

TO BE A MAN

Blessing Okwong.

To be a man is to be born with the X and Y chromosomes.

This was what I was taught in Biology class but this was not the reality I lived with. It was much more complicated.

When my parents got divorced, that was when my walls started shaking like the walls of Jericho. It didn't make sense that two couples who were once head over heels in love with each other, exchanging vows at God's sacred altar would suddenly feel they did not love each other again, become sworn enemies, and separate without thinking about the others whom their actions would hurt- my twin sister and I. As they say, when the elephants fight, it is the grass that gets trampled on.

Sharing everything in halves, I was the kid who got to be with Dad. This was the beginning of my nightmare. Dad didn't take the divorce well and it haunted him for years while I had to suffer to understand he was going through a phase. Then, Auntie Toyo came to live with us.

I was turning 10 when I started noticing how long she looked at me. How she would get me ice cream even on occasions that didn't give reasons for her generosity. Then my dad started working late and Auntie Toyo spent more time in my room.

It was one cool Friday evening, Dad had gone to the Village for a funeral and would not return until Sunday evening. My twin sister was still around as Dad had picked us both from school. He had given her 50 naira to buy *trebo* and *goody goody* and to me, he said I should be a man. To be a man?

Later that evening, Mum came to pick up my sister and when I had asked to follow them as Dad was gone for the weekend, she said I should stop being a crybaby. "You will soon be a man. Learn to be strong."

Auntie Toyo called me into her room to help her oil her back as her hands could not reach her. "...but how have you been oiling your back before today?" I didn't say it out loud. I was an obedient child, so I did as told. Soon, she asked me to go and lock the doors so that it was night already and nobody would go out again. I did and returned to the room as she had instructed.

Returning to the living room, she was lying on the couch with her wrapper loosely tied around her chest, watching a movie on the television. She asked me to come watch the movie with her. I did. As I lay on the bed, which she had brought out from the room, she asked me to move closer

to her. The living room grew darker and she removed her wrapper complaining that the house was hot. She asked me to remove my pajamas too but I told her the house was not hot.

I didn't like the movie so I pretended to be asleep. But Auntie Toyo started making some sounds as if in pain and asked me to touch her breast. I told her I could not. She insisted. She was now touching me all around and putting her hand inside my pajamas trousers. I didn't know what feeling that caused and I cried and told her I was not comfortable. She promised Ice cream. Suya. Popcorn. I told her I didn't want to. Then her tone changed. Nice Auntie Toyo changed!

She threatened to beat me and make this house hell for me. Dad would never know, she had said. She told me to watch the movie and do exactly what the man was doing with the lady to her. She said this was what would make me a man. The man my dad had talked about earlier on. She said I would enjoy it. So, she forcefully, in a manner I had never seen her before, took off my pajamas scooped me on the bed, and made my body touch with hers and do things that made my heart beat so fast I feared it would explode.

She said I must not tell anybody. She said nobody talks about this kind of thing but everyone does it. She said things that convinced me not to ever open my mouth. But even without the threat, how was I to tell people? Who was I to tell? My dad? Would he believe that Auntie Toyo was... what was even the name for it?

It happened the next day and the day after and every other day Dad was not around. The house grew uncomfortable. I started having wet dreams. I was no more uncomfortable walking around the house with just pants. I felt she was looking, so I wore clothes all the time.

When I was thirteen, she snuck into my room one cold rainy night. I was worn out from playing football with my friends and I had told her I was not in the mood. She said she was and I have to. I told her I would scream if she tried to force me but she said the rain was too heavy, and Dad wouldn't hear me. I was determined to escape that night so I ran to my dad's room and told him all about it. He looked at me like I was speaking a foreign language, and told me to lie down that it was all a nightmare.

That morning was the worst morning of my life. I woke up to a sharp pain cut across my back like a machete was used to divide it into two. Then another one and another one. I was now wincing on the bed like an earthworm that had salt sprinkled on it.

While my dad's face was washed red like a hot plate, I saw Auntie Toyo standing next to him with a wide wicked grin like, "Dor oooo... I told you". I was in pain! Whatever the story was, there was no way I would convince my dad otherwise.

My mum came by that morning. She was burning with rage. Thoughts ran through my head. I was sweating like a Christmas goat. I felt the ground would open and swallow me or I would just

faint or something would just happen. But everywhere was quiet, except the old wall clock ticking.

“I will take him for admission tomorrow morning at the Community Boy’s High School. He will be boarding there and he will visit his grandparents during the holidays.” My Mum said, not taking her eyes off me.

“Alright then, that is fine by me. I shall be anticipating you tomorrow then.” My dad replied. My mum left without saying a word to me. I begged to follow her but nobody said anything. It was more like, “After everything, you still have the guts to talk?”

Aunty Toyo had told my dad that I had started keeping bad friends in the neighborhood and that I had this girl she had caught me with the other evening when she had returned from choir rehearsals. My major offense was that she had seen me watching her in the bathroom a couple of times and I stayed up late to watch obscene movies.

My anger was not in these false accusations. It was that my parents should have listened to me or asked if it was the truth. My dad’s conclusion was I had made up the story last night and I needed some deliverance. No one believed that I was abused!

Well, my dad did. He just didn’t see me as the victim. He called me three days later after Aunty Toyo had left. Why should I have allowed a woman to use me? I should have been a man. I should have taken it, not received it. Did that mean he believed me? Why was I not the victim here?

My dad said when it comes to abuse, women were the victims. There is no empathy for the men. You are expected to be a man, have the strength and overcome, deal with it, and not cry. He told me how sorry he is but this is a man’s world and its reality. I was to tell no one of what happened because I would be laughed at, for being weak. He continued by telling me how the genesis of his broken marriage was when he was demoted at work. “To be a man is to be okay”, he said.

My experiences with Aunty Toyo and my parent’s broken marriage had a toll on me. I became very distant from the world and everyone in it. It seemed like I lived with a burden and there was this fear eating me from the inside. I had nightmares haunting me and nothing made sense. I lived in depression and almost committed suicide.

My grades couldn’t afford to drop, so I pushed all my energy into my academics. “As a man, you have to work hard and be successful”, my Dad would say. Somehow, I envied my sister. All she had to do was look pretty and learn how to cook. She could easily get money from my dad when she visited but when I did, he made me work for it. He said my sister needed money to buy her basic needs and I didn’t need money for anything. If I do, then I have to work for it. “You will not behave like a woman under my watch.”

It was okay for my sister to have Bs and Cs. It was not okay for me. I was to study engineering or medicine or statistics or do tech. My sister could study fashion design or go learn make-up. She could learn anything she wished to but I must study what will make me successful in the future. “If you like, joke about your future”, my mum said.

I got admitted into the University years later. To me, it was an escape from my little world and the family drama. I was not used to girls or being comfortable around them, especially with my experience with Aunty Toyo, my mum leaving my dad, and having attended a boys’ school. So, I never talked to any girl in my class.

Soon, I had eyes looking at me like I was some outcast. Rumors called me a nerd and gossip taught me I was gay. I was not social. I stood by my own opinion, even if it meant the whole class was on the opposite side. I had my headphones on 24/7 because music was the only one who understood me.

Then, I met Precious in my sophomore year. She came in as a transferred student. Precious was the opposite of me. If I was invincible, she was seen. Beautiful, smart, light-skinned, perfect dentition, shining eyes, black long hairs. She was almost too perfect to be real.

On her first day in school, she complimented my handwriting. When I smiled saying thank you, she said I had a “sweet smile”. No one had been this nice to me, so I could not stop looking at her.

I never answered greetings from any of the girls before and I never answered when my name was called. I didn’t know how to. I didn’t want to be enticed gradually like Aunty Toyo did, so I held on to my guard. But Precious was trouble.

She greeted me every time, even when I didn’t respond. When I had my headphones on, she would smile and wave at me. She got my contact from the class group chat messaged me and asked why I did not like returning her greetings. I told her I was not used to it and she said it was okay. She would keep greeting me until I got used to it.

One of the guys in my class who was on my football team and my roommate noticed the whole ‘glow’ I had when she was around and told me to ‘grab the golden opportunity’. He said I was dulling and soon enough, one of the big boys in class or the school would snatch her away.

So, I had to be a man!

He told me to ask her out on a date and every other thing a guy should do to woo his lady. When she called one evening, I asked her to go on a date with me. She accepted. After the meal, I paid. I tried telling her nice things that would make her smile. She smiled. I picked up and paid for the

cab. I had to walk her down to her hostel and make sure she was in her room before walking back to my hostel, alone. When I was in my room, I still had to check up on her.

That night, I thought of Precious. She was unlike anyone I had ever known. Her presence was warm, inviting, and accepting. It was like she saw right through my façade, straight to the vulnerable person I had been hiding for so long.

To keep Precious, I needed money, my friend had said. When I asked him why, he said girls have needs. It was these basic needs, too, that my dad sent my sister double the money he sent me. Didn't we have basic needs too, as a man?

So, I picked a part-time job. I had to be a successful man and success was measured by the size of a man's wallet.

My dad fell ill in my third year. It was one of the hardest periods of my life. That evening, Patricia, my twin sister, and I left school to go visit him and see how he was doing.

We entered a public taxi along with two other passengers and the driver. We got to the Police Checkpoint and one of the officers stopped the taxi. After getting his commission from the driver, he asked me and the other guy to come out with our properties.

My bag was searched thoroughly, I was asked to provide the receipt for the laptop I carried and I was questioned for using an iPhone.

Without much investigation, I was handcuffed and asked to follow them to their van. The other guy was dragged too because his hair was in dreadlocks.

My sister and the other girl were not even allowed to come out, talkless of being checked. To be a man and look well to do was a crime in Nigeria.

I tried telling them I wasn't into Internet Fraud, but that was like pouring water on ducklings. For them not to carry the matter to their station, the other guy and I had to transfer 50k each. What was our crime? Was it the dreads he kept? Was it my iPhone or my laptop?

It was because we were men!

After all the struggle and the money spent on drugs and medication, my dad passed away. If the walls of my life were shaking years ago, it was tumbling now. It was falling into broken pieces. Everything fell apart. My uncle Eugene had tapped my shoulders after the funeral and said, "Take heart, my son! Be a man."

All of my dad's savings were used to fight for his life in the hospital and to plan the funeral. So, he died leaving nothing, except three children, my twin sister, and his wife. So, I had to work, I had to maintain my grades at school and I had to remain sane and be a man.

I could not keep up with Precious, so I had to tell her to move on. “It is about me, not you. You are such a great person. It's my loss.” That was the summary of it. I couldn't tell her I had setbacks. It would be me complaining and nagging, as a woman. My friend had said.

Society had set an unyielding definition of what it meant to be a man – strong, stoic, and successful. My worth was constantly under scrutiny. I had to be the provider, the breadwinner, and the unyielding pillar of the family.

The harder I tried to fit into this rigid mold of masculinity, the more fragile my ego became. I was constantly haunted by the fear of not being “man enough.” The pressure to conform to these standards has left me with an ego as brittle as glass.

During my final year school project, my project supervisor told me during one of the sessions with him over my project work that he was planning for outreach with young teenage boys in his foundation. He said his guest had called a rain check and he needed a recommendation on who to fix in his stead. For some time, I felt quiet. There was a war going through my mind but the voice of my father telling me how I would be laughed at and the scornful wicked grin of Aunt Toyo were drowning me.

My project supervisor asked again to be sure I heard him. Until I blurted out the words, “I have a story to tell”, I didn't know. He smiled at me, telling me to share it. I opened my mouth twice, but no sound was made.

“Patrick, see, men are humans and they have the same emotions as women. We do not have any program or orientation to groom our young men, hence my foundation. If no one will speak for us, we have to speak for ourselves. You have to forgive yourself by sharing your story”, he said.

I held back the tears in my eyes. I was a man and men don't cry. This was my chance to speak and if he will see me as a coward, then fine!

“As a teenager, I lived with my dad after my parents' marriage crumbled. It was a challenging time, to say the least. Aunt Toyo, one of Dad's relatives, moved in with us and she subjected me to emotional abuse. It left a deep scar on my soul, and I felt like I had to hide my pain, weakness, and vulnerability to fit society's rigid definition of masculinity. The world had taught me that being a man meant wearing a mask of hardness, concealing emotions, and proving my worth through financial success.”

My supervisor looked at me for what seemed like forever. He was a man in his early 40s and I have always admired him. Still in the silence, he grabbed his black pen and wrote down something. He sat up, and leaned in his chair, not taking his gaze away from me. He said he had written my name as the guest speaker. He said I had to share my story. I have to embrace my vulnerability. He said my vulnerability didn't diminish my masculinity; it strengthened it.

It was liberating to finally talk about it, to let go of the armor I had worn all these years. It was reassuring to hear him say that I had to break free from the hard, small cage society had constructed for me. "Masculinity is not a one-size-fits-all concept. It is being authentic, compassionate, and embracing my humanity."

Somehow, I wished I had met him all this while. Maybe, my life would have been with much ease. I was grateful I met him all the same. He introduced me to his foundation and helped me heal my scars.

On the day of the program with the foundation, I looked at the teenage boys and I could see myself amongst them; broken, withdrawn, and living in fear. I mounted the podium and began,

"My young friends",

"To grow into strong, responsible individuals, it is essential to understand the expectations placed on us. To be a man is to be born with the burden of responsibilities.

We are expected to be providers, protectors, and leaders, but this doesn't mean we should ignore our emotions or vulnerabilities.

As young men, we face various pressures – the pressure to be strong and dependable, the pressure to always be there for others, and when there is no one there for us, they expect us to still be okay. They give the idea that we should never show our true feelings. We must always be men.

Society sometimes wrongly suggests that we should hide our emotions and toughen up, but that's a disservice to our humanity. True masculinity isn't about being confined to a narrow definition or living in a 'hard' shell. Instead, it's about being confident enough to be ourselves and embracing our fears, weaknesses, and vulnerabilities. It's about being authentic.

We don't have to prove our worth through material possessions or by appearing 'tough.' To be a man is not to have the most money. The more we feel pressured to be hard, the more fragile our self-esteem can become.

As men, there is a lot we go through, and society expects you to take it all in. They tell you,

Take it as a man.

Shut it all up.

Don't cry.

Don't speak up.

Don't complain.

Be a man!

Dear Brothers, let go of the unnecessary burdens. Don't let them overwhelm you. It's okay to express your feelings and speak up when needed before you get drowned.

Let go of the pressure!

Speak up, bro!"