

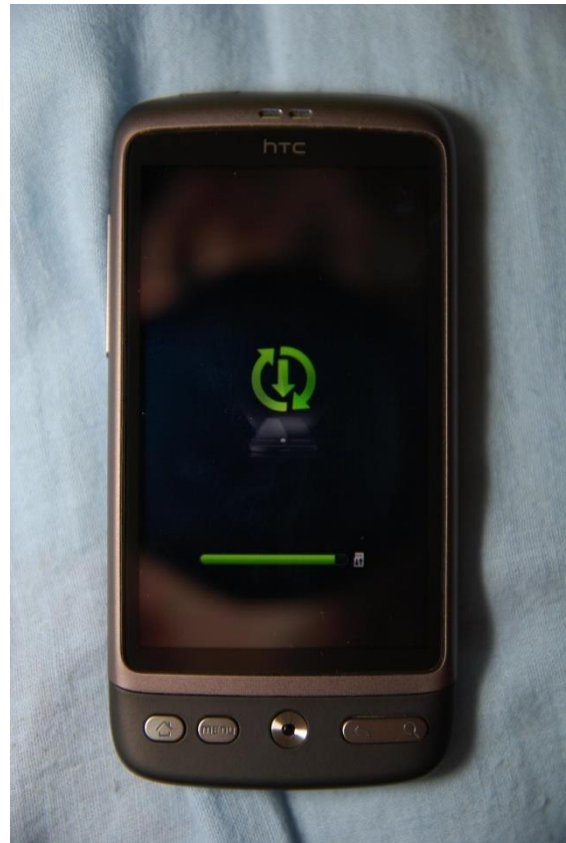
My Father

By Chukwuemeka Famous

I am staring at the text from my father, the carefully measured words warming up the insides of my heart, echoing all the assurances I have always sought. “I don’t have anything against you, my son. All I want is for you to be established in life,” it reads.

As it often happens, a certain frostiness, forged out of a long-time accumulation of hurt and rife from previous tiffs, had, like ringworm, recently seared the surface of our father-son bond. In the past, this frostiness had eaten deep into our bond, causing it to break off like dry wood. Whenever this happens, the voices in my head whisper that it is what I think it is. Why have I always thought my father hates me? Or maybe he loves me, but this love is not as intense as the one he extends to my siblings. Why have I always avoided his presence like it is some sort of deadly infection? There is this persistent dispiritedness that ensues each time I am made to sit opposite him in the parlour or beside him on the front porch. I am always made to.

The date is 14th February 2024. St. Valentine’s Day. His text came in hours after I had sent a warm message to remind him that I still loved him and would never let him down. As I read the words aloud to myself, absorbing all the affection beneath them, memory hauls to me



the distasteful relationship between my father and his mother, a relationship I experienced and which I have always feared would be my fate, too.

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My father, who was born second but took up the position of the firstborn because the first died at birth, is the eldest of two surviving sons and his mother loathed him. As a child, I witnessed lots

of wrangles between them. The hate was so much that my father resolved one day after they had a heated row, that she wasn't his real mother. "If my father were alive, I would have asked him to show me my real mother!" he had yelled in Igbo. One would think he was merely uttering words from a place of anger that would soon fade. But at that moment, I could perceive that my father was deeply hurt. Hurt by the fact that he could never trust the woman he called mother. He must have observed how his friends, especially our family doctor, who is deceased now, spoke dotingly about their mothers. He would never know or tell such tales about his. This pain was firmly lodged in the inner chambers of his mind from where it grew roots, extending all through his body until it defined him as one whose life was forever locked up in the black books of his mother. Sometimes, I wonder, at what point did their bond rupture into splinters of distrust scattered around in their hearts? The very few lighthearted moments they shared were bracketed by chariness because there were times when jovial discussions segued into bickering.

My grandmother was a young widow whose husband died in his mid-thirties. She birthed five boys, of whom only two are alive. An old black-and-white portrait that hung in the sitting room of our house in the village comes to mind each time I think of Grandma. Years later, after her death, when I would stare at this portrait, I would look beyond the light-skinned woman with full, thick hair and remember her as a woman who

despised her son. A nurse by profession, she had the kind of beauty and idiosyncrasies that most people attributed to Mami Water. Her elegance and fairness earned her the name Nwanyiocha, which translates to 'fair woman'. After her husband's death, she took on the upbringing of her sons with a grit that was not so common with women in those days. She unapologetically shunned advances from men who proposed to her with promises of taking care of her and her sons. My father once spoke about one who was an Nze, and who, believing that he had the qualities to match up with Nwanyiocha's rather intimidating portfolio, persisted, unwilling to let her defiance bruise his ego. In the end, he and his ego were bruised and my father suspects that it is the reason why, years later, the Nze refused to help him get a job. This courage, this resilience is, perhaps, the only thing that I admire about my grandmother. She bought a Vespa motorcycle that set tongues wagging. More shocking was the spacious five-bedroom bungalow she built that still stands to this day. This old house, built with sturdy concrete, with flaking yellow paint and a sitting room so large it can contain three big bedrooms, stands dauntingly in the center of our compound as though to remind people of Nwanyiocha's tenacious legacy. It was in this house that she raised her sons into grown men. It was also in this house that she joined a spiritual league that morphed her into a stronger woman, feared and avoided by many. I am sometimes moved to believe that Nwanyiocha, although in a

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negative sense, helped to preserve the legacy of strength and fearlessness that was peculiar to Nwanu's family. Nwanu, which means 'child of the bee,' was the sobriquet given to my influential great-grandfather who was a dreaded warrior. Stories about him told that wherever he went, he was armed with a gun, a bow, and an arrow which he used on those who troubled him. First, he would grant his adversary the chance to choose which of the weapons they preferred, and if they hesitated, he would make the selection for them, and his most preferred was the bow and arrow. Nwanu once chopped off the buttocks of a thief who came to rob his house. The next morning, he gave the flesh to his wife to cook and sauce it with pepper, oil, and utazi leaves. Then he invited his close friends who relished the meat with gourds of palm wine and ignorance. After Nwanu, Nwanyiocha became the next feared person in the family. Not much was narrated about her husband, my grandfather, except that he worked for the Railway Corporation in Port Harcourt before the Nigerian Civil War and was enslaved to drink. My father still suspects that he was poisoned to death, having lost him when he was ten.

Nwanyiocha must have been a lonely woman or a woman in search of power to protect herself

and her young fatherless sons, so I think. Either of these drove her to seek company with the spiritual league of water-spirit worshippers. By the time her sons became adults, she had steeped herself so deep in this new-found mysticism that she claimed to have become a river goddess. My father has narrated stories of how she took them in turns to the river to bathe or to shrines for rituals purposed for protecting them or granting them success. Once, my father had recalled how he knelt in front of a Dibia who upturned a slain goat and let its blood drip onto his body. It was a ritual to hide him from his enemies, according to his mother.

Immediately after his secondary school education, my father acquired some basic work experience at the Local Government Headquarters in Mbaise, and with the money he was able to save, he travelled to New Delhi to begin his journey in medical studies. Armed with dreams and willpower, he settled at Punjab University in Chandigarh where he studied pre-medical courses. But those dreams soon flamed out when, after he had aced his exams and was admitted into Davao Medical School, Philippines, his mother disappointed him at the time when he needed her the most. With his savings, he was able to buy all the required medical texts and had

some change left for his relocation to the Philippines. All he requested from his mother was money for tuition and other student fees.

“She was financially comfortable by Nigerian standards at the time. But she refused to help me. My mother rather preferred that I ditch medical studies for the Teacher Training College in Mbaise!” my father would say, shrugging his shoulders in immense disappointment.

Still determined to pursue his passion, he sought other means of raising the money and when they all failed, he packed his medical books, the carcass of his dreams, and his other effects and flew back to Nigeria, dejected. Those books now sit on a shelf in our home, lapping against each other as though in a consolatory hug, now at the mercy of merciless rats, a forlorn symbol of aspirations long dead. This leaves me with an unanswered question that continues to plague me; what then was the point of having your son partake in rituals intended to fortify him and haul him into the realm of success when you were eventually going to hinder this leap to greatness?

Upon his return to Nigeria, my father proceeded to Calabar for his National Youth Service. There, he met my mother and soon, they got married. Sometimes, I wonder if my mother would have accepted my father’s proposal if she had a glimpse of what lay ahead. The battle ahead took her by surprise and began when she lost her first baby, a girl, fifteen minutes after birth. Nwanyiocha called her an *ori nwa*, a child eater, and further scorned that she did not have what it

took to birth a child. My mother felt helpless, dejected, and lonely because, at this time, my father had gone fully into the transport business. People hired him on charter to far places like Makurdi, Jos, and Lokoja to trade perishable wares. He was barely around and my mother was left at the mercies of Nwanyiocha. The taunts and verbal assaults became so unbearable that my mother resorted to spending most of her time sitting on a stone at the back of the house, sobbing and petitioning God. It was during such moments of reclusiveness and melancholy that she fell into a trance. My mother narrated how, in that trance, Nwanyiocha handed a piece of white paper to her. She opened it and saw the words spelled out; the next goddess. When my father returned from his trip that evening, she narrated what she had seen to him.

“She may be looking to initiate you into whatever society she belongs to,” my father had said.

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Perhaps, this sentience on the path of her now Christian son and his wife, this consciousness of the fact that she was up to something they considered profane, and the ensuing spiritual alertness in the place of intense prayers drove Nwanyiocha to fully unveil the hate she had harboured for my father. Mother and son transformed into cat and dog, occasionally hailing invectives at themselves. My father would remind

her how she refused to support his dreams and Nwanyiocha would yell that he was the first son and that first sons are not meant to be so far away from home.

My parents soon learned that Nwanyiocha had dragged the entire lineage into a pact to worship a water spirit forever. As my father would put it, she ushered in Mmuo Mmiri into the family and it was a rule that every seed of hers, children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, would worship this spirit. My parents, based on spiritual revelations and dreams, described this woman as a fat, ugly, and dark woman with dusty crinkled hair and a coarse voice. On every occasion, she would wear a white wrapper around her charcoal-black skin. All these appeared as just fables until this spirit revealed herself to me a few years later.

Nwanyiocha tried to initiate my mother into the worship of this spirit. The idea was to have my mother initiated first before birthing children. That way, every seed from her womb would automatically be loyal to this spirit. Since that did not happen, the first baby had to be killed. My father would later discern that it was the reason Nwanyiocha, who at the time had become a senior nurse at the General Hospital, insisted on being in the labour room with my mother. Whatever she did, no one knows. All we know was that the child died fifteen minutes after birth and my father packed the corpse in a small carton and buried her.

My mother was tormented by nightmares, all

in a bid to make her reverence this woman-spirit. But my parents' vigilance stalled her and soon, my mother conceived and gave birth to me. My mother would often recount how, at intervals, she would stretch from the hospital bed to peek at me in the baby cot, swaddled with white cloths, to ascertain if I was still breathing. Once, just to be certain, she beckoned to a nurse and asked, "Biko, nwa m, o di ndu? Is he alive?" My mother recalled the bewilderment on the nurse's face, surprised at why such a question should be asked with fear so palpable.

After my birth, my father moved us from Mbaise to Owerri to live in a rented three-bedroom apartment in World Bank Housing Estate. We felt safe being away from Nwanyiocha and I grew, healthy and handsome.

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I am always bothered that the same fate that befell my father would befall me, too. I am always aware of this fear. I began to see hate toward me in most things my father did. I saw it in how he flogged me as a child and rebuked me as an adult. I concluded he was more concerned with the well-being of my siblings than with mine. I was drunk in this fear. It worsened when I heard the story of another man, a first son, too, and also from Mbaise, who suffered a similar fate. This fear has defined a greater part of my life and gave an almost toxic definition to the relationship I have with my father.

My father has always shown his fondness for me. But then, why do I always feel like there is this hidden hate somewhere inside him, waiting to manifest toward me at the right time?

Due to the circumstances surrounding my birth, I was the most pampered of all my siblings, my father would say. My mother, testifying to this, would narrate how he did not allow people to touch me when they came to visit. He developed several strategies to keep people away from me including saying that I would cry uncontrollably if anyone else touched me. “Your father carried you like an egg. He made sure no harm came to you as a child,” my mother says to me often.

When I was to travel to Benin City to take the Post UTME exams, my father travelled with me. We stayed at the home of a professor in the Department of Physics. The morning of my exam, he escorted me to the exam hall, carrying my bag, and waited outside the hall until I was done. After I was admitted to the university, my mother packed boxes for me, and my father, again, took me back to school. I still recall that moment when he handed me over to the young pharmacy student I was to live with till I got my apartment. “Please, watch over him for me,” he pleaded, hugged me, and left. As I watched the car that brought us drive out through the main gates of the University of Benin, I was moved to tears. The pharmacy student (name withheld) gripped my hands and led me into the school. “I

felt the same way when I left home. You will be fine, soon,” he assured me.

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During my youth service in Abakaliki, a family member living with me at the time called home and accused me of maltreatment. I was shocked when my mother called to ask if what she heard was true. I explained and cleared myself but things went sour when she handed the phone to my father who was close by. To my surprise, my father was not willing to take any clarifications from me. He had swallowed the false accusations against me like pills and chastised me sore. All my efforts to make him understand that I was innocent proved futile. He kept ranting and ranting and uttering words that hurt me until I was pushed to my limits. I flung these words at him: “My discussion with you is making no sense. Please give the phone back to Mum. She understands me better!” My tone was very uncouth.

In the weeks that followed, I knew what it meant to be fatherless. I was lonely. The family member who had caused this discord was called back home. My father, I learned later, deleted my

number from his phone. My mother, too. Of course, I had insulted her husband, so she followed suit. I was cut off from my family entirely. This moment was so devastating for me that I contemplated suicide. I had planned to swallow all my asthmatic pills at once. It was going to be a slow painful death. I wanted it that way. On the night I planned to evict my soul from my body, I wrote a note. The exact words I wrote were “I would rather die than have my father hate me.” I slipped this note under my pillow hoping that anyone who would discover my body later would discover it, too. Then, a billow of rage swept me up from the bed, forcing screams from my mouth. My hands ripped my shirt and flung it to one end of the room. I banged my fists on the hard-tiled floor until I could see red patches on my knuckles. I banged the walls, upturned my bed, and crashed on the floor. The drugs and a cup of water lay close by. Hot tears streamed down my eyes. I thought of all the dreams and passions I wanted to pursue and how they were now being threatened by the strained relationship between my father and me.

Immersed in those thoughts, I fell asleep and the woman-spirit came to me in my dreams. She was exactly how my parents described her. She walked up to me, jerked her head backward, and hooted. Then she gazed long at me, terrifying me with her manic mannerisms. “It is your turn,” she said and walked away, her bulky form echoing a smug pride. “I own them. I determine how their lives go,” it seemed to say.

When I woke up the next morning, a strange calmness was upon me. I stood up and arranged my room. Then, I took my phone, composed a long apology text, and sent it to my father. He called later that evening and we made peace. I resolved that I would not let this spirit win this battle. Going forward, I became more careful in dealing with my father. Even when angry, I struggled to guide my responses with courtesy. Things speedily went back to normal but this fear lingered on and coldness loomed between us. It bothered me still that my father had even believed such accusations about me. Was this not the same thing that sparked off the misunderstanding between him and my uncle in Belgium? The two brothers were, at first, inseparable until Nwanyiocha deployed her schemes and sowed conflict in their midst. She’d call my uncle and lay serious accusations against my father and my uncle, without seeking clarifications from his brother, extended the same animosity to him.

One of the most emotionally disturbing moments in my life was the day I hit my father on his shoulder in anger. It was a cool evening heated by our arguments. The atmosphere became charged with fury and he rose from his chair to hit me. I bet he must have thought that that would bridle me but rather, it intensified my anger. No longer under the control of rationality, I hit him back. He chased me out of the house with a machete threatening to cut me into pieces while I yelled that he hated me. I called a family friend who housed me for the night and promised

to beg him on my behalf. I didn't sleep that night. How could I, when the emotional torment was immense? I wept. The woman who took me in did everything to pacify me. Nothing could extirpate the trauma that stung me. I hated myself so much for doing the abominable. Perhaps, I still do. I hated that this woman-spirit seemed to be winning despite my resolve to thwart her plans. I kept seeing her face in my dreams, laughing, and reminding me that I was the next to suffer the same fate. Was this what awaited every firstborn in my family? Now, I remember my grandfather; Nwanyiocha's husband, who was the firstborn, too, and who was despised by his siblings so much that one day, after they had all fled back home during the war, his sister broke his head with a spindle.

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On the night my father forgave me for hitting him, I sat in the parlour drenched in compunction. This was, of course, after a few family friends had gone to see and beg him on my behalf. That night, he reiterated that I was loved and not hated. He narrated numerous instances when he had proven to love me unconditionally. I began to see through the thick glaze of fear that covered my sight that truly, my father meant well for me. Scales fell off my eyes. I crawled to where he sat, wrapped my hands around his belly, and wet his trousers with my tears.

"I love you, my first son," he kept saying, and blessed me.

It has not been easy for me to live amid the biting guilt that this event brought upon me. Sometimes, when I look at my father, I shed hot tears within me, wishing that I could go back in time and undo what I had done.

I am aware that he loves me and I him, too. But it is no longer the fear of being hated that plagues me. Rather, this unending guilt is attempting to further detach me from him. We have more cold moments. No misunderstandings, no quarrels, just cold moments with each of us harbouring thoughts in our minds.

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I pull myself out of bed, grab my phone, and read the text aloud to myself again, allowing each word to usurp whatever guilt and fear still looms in my head.