

The Tobeness of Tobe

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Mummy Tobe sat in the spacious living room of her one-bedroom apartment, her jaw set firmly on her hand and her hand set firmly on her leg. Her expression was one of deep thought. Her eyes fixed on the linoleum floor and peered into the unknown. Her friend Agnes was sitting on the same sofa she was, running her mouth as usual. If asked, Agnes would say she was doing her best to distract her friend from the distasteful task they had to perform in at least thirty minutes from now. But that was a lie, or a partial truth. Agnes was talking because she loved to talk. The third and final person in the room was one neither woman had seen before. She was clothed in white, a white iro and buba with no design and a white headdress. White cowries decorated her wrists, and a single white seashell adorned her neck. She sat quietly, poised on a single seater like a queen on a throne. Though the tension in the room was thick enough to cut with a knife, she was composed, silently observing the increasing agitation of the other women. She was called Iya Lola, even though it had been five years since her daughter's death.

The three women presented an odd picture. Under normal circumstances, such a trio could not exist; one worried, one reassuring to the point of mania, and the other detached from it all. But these were not normal circumstances. The three women were gathered for a reason. A singular purpose bound them, the fine chain of destiny looping, enclosing and ensnaring them so that they could not be separated. At least until their purpose of coming together was satisfied.

It had begun on a Saturday, but the drama had started a long time ago. On this Saturday, Mummy Tobe had had time on her hands, she being a secondary school English teacher, and decided to make moimoi. It was not exactly a meal easily prepared, but she reasoned she had time on her

hands. She had the spices and flavoring on hand, but had run out of the chief ingredient: beans. If she got the beans now, it would be at least an hour and thirty minutes before she picked, washed, and ground it. She checked with herself. She had nothing but time to spare.

"Tobe" she called out to the empty room. There was no reply. So she tried again. "Tobe". She sighed when no answer came. "TOBECHUKWU" she screamed. "What?" came the belligerent reply. As always, the sight of him made her heart stutter. He looked so much like his father that he barely bore any resemblance to her. As her father would say, "It is like Chukwudi spat on the ground to form him". But at the same time, she felt exasperated. He couldn't even greet her.

She took a breath, choosing to ignore his blatant disregard. She said, "I want to make moimoi today, and I need you to buy beans and smoked fish for me". He began to grumble, as she knew he would. "You were coming back from school yesterday, why didn't you buy it then?" "Because I wanted you to go and buy it this morning" she said in her most authoritative voice. She fixed him with a pointed look. He looked her squarely in the eye. She did not like that.

The staring contest lasted until Tobe had blinked. He hissed and walked away. She didn't like that either. She contemplated calling him back to make him apologize. But her relationship with Tobe was as tenuous as that of a snake charmer and his snake.

Besides, she had won. "The money is on the table. Go and come back quickly," she yelled. Tobe had come out ten minutes later, dragging a shirt above his head and his feet on the tiles. He snatched the money off the table. He spared her with a dark look and walked out. No, she did not like that at all.

Seconds became minutes and minutes became hours, and still Tobe had not returned. "What is he still doing there?" She wondered aloud. By one in the afternoon, she started getting frantic. Did something happen? If nothing happened why hadn't he come back yet? The noon met her distraught. Something had happened. A more rational woman had not been born, but Mummy Tobe's nerves were already frayed. They were on the verge of breaking all together. A child she had sent out since 10 am in the morning had not still returned by after 2pm? She was grabbing her head tie as a knock came from the door.

"People" she thought. People have come to tell me he's dead". She shakily opened her door and was greeted with the sight of her son. Her drunk son, as her nose suggested. Her very drunk son, as her eyes suggested. He was totally wasted, swaying on his feet, caught in a breeze that only he felt. "Tobechukwu" she said despairingly. But she was not surprised. Very few things about her son surprised her these days.

He pushed past her, stumbling into the room. "Tobechukwu, why? Why do you do this? Didn't we talk about this? We agreed you would stop. Why do this now?" She basically pleaded with him. His feet hit the table's leg and he went falling to the floor. "Tobechukwu" she sighed. He was on his stomach, trying to stand up again. He reminded her of a catfish that escaped its bowl. She was tempted to leave him there. But she did not because she could not.

She gripped his elbow and supported his weight as he rose back up. The smell of alcohol and sweat hung on him like a malodorous fragrance. "It would be very foolish of me to ask where the beans and fish are, wouldn't it?"

"WHAM". With his free hand, Tobe slapped his mother. The slap was so unexpected that she did not feel it even as it landed on her face. The shock stayed with her for a while. He pushed her away from him. "What is your problem sef? Na only you? All you do is nag and nag and complain and

complain. I'm tired of you always nagging me. Why won't you leave me alone?" he burst out. Mummy Tobe did not answer. She was not really there anymore. Tobe turned and stumbled to his room.

Mummy Tobe was still cradling her cheek when Tobe left. It was beginning to dawn on her that her son just slapped her. Her son of fifteen years, whom she had carried for ten months had slapped her. He had gone out, spent her money on getting high, and hit her when she complained. Her cheek stung like a million ants had bitten it and felt swollen. Helpless tears began to flow down her face. She supposed she should go upstairs and discipline him. But she did not dare. Like a snake charmer, she knew she had reached the end of her act. Any more coercion and the serpent would bite.

So she did what she could. She wiped her face on her wrapper, careful with the stinging side and wrestled her emotions into submission. When she did the best she could, she called her friend. "Baby mi" Agnes said, answering on the first ring. Mummy Tobe broke down and sobbed openly on the phone. "Antonia what happened?" And she told her all.

Talk is cheap, a commodity Agnes afforded easily and with alarming regularity. To put it simply, Agnes loved to talk. "Agnes", her mother would say, "one of these days your tongue will jump out of your mouth. Food is poor compensation for the amount of work it does". Second to the heart, the lungs are the most used organs in the human body. In Agnes' case the second most used organ would be her tongue.

She worked in a salon as a hairdresser. Information as well as hair making services were bartered and traded each day in the salon. She was listening to one customer complain of how her husband was sleeping with their housemaid while braiding another's hair simultaneously. She was about to offer her own tuppence when the call came in. She excused herself and went outside. She spent a lot of time listening. A very serious expression came over her face. She nodded her head once or twice. Finally she spoke. Agnes was well versed in the commerce of talking.

"Nawa oo" she said. "No no don't worry, I'll come around tomorrow". Again she spoke, "No oo, better leave him alone before he breaks your skull. Don't do anything. Just wait for me". After some more reassurances, she hung up. She shook her head again at nothing in particular and went back inside. "Hope nothing?" asked a customer. The entire shop went quiet, hoping earnestly for something. If information was currency, Agnes would be the richest woman in the room.

"May the lord deliver us from evil o. Hmmmm," she finally said. "Amen o" replied her customers, each with the hopes that she would divulge more. "It's just that one of my friends is having domestic issues". "It's her husband abi? I've said it before and I'll say it again, these animals called men are moving crazier and crazier these days" one overly enthusiastic customer said. "No, her husband is dead. It is her son" Agnes corrected.

The women hissed in unison. "Children these days are something else" said one. "Abi dem dey call themselves Gen D?" asked another playing devil's advocate. "Na Gen Z my sister. What did the little brat do?" Again Agnes did not answer immediately. Like an experienced entertainer she let the tension build. The women were basically vibrating on their seats, all pretense of making hair forgotten.

"He beat up his mother," she said. The women did not disappoint. They each reacted visibly, some looking pained and sympathetic, some shaking their heads and snapping their fingers away from themselves, but most were outraged. "Imagine going through the pain of carrying a child for nine months and labor, only to have that same child beat you up," said one. "No be to beat am, tear am better slap?", "na to swear for him generation, he dey craze?" Various suggestions were made.

Agnes listened to them all, as if she knew all the intricacies of the matter and had not just heard of it five minutes ago, she said "Beat am keh? If you see this boy, you will run. And his father is dead. If my friend raise hand he fit kill am". The women fell silent, each contemplating what would work more but not really caring. "I know someone that can help," one woman finally said. She spoke directly to Agnes. "She has done this kind of thing before". Information, like currency, was traded and Agnes was well versed in the commerce of information.

But Tobe was not always a bad boy. No one knew this as much as his mother and his deceased father. Perhaps his extended family as well. When he was a child, he and his mother were the closest of friends. They played all kinds of games together. She would knock gently on his head saying, "knock knock, who is there. Is anybody at home?" And he would say "yes, Tobe is at home, who is looking for him?" And they would both laugh and laugh. Tobe followed his father everywhere too. From the moment he could crawl he was a constant shadow to his father. And Daddy Tobe never minded.

It did not occur to Mummy Tobe that the emotion she was experiencing now was nostalgia. Nostalgia, like other of its emotional counterparts, had the ability to alter reality. All those memories, those recollections tinted with the bright yellow of happiness and joy. She did not remember the tantrums and rage and the time when Daddy Tobe had nearly beaten him to stupor for breaking his laptop. It did not matter that she could not trace the beginning of Tobe's depravity. All that mattered to her in that moment was that Tobe was not always a bad boy. And that was all she saw.

A knock on the door startled all three women. Simultaneously, they looked at the clock. The time had come. "It's time," Iya Lola whispered. Yet neither Mummy Tobe nor Agnes moved. Another knock followed by a "mummy?" roused them into action. Agnes went to stand with Iya Lola behind the door and Mummy Tobe stood in front of it. She had a bad feeling about this. She opened the door nonetheless.

Her son pushed past her, grumbling about people standing in his way. She quickly shut the door behind him and locked it. She could not have acted faster. Immediately, there was a loud "oof" as Agnes and Iya Lola tackled her son to the floor. She threw herself into the struggle. Tobe would one day be his father's son in every sense of the way. Today, he was a fifteen year old boy against three determined women. He didn't stand a chance.

Finally, the struggle ended. Tobe was successfully pinned down. Agnes sat on his legs, his mother held down his hands above his head and Iya Lola sat on his chest. "What is this?" Tobe asked, trying and failing for bravado. Neither woman answered him. "Quickly Agnes" Iya Lola said. Agnes passed her a small transparent medicine bottle filled with a greenish liquid. "What is that?" Tobe asked, all attempts at bravado discarded. His voice was shaking.

Again, nobody answered him. With a strength that belied her slender frame, Iya Lola forced open Tobe's mouth and poured the entire bottle's content into it. "It is done. Get off him," she said. The three women scrambled off as their hostage struggled to get up. "Are you all crazy?" Tobe asked, gagging. "What did you..." He clutched his belly. "What did you give me?" He asked weakly. He shuddered from head to toe and swayed. Sweat beaded his forehead and his eyes rolled in their sockets wildly.

Iya Lola stepped in front of him. She spread her arms wide, as if she was offering Tobe a hug, and began to speak, "Our fathers in heaven and our fathers in the earth. We call to you. We three call to the powers that represent and guard all good things in this life. Come and save Tobe. Pour in your goodness, chasing out the bad spirit inside him".

Tobe was shaking now, his entire body trembling as if he was under a total spiritual revival. He opened his mouth wide and screamed. Unknowingly, Mummy Tobe took a step towards her son. "Don't move" Iya Lola said. She continued her prayer "Daddy Tobe, Mummy Tobe calls to you to deliver your son. Chase out that wicked spirit that makes him do these bad things".

Tobe's stomach was bloated. I looked just like that when I was pregnant with him, Mummy Tobe thought to herself. Tobe screamed again and she lurched towards him, unable to stop herself. "Don't move," Iya Lola repeated. Tobe heaved and vomited on the floor. Green stuff poured out of his stomach like water from a tap. "Jesus Christ!" Agnes screamed and leaped back. Mummy Tobe did not move; she was transfixed where she stood. Some of the green stuff fell on her. It burned like acid. So that is the thing that this madwoman poured down my son's throat. This time when she moved, she was fully self-aware.

"Hold her back," Iya Lola screamed, "it's nearly here". Agnes grabbed Mummy Tobe around the waist, restraining her. "Please, my friend" she said as they both struggled, "we are all here to help you". But Mummy Tobe was beyond reason. She elbowed Agnes and they both fell to the ground. Five feet away, Iya Lola was still performing her incantation.

"And now, Esu, you wicked imp, possessor and defiler, leave his body in the name of mine and his ancestors". She screamed. Tobe grew still and everything grew still. Iya Lola stood still with her hands stretched out and the two women on the ground stopped scuffling. "Tobe" Mummy Tobe whispered. Her son turned towards her, his eyes wide with fright and shock. "Mama" he said, something he had not called her since he was very little. Then he clutched his belly, bent at the waist and screamed.

His stomach moved in ripples, like waves in the ocean. It's like he's in labor, Mummy Tobe thought. The lump in his belly moved upwards, up his stomach, stretching out his chest cavity and grotesquely enlarging his diaphragm. Mummy Tobe stared. It was like she was watching a movie, this was not really happening. Her son was not about to give birth in the most horrific way possible. And in her living room to boot.

It was in his neck now, making him look like the worst case scenario of a goiter patient. He fell to his knees and dry heaved. Mummy Tobe could see him try to swallow, but what was coming up was by no means going down. His jaw opened wide, and wide, and wide again, like that of a crocodile. Saliva and blood flowed like an image portraying Christ in stigmata. Mummy Tobe saw a small head at the back of his throat. And then he vomited the stuff.

It was a body. A little body with a big head and broomstick arms and legs, its skin as yellow as a jaundiced baby. It huddled feebly on the ground, its breathing slow and shallow. Then it stopped, obviously dead. "Thank you, Our fathers" Mummy Tobe heard Iya Lola say. She did not care about that. Nor did she care about the corpse of unknown origin on her living room floor. No, her attention was solely focused on the prone figure, in a pool of blood, spit and green. He was not moving. "Tobe," she whispered. For the first time that afternoon she felt true fear. Then he opened his eyes and she knew everything would be alright.

Iya Lola helped her dispose of the body in her backyard and gave her some instructions. She promised that everything would change with Tobe, was paid, and left. Agnes left as well; she had gotten what she wanted, a story to rival all others. The only person dissatisfied with the conclusion of the whole affair was Mummy Tobe. And the reason was because Tobe changed.

He didn't speak as much as he usually did, he only spoke when spoken to. He would sit on the living room floor, staring into a distance. Even when he spoke, it sounded lifeless, robotic. She

walked up to him one day, knocked softly on his head and said, “Knock knock, is anybody home?” hoping and praying for anything, a glimmer of recognition, a sign of her son. But Tobe stared at her blankly. There was nobody at home.

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