sex is thrusting me into perversion with the necessary tools to destroy my life. To her, to most of my family, I shouldn't have any sexual identity.

I hadn't approached her with the intent to engage in sex. Rather, I wanted to prepare for sex—for the possibility of it perhaps, to make sure I'd be okay regardless. At that time, I knew that many women didn't get to *choose* anyways.

Weddings are huge in Nigerian culture. They're seen as the binding of families and a continuation of a society blessed by God. As such, most weddings are grand events, boisterous and full of beauty, love, and dramatics. I love them.

My cousin's wedding was gorgeous. She and Clayton had rented out some space in a Hilton Hotel in Pennsylvania for their ceremony a couple of years ago. It was one of the few I remember without a prior church service. They were standing on the gray carpet, staring at the minister under golden lights and giddily fiddling around.

The pastor spoke, voice booming from his microphone, “Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is

the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body. Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing,” (King James Version Eph. 5:22-24).

He didn't mention the verses that told husbands to treasure and protect their wives. I remember feeling disturbed, not wanting to be submissive in any way or defer to my partner's judgement. It didn't feel right. I knew what was expected of Christian girls though. I stayed seated, tuning him out in favor of the sight of my first “drunken uncle” at a wedding.

I find myself leaning into temporary self-transformations in most social situations. I make accommodations, temporary conversions of my reality. I'll change little bits about me or the things around me to help someone else. I'll make them feel more accustomed to me and my space or more at ease with me being in theirs. Most of the time, I don't mind it. I've been contorting myself for over a decade because it allows me to read people and understand their views on life.

Accommodating for others, helped my develop thought processes that go beyond my own understanding, placing myself as a welcomed bystander in other lives, observing their reactions and guessing their logic and putting it above my own. When my godbrother can't communicate what he needs, I neutralize myself. This allots him more control over his space and his decisions than I normally would give to a cute four-year-old. When I speak to different friends, I'll alter my conversation course, teasing one more to bring them out of their shell or letting another rant while humming and interjecting with a quieter, more melodic voice, easing them out of frustrations they can't tackle on their own.

Then, there are the times that I contort for *other*, other people. People who seem to want me to place myself at a detriment for their comfort, forcing me to interact with them and demanding that I fit their pre-determined expectations for our interactions, and still wish I'd never entered their space, never existed. I find that my contortions change under these circumstances. I shift towards embracing traditional femininity to prove that my presence is a declaration of peace and not of war.

Like when my older cousin drove us to the mall because I needed new winter clothing and we browsed a boutique on the second floor, shocked at the \$60+ price tags attached to all of their sweaters and cardigans. My cousin had wandered a few feet away, glancing at me a few times before shoving his hands in pockets. I remember the store workers hovering a couple of feet away from us, and how the older one asked me twice how I was doing within a few minutes.

Each time, I rose my voice an octave higher than I normally did outside. I switched my posture, moving slightly away from the clothing racks and tilting my hip towards the women on the right while flashing them a quick smile. Nothing too toothy, like when I'm laughing with my siblings or taking a candid picture. It's nearly closed-lipped but big enough for my dimples to peek through my mask. My shoulders slid down a bit since one of them was taking a few glances from behind as she moved around. I set the scarf I'd been looking at down gently before heading over to my cousin and leaving for another store.

I think it's mostly fear that pushes me to do this. I need to send a message that screams "I'm civil and I don't want to argue with you. Leave me alone to do whatever else you were doing two minutes ago." I'll add a set of wide eyes sometimes. I did so a lot as a kid, hinting that I was young and playing into the traditional, juvenile, girlishness people expected.

It's a game like Reactionary Pictionary, the game I'd play as a child to interpret people's thoughts and emotions before contorting myself; the one that was an early indicator of my interest in psychology. Now, it seems the game has turned into Russian Roulette but the gun's only pointed at my head, *click, click, click* echoing in my mind.

I hate the rising commonality of "females". It's my most hated gendered term. I don't interact with people who let it fly from their mouths or their fingers freely. "Woman" was fair, I like it so long as it isn't snarled and spat out by men disrespecting their wives or girlfriends or random girls on the sidewalks. But the disdain "females" carries tastes bitter, like Earl Grey tea steeped too long in the numbing cold of winter. Females where? Meaning?

It's used to dismiss, to invalidate, to attack and reduces women to their biological organs, mockingly marvels at those of transwomen or femme people, stripping all of their humanness. I never hear people say, "males and females", just "females and men". Men are intelligent humans with feelings and consciousness. Females are just there; they talk, they breathe, and they exist.

A story my 11th grade English teacher told us, removed the dreamy, respectable connotation I had for lady, at least in it's modern context. She was driving past a checkpoint with her husband, when a younger man, maybe in his twenties stopped their car. "We were leaving after he cleared us, and he just started screaming at me, 'Hey Lady!'" She exclaimed. "My jaw dropped, and I just turned around and went back and I said, 'What did you say?' I was pissed!"

Before then, I didn't recognize how weaponized feminine identifiers are. I could hear the cruelty in "woman" when it was shouted, stripping someone to their sex. Yet, "lady", a word that

in Western history was used to honor women (even with its classist overtone) has been repurposed for disrespect. If anything, I imagine that people, mostly men, of that time, snarled “lady” as often as I see men do with “woman”. But, instead of cloaking the double-entendre with general language and terminology, they used with false regard.

The amount of power held behind words has always awed me. Reflection like this makes me fear that power, questioning every word spoken to, interrogating them under duress and the possibility of insult. Though I suppose attempting to brand myself as a child sex worker would be amongst the worst offences My dad was the one who stopped me from naming my budding, and now dismantled, website/brand, “Working Gals” when I was 14. That added “gal” my list of unpleasant terms and the anxiety growing, urging me to tally the number of times I’ve been slighted underhandedly. Which is a mental spectacle in itself—that as much as I can argue and criticize society, I can still direct that same ire at myself and reduce myself to nothing but a hypocrite.

There was another wedding, meshed with remnants of past celebrations. Apart from the flashes of blazing lights, pounding Naija music, bodies roaming over the dance floor, and of so many smiles and so much food, rushing through the crowd and spreading its warm, savory aroma throughout the room. Amidst it all, I sat down on a cloth-covered chair, my family spread out before me, and my parents and siblings beside me.

One of the ushers had grabbed a mic, motioning to the DJ to lower the music while he stood under the dark blue lighting of the room. I’m sure he said the usual greeting and a couple

of other kind statements to the crowd. People shouted, “Ee¹!” back at him. But I distinctly remember glancing over at the bride and groom before he laid out his prophecy.

“In the name of Jesus, ah! You will give birth to a Bouncing! Baby Boy! by next year! Amen!” He declared.

And everyone shouted amen. I couldn’t believe it. Who’d want to get pregnant so fast? Why would he pray for her womb without talking with her first? Why not let them enjoy their first years of marriage together? Why bring that up at all? Much of Nigerian culture is centered around God and the family, but this seemed absurd to me and only me. I’d decided at that moment, sitting there at twelve or thirteen years old, that I’d never let some uncle or recommended usher speak at my wedding.

This was one of my first, truly jarring encounters with the Nigerian brand of misogynoir and misogyny. Soon would come the harassment of breast-cancer survivors and women who refused to follow wedding tradition and kneel at their husband’s feet during the palm wine ceremony. Then, a girlfriend whose back was sliced open after an argument and a doctor, who was reunited with her abusive husband by their governor. Followed by, thankfully non-violent, critiques by aunties and uncles of how I function, the things I say and the things I don’t, rooms left uncleaned, and too loud assertions.

But that all came later. So, for then, I opened my mouth, looking toward my mother, aghast, and asked, “What kind of curse is that?”

¹ “Yes” in Igbo; pronounced as a deep “A.”

Works Cited

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