

## STORIES THE DEAD TAKE WITH THEM



It was during winter, on a Sunday in the month of June. Rays of orange-yellow evening leaked in through the windows of the Intensive Care Unit of a Hospital in South Africa. This unit was a quiet space where people tormented by sicknesses awaited healing, but also – in some unsubtle way – death. I thought someone had died. Or I knew but it was impossible to not need a second confirmation from the nurses. Not only for the usual sake of being sure that the patient was dead but I had chosen to doubt because I was as invested in wanting the patient alive as her family must have been. I found myself screaming for the nurses even though they were just at the entrance. They rushed in, one of them with a stethoscope.

“She is not breathing”, I said. I did not hear myself say it in such an accusing way, but I would later remember saying it like that. Pelisa’s body was cold. Maybe she had died hours ago. Or the night before. And there had been nobody there to scream on her behalf, speak for her at the very moment of death. Nobody to call the doctor or nurses in a panicked voice that doubles as an expression of love for a patient. It only takes someone who loves you to scream in hospital because of you. The way my mother – during those times I was hospitalized – had screamed with her wrapper unknitting itself as she ran out to grab the first nurse or doctor she randomly came across to come make sure that I was alive. I remember one night when I woke up to find my mother holding a bottle of Ribena and a spoonful of rice, ready to feed me the moment I said yes. Asking me, *Omuye gi ya na onu mobu ka I ga agbo ya?* “Should I put it into your mouth or would you vomit it?” with a worried face. She mostly spoke Igbo when I was sick because it was the language of home, of healing, of being under Mommy’s watchful eyes. Pelisa, for the past two weeks, had not been under anybody’s worried eyes. Her family was far away in Johannesburg. The nurses were only doing their normal routine. She was not anybody’s priority, she was just there, just one of so many patients in a government hospital. For most of the time, she was alone and lonely.

Nobody would have panicked about her because she was not theirs. And if she died, then she simply died. She would simply be counted as ‘one female patient who did not make it’, become a counted number.

Seeing her dead and cold, it was as though Pelisa was not a mother who would have done the same for her children: shouting for the doctor at every slight change in their bodies, being hasty whenever she needed to use the toilet so that she would not miss out on anything regarding her child's health. So that she could catch death red-handed if it came to snatch her child.

"Pelisa is dead", I said with a tone of finality as the nurses pulled the bedcover over her face, the same way they had done many times in my presence whenever patients died with whom I had had long conversations. It was now confirmed, true, that Pelisa was dead. It was not a phenomenon which would occur, it had occurred. I placed a hand on her left knee and prayed. Then marked her head with a sign of the cross. I had regrets.

Before today, Pelisa and I – although her speech was defected into near silence – had agreed on surprising her children with a video call. Her old-fashioned phone could not do a video call, she had said it with a smile on her face many days before she deteriorated. So I decided to use my phone so that she could take in the faces of her children, absorb the unspeakable joy of seeing children who have come from her. It was supposed to be for the last time, but that last time never came. It had not come to me that she would die soon. It had not played in my dreams. Other appointments kept me away from the hospital on the day we were to make the call. Now there was a huge difference between the Pelisa whose eyes are shut with her body curled into the stiffest version of herself, and the Pelisa whom I first met two weeks ago smiling.

Two weeks ago, the day after she learned my name, she began to whisper it whenever I came and stood next to her. She recognized my presence even before turning to see me, as though she counted the hours and waited for me to come, "Anthony", she half-rose before sinking back.

"How did you know that it's me?" I asked

"Hayibo! I know, I always know. You that you are very big like this, bigger than your age, eish. You look older than thirty *wena*", her eyes lifted to my face, and we both laughed. Although her laughter was weak, it felt refreshing. Because it was my first time of seeing her laugh.

The day before, the very first day I met her, she had been death silent. Her head lay quietly on the pillow, her hair streaked with grey in front. She was hooked up to a drip. She tore her eyes away from everything I said: "Good evening", "How are you?" "I am Anthony from Mariannhill". And after a moment's pause, I asked her whether she had any kids.

Tears came and stood in her eyes. "Kids? My children?" It seemed all of a sudden that "kids," this single-syllabled word, meant more than I ever knew. "Why did you mention my children?" Her tears crawled down her cheeks, her Zulu accent trembled as she spoke on. "Anthony, I have not been able to sleep well at night because I have not been able to cry. Now I can sleep again after you are gone. It gets lonely here at night, very lonely, but I will sleep tonight. Thank you, thank you". I thought: So it is okay to cry? I had never thought about crying as a need, what one needed to do in order to sleep well at night. I thought about what kind of mysterious therapy crying is, because therapies are supposed to save us from having to cry isn't it? Or maybe there is the life-snatching kind of tears as opposed to a life-giving one.

Maybe there are times when the therapy for a particular kind of pain is the ability to name it, looking it in the face, touch it, give it a name like it were your child. I brought a chair close to her and sat there. “Would you love to tell me about your children?”

“Of course, I want. I want to. They’re the only people I want to talk about. I can talk about them forever”. She began unearthing memories, dabbling tears off her face with her hand. Pausing at intervals to sob. Sometimes she formed words in her mouth and was not able to roll them out because they were words so precious, words of happy sadness or sad happiness. Words that took all the space for her air and left her breathing labored. She brought them carefully, as though they were made of glass, fragile and would break if forcefully dropped.

In the coming days, after visiting other patients I would join Pelisa in looking into family picture albums of her children, through storytelling, until she deteriorated and talked very little. It was the day she could hardly say anything that I promised her a video call with her kids. She only smiled at me – really smiled, and I took the smile for an agreement. She said nothing. I did all the talking and replying for her. But she smiled – really smiled. She was clearly conveying something she could not say, something more than a yes. Perhaps a *thank you for this opportunity*. That opportunity never came.

When I heard the sister nurse call her family at the reception to say that Pelisa had died, I shut my mind’s ears. Especially to the voice on the other end of the phone. Calling her family would have been the hardest thing for me to do. But these nurses have grown indifferent and unemotional from years of telling people their fate, calling all kinds of people to say: “your father died”, “Your sister died”, “your child didn’t make it”, until they lost count and feelings around it. I clearly remember this moment because a brother went with me whom I had told earlier about Pelisa. His being in his black cassock at the other end of the body makes this memory stand out.

The body. She was now a body. Pelisa’s name was suddenly non-existent on our lips, but it was on a tag stapled unto the body bag. Until this moment, I thought about how she had said, “my children, they are the only people I want to talk about”. Now she was a body being put into a bag. Never to say more about the children we loved to talk about. It was for her that I fetched a death notification form from the mortuary. It was her name that I wrote on it with a black pen. She was the one on the trolley who was being taken to the mortuary and would never eat breakfast again.

That evening, I returned to the Mariannahill monastery and prayed. There was a little room to escape the guilt of not coming on Saturday which we planned for the video call but coming instead on Sunday. The way I saw it, she should have seen her children before death. The way I saw it, she was truly looking forward to the video call. It was why I kept glancing back at the mortuary where we had taken her, as I walked home to the monastery. But what difference would it have made if she saw them? Would she have lived a day more, or two? Maybe she would have died differently. Actually I thought for the first time, how an extra day in one’s life could make such a huge difference. Just one more day, and her fate might not have changed, but her story would have been slightly different. Perhaps a different last page. That was the difference between yesterday and today.

Lightening flapped through the windows of the monastery church, summoned the statues in the church into potent figures. For a split second it was as though they breathed in and out, gave out air that made the building refreshingly psychedelic, their eyes everywhere, a dank chill in the air.

Wind blew in from all opened doors, the candle flames flickered each time the wind picked up, a noisy flicker, and then another long period of nothing. Sitting alone in the church and inhaling the faint smell of candles, watching the colored glass windows create a sensation of inhabiting a hallowed space, I thought about how Pelisa's family must be battling with news of her death, now. I imagined them screaming until they were hoarse. Or did it numb them? Her sister who took care of her kids, how did she bear the burden of delivering the news to the children? How did she go about it? One family was once more embarking on the painful journey of accepting and surviving a loss. God had a job to do, a family to lift up from the abyss of despair, lead them on where human efforts stopped. And as I prayed for them, it was as though I was praying in a dream.

I would write into my journal that night: "Even the dying look forward to something. Hope is that strong. And in the moment of death, it is neither theology nor dogma that people think about, really. It is the small moments of love, of charity done to them and for them, of forgiveness that they have enjoyed and shared. They do not carry the details of catechism in mind, I think, I doubt. They simply carry essence. The essence of all things which is to love and to be loved. And if they would be grateful for anything at that time, it is to have known love. All the small bits and pieces of it, coming back together to make a collage of important feelings. We need to be born and be alive in order to come across love. Love is the theme of all the stories the dead take with them, because it is the title of the story we unconsciously looked forward to reading from the moment we were born, occupying the spaces in our minds that would remain light, yet never empty.

Is it not why a HIV positive mother such as Pelisa, knew the children were HIV positive and still wanted the child to be born? Is it not why many people have lived a little longer than they thought they ever would? Love. You know, at some point in our lives, we will all come to see the vanities of rivalry and envy, these things we bicker and bite about. Many of us will come to a point where we can only channel our energy into staying alive for ourselves and those love. It is the memory of love that would matter the most on a hospital bed, the only book we can read when our eyes fail, when we confront the uncomfortable nearness of mortality.

Is there something you're not telling the people you love? I am thinking now about all that Pelisa's kids should have said in the video call, most likely in Zulu, a language so beautiful whenever Pelisa spoke it with the nurses. Maybe we do not have as much time as we think. We do not have enough luxury of time to swallow up an "I miss you" or keep a "thank you" in us as though it were a treasured secret. As though they did not come to us in order to be said. How easy it is for me to resist love even when it comes – because I am shy? Maybe I am not generous enough to be the one on the receiving end of love. And yet I would one day search my mind's archives for memories of it, then wish that I had more. I would scramble for it like a hungry street urchin searching the bins of neighborhoods for something to feed on.

How late it is when we wait for tragedy to happen, then love becomes the parody of a broken hymn! Love as a resource for the living, turns into treasure at death. Too precious to be necessitated by tragedy instead of everything. Everything else. It is these stories of love that would one day, count the most. It is these stories that we are collecting already, bringing together like a harvest of happy tears, living now knowing that we would die one day and carry them along, die with them in order to live with them.