



**2019 Shortlist**

**When Silence is King**

**by**

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## When Silence Is King

My mother tells a story of me, aged three, right before we leave England for Nigeria.

I am at the Notting Hill Carnival dancing. I dance with such confidence and abandon that an impressed bystander rewards me with a pound coin for my efforts. I smile whenever she tells me the story of the person I used to be.

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My formative years are spent in Lagos, Nigeria. I learn the national anthem for school and Bible verses for church. I learn the Yoruba etiquette of kneeling to greet my elders and the importance of using my right not my left hand when handing things to people, lest I cause offence. My parents determine my priorities and the boundaries of my learning.

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On the eve of my 36<sup>th</sup> year, I find myself sitting on my bike at a T-junction with my instructor Thomas.

I have been taking lessons for a month, having never learned to cycle as a child. In adulthood it suddenly becomes a priority.

Thomas has a *Mr Miyagi* from *Karate Kid* type aura about him – the sage with confidence in his instructing techniques, the requirement that I complete repetitive exercises even when I am not sure where he is heading with it all. He leads me through quiet roads and parks. He teaches me to complete U-turns in tight spaces and warns me to stay an arm's length away from car doors. He says that he is confident that I am ready to take things to the next level and starts telling me the plan, step by step. I can hear his words but am unable to digest any of it. Even though I don't feel ready for the main roads, I shut my mouth and hold my fears within the four chambers of my heart. I know I need to veer right but can't for the life of me recall what to do next.

I take my fingers off the break and advance into the main road at speed with Thomas behind me and cars beside me. Dread wraps itself around me. In the distance, Thomas' voice grows louder. I continue pedalling until he comes alongside me and tells me to pull over. I come to a dead halt at the side of the road without signalling or indicating my intent.

'What are you doing?' Thomas asks. 'I told you to turn right and then take the first left into that park.' He puts a tiny puncture in the atmosphere with his finger and points in the direction I was supposed to go.

'I didn't know what you wanted me to do.' My heart is racing. I feel like a kid in serious trouble.

'If you didn't understand, you should have asked me before we set off.'

I open my mouth to speak but only a cascade of tears comes out. Thomas puts his hand on my shoulder and wills me to take some deep breaths.

'I didn't mean to upset you.' A softness creeps back into his voice.

'No, it's not you. It's just...' I begin gasping for air. 'It's just that when I am not confident about something, I freeze.'

My tears have nothing to do with cycling and everything to do with my lack of confidence. I have no great desire to become a cyclist. The Tour de France is not on my radar. Cycling is just something I need to master because I figure that if I can learn to do this one small thing, then maybe I can find the confidence to do the one big thing that has eluded me for so long.

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I have lived with an eating disorder for almost two decades. I have spent the past few years failing in recovery or at least convinced that recovery is beyond me. The knowledge of this has battered my mind. The house my childhood confidence built is no more than a pile of rubble.

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My mother tells me another story. This one I remember clearly.

I am in Nigeria. My mother has just returned from a trip to the UK where she spends half the year working. During her long absences, my siblings and I are in the care of my father and my maternal grandmother.

I am seven or eight, waiting in the darkest corner of our sky-blue sitting room in Lagos. My mother walks in through the open glass doors. My siblings run to embrace her. She returns their affection with kisses and squeezes until they take their leave and race out to play under the cruel heat of the Lagosian sun.

Silence descends. I have her all to myself. Her face is laced with an ethereal glow. These trips always seem to do to that her. Or maybe it is time that has changed my sight. I walk towards her and embrace her tightly, not wanting to let her go.

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My earliest memories are firmly grounded in Nigeria. Jùjú musicians from King Sunny Ade to Ebenezer Obey provide the soundtrack to my childhood. My days are filled with learning and my nights illuminated by fireflies, kerosene lanterns and dancing flames atop thick white candles.

I remember sticky fingers from sickly sweet fluorescent Fanta and my father getting out the blackboard to teach us Maths on Christmas day.

I remember Jimmy 'Superfly' Snuka flying through the air and Big Daddy with his light blond hair. I remember my daddy on Saturday mornings watching with wide eyes as grown men bashed the hell out of each other.

I remember more vividly the day my father comes close to death outside our compound gates, his stomach grazed by the bullet of an armed robber. He lives, but our relationship barely survives the separation which is to come.

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I have no distinct memories of the first three years of my life which are spent in England. As a child in Nigeria, at night, particularly during my mum's absences, a strange melancholy washes over me as I lie curled up on the bottom bunk. I think I remember a cold country far away but nothing more. There is just a thought that before I was here, I was somewhere else. And now, it is to this place called 'somewhere else' that my father tells me and my siblings we shall return.

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When I am an adult, settled in the UK, my mother tells me another story.

'You didn't talk when you were in this country.' She is referring to the first three years of my life.

'We thought there was something wrong with you. We took you to a specialist. He said you were fine, that you would talk when you felt like it.'

'It was only when we got to Nigeria that you started talking.'

'Your first words were, "Hey, hey, boy, boy"'

'You pointed at a boy across the road.'

My mother's smile warms the room for a moment before it suddenly fades.

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The day I tell my mother I have an eating disorder, she is lying in a hospital bed where she will spend the next three months being investigated for an, as yet, unknown illness.

'I know,' is her simple response.

I am sitting on the edge of the bed looking away from her. I am a child though I am on the verge of my 30<sup>th</sup> birthday. Outside, the day is rich with light and activity. The wheel of the London Eye is turning but my vision is blurred by the pool of tears settling on my lower lids. It is years since I last cried in front of her.

She takes my hand and begins to stroke it. Our spirits have not come this close to touching in years.

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The day I leave Nigeria for England, aged nine, there are neither tears nor sorrow because I have no idea of the road that lies ahead. All I know is that I will soon be reunited with my mother, my first love.

Our reunion is a lot cosier than expected. All six of us cram ourselves into a bed and breakfast for a year whilst we pray our hearts out to God for more permanent accommodation. The more passionate the prayer, the greater the size of our hope.

In the mornings, when darkness still reigns, my mother leaves for work. I don't know exactly what she does, I just know she calls it 'early morning'. Once or twice a week, she comes back late in the afternoon with two large portions of fish and chips soaked in vinegar and wrapped in day-old newspapers before heading back out to her second or third job. We tuck in with delight, then spend the rest of the day caught up in mischief inside the B & B which helps me forget the horrors of the school day.

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English is my first language but Yoruba is my mother's tongue, so it is by inheritance audible in my words and speech. I say hair-rer rather than airer and suss-pan rather than sauce-pan. I speak without apology and put emphasis in places foreign to the British accent. All these things and more expose my siblings and I to ridicule and abuse from time to time.

In our first few months at school, we, 'the Africans', are regularly taunted. Sometimes things get a little physical but we are warriors. We throw back the ugly words which are hurled at us and deflect the hands or shoes which fly in our direction. At the end of one school day, a girl spits in my face then runs off. I am the quickest in my class save for one boy. There is no chance she will escape. I run after her, grab her by the collar and push her back against the iron gate.

'Don't you ever do that again.' My face is tight with rage. The sun is my only witness.

Eventually, a ceasefire is called. Fists are laid down, malicious tongues rested. We resume our primary school years as though none of this ever happened, but my heart begins to store up the weight of this and other memories from those years.

Soon, my accent will be bleached, my hair straightened. Soon, I will learn to despise the big and small things which make me, me. By the time I reach secondary school, my accent will be no more. Only a few kinks will remain in what will become my well-ironed straight jacket of an English accent.

\*\*\*

When we are children, in Nigeria, we are discouraged from speaking Yoruba at home even though it is the language through which our mother and father converse and find expression. They fear it will interfere with our mastery of the English language and in some schools, speaking in the vernacular will teach you a painful lesson.

Despite this prohibition, I go on to learn Yoruba because of the aptitude I have for mimicry and mockery. In adulthood, it is this language which will help heal the wounds in my relationship with my mother.

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As a teenager, I have no understanding of my mother's ways, her anger, her sadness. At home, there is sometimes joy and sometimes fear. For years to come and well into adulthood, when she is no longer the person I remembered, a shot of fear races through me whenever she calls out my name.

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In Year 8 or 9 at my all-girls school, we are told that we will have one day out of school to accompany our parents to work. It is called, '*Take Your Daughter to Work Day*'. My father is to all intents and purposes invisible, so it is my mother who I accompany.



I arrive outside a care home in a well-heeled, well-decorated part of Kensington & Chelsea. Yet there is nothing pretty about the sights which greet me inside – greenish-brown faeces smeared all over white cotton sheets, more of the same stuck on the behind of a large pale resident and my mother struggling to bear the weight of bodies double her size. I see some pleasant sights too – my mother laughing with residents and feeding those who can no longer feed themselves because the circle of life has come for their asses too. I see my mother running here and there and the compassion which she shows her residents.

I get a glimpse into a different side of her, her daily life. But my eyes and mind are still too young to grasp the magnitude of the weight she carries.

Decades later, she tells me about the resignation letter she wrote and the woman at work who dissuades her saying, ‘you will just be sitting at home depressed with your head turning’.

\*\*\*

The day I wave goodbye to my father at the airport in Nigeria, I do not realise that I am also waving goodbye to his union with my mother. In later years, I will wonder how two people who loved each other which such fierceness can no longer find common ground. In later years when I think of my father, I will seek an answer to the following question: if the definition of a stranger is ‘a person whom one does not know or with whom one is not familiar’, how do you define a person you once knew but are no longer familiar with?

Separation and the pressure of singlehandedly raising five children takes its toll on my mother and subsequently our relationship. In my teenage years, we become estranged. I can no longer see her beauty, just her anger and frustration. I am lost to her and she to me. I speak one language and she, another. I learn the rules of engagement – answer a rhetorical question at your peril, slam doors if you wish but silently. Contain a storm within the walls of your mind, reduce your scream to a whisper.

I fill my diary with fury and my ears with hip-hop. I find comfort in my use and abuse of food.

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Sometimes, it is hard to do the calculations which will explain my teenage years. My word is just one part of the equation. There was love and there was fear. There was so much more between here and there.

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When I am just a girl in Nigeria, my father brings home animals at times of festivity. Rams, goats and chickens, blissfully ignorant about their impending slaughter.

Once decapitated, the chickens are dipped in a bucket of boiling water, made soft, easily plucked.

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Both my mother and I are softened by sickness. Hers of the body, mine of the mind.

The day I realise the tectonic plates of my mind are colliding, slipping, I am on my way home from work. I am standing at an open-air tube station in West London staring at the tracks when I am suddenly overwhelmed by dread the size of a universe.

In the weeks, months and years that follow, I stumble through life in a constant state of confusion. I have the feeling that nothing is real, not even me. I lose the ability to see in colour. I doubt, then question my own existence.

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There is no word for depression in Yoruba. Nor is there a word for anorexia or bulimia or any of the other labels attached to me by learned strangers.

My mother refers to the things which ail me as, 'your condition'. Sometimes I wish she would just call it what it is and at other times I realise how hard it is to adopt a new vocabulary when you have spent a lifetime in the skin of another language?

In the days following my revelation, my mother says, 'but I don't understand. It's not part of our culture.' Later, she begins to blame herself, saying she was too tough on us. I remind her that my other siblings did not end up like me. I tell her that there is no one reason for my 'condition', simply an accumulation of things. She sets her mind on understanding.

Sometimes, she stumbles across a TV programme and discusses her findings with me or uses it to encourage me.

'Look, that woman has one leg and she is climbing a mountain.'

'Look, she too had an eating disorder but now she is better.'

At times, her words of encouragement make me feel worse about myself even though I know she means well. The success of others confirms my belief that I lack the ability to emerge triumphant in the battle with my own mind.

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My mother is fervent in prayer. The sound of her crying out to God comes through the walls like a bulldozer. Prayer gives her hope. Hope is the baton she passes on to me.

'Everything which has a beginning must have an ending.'

'No condition is permanent.'

I hear her words, but my heart does not receive them.

She hears the sense of helplessness in my voice and sometimes I hear the despair in hers.

'I wish we had never come to this country,' she says. She assumes things would have turned out differently.

She tells me that she just wants me to be who I used to be. I try to explain to her that who I was, was still broken but she cannot understand because my body did not look broken.

Sometimes, I think that what hurts her most is the state of my body not the state of my mind. Sometimes I blame myself for this because I tell her only what I am comfortable revealing. I tell her that I have an eating disorder. I don't tell her that this is the one thing which keeps the depression of my teenage years at bay.

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On days when I have lost all hope, my mum tells me, '*Ojojúmọ koni óbe obinrin dun*'.

It is not every day that a woman's stew will be sweet. Sometimes things will be good, sometimes things will be bad.

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My mother is a wonderful cook. I know this, though I rarely eat her food. She spends Saturdays making black-eyed beans and sardine stew. She grounds up *ata rodo* (scotch bonnet peppers), tomatoes and onions. She boils this mix then fries it in oil and adds thyme, bay leaf, Maggi cubes and chicken which has been roasted to death because that is just the way she likes it.

I cannot eat eba or pounded yam or jollof rice or any of the other foods which please her. But I can spend time with her in the kitchen talking, laughing or despairing.

Sometimes we stay silent about the loudest noise in the room, preferring instead to joke and swap stories. Other times she dares to ask me the question I stealthily try to avoid.

'How are you doing?'

It is a general question but I know her well enough to understand the specifics she is searching for. I know too that I will enjoy my time with her much more without this atlas stone of a problem on my back. She knows I have tried in vain to access more intensive treatment.

'I give up,' I tell her.

At times, a crack appears in the window of my life and I can no longer summon the energy to pretend or lie.

'I'm not asking for help anymore. I don't care what happens to me.' I go into one of my stream of consciousness rants until my mother brings me back to the present.

'Please don't say that. One more time. Try just one more time with your GP. I will even come with you.'

\*\*\*

When the condition of my body and mind become so severe that I am no longer able to work, my mother and I begin to spend more time together. I imagine this is what it must be like to be reunited with a long-lost love.

We begin to converse in Yoruba. She, my teacher and I, her student, embarrassed by the fact that I have greater fluency in foreign languages than in my mother's tongue. Nevertheless, with her encouragement and my persistence, I grow in confidence and we share stories in this rhythmical language.

'I used to sit and read with you when you were tiny.'

'You were always brilliant with languages.'

'All the nursery rhymes you learnt when you were with the nanny in the UK, you started singing when we got to Nigeria.'

'Frère Jacques, Frère Jacques, dormez-vous? dormez-vous?' She mutters the rest.

Despite my fluency in French, I am unable to help her finish the rhyme.

In the silence which follows, I begin to understand that these stories are not simply the plug which helps us reconnect. They are also her way of reminding me who I was, who I am.

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My mother is my greatest cheerleader and a lover of an educated mind. At times the two come into conflict.

During secondary school, I am known for my exploits as a barefoot track runner.

In my first year, I come second in a cross-country race. The winner has been training religiously. I am a novice.

My sports teacher says to me, 'you should join an athletics club.'

My mother says to me, 'you need to face your studies.'

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In a London Schools' athletics competition, I compete in the 100-metre hurdles. Towards the end of the race, I bump arms with a competitor. I am off balance and flailing. I crash into the penultimate hurdle and am left on the track in tears. I pick myself up and walk towards my mother. I see her smile, then laugh. I think she is laughing at my tears. I am twelve years old. I will not cry in front of her again until the day she is sick in hospital and I am unburdening myself to her.

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As a child, I cry out for my mum. As a teenager, I cry because of her. As an adult, I cry for her.

This circle of life stuff can be so cruel.

My mother is multiplying in age and sickness. Once, she was fleet of foot and now her steps are laboured. Once upon a time, I was the young girl in Brixton market pulling her trolley and doing half-sprints to keep up with her impatient feet. Now she is the one struggling to keep up with me and I am the one showing an unforgiving level of impatience.

I encourage her to take up an activity. She begins a Water Workout class at our local pool. I accompany her, just to be close to her.

One day, as I watch her playfully stroking the surface of the water against the tide of the class which is all bounce and overexertion, I begin to sob uncontrollably. Her childlike pleasure gives me a glimpse of the girl she once was. In that one moment, I see that once she was young and now she is old. I see that life, hers and mine, is the sum total of dashed hopes and simple pleasures. I see that life rarely unfolds in the manner we expect or intend.

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I am almost 200 miles from home when I begin residential treatment for my eating disorder in the East Midlands. My rapidly declining mental state has left me with no other option than to beg and plead for help.

This difficult period is sweetened only by the deeper renewal of my relationship with my mother. She encourages me to talk, cry, be vulnerable, pick up lost dreams. She empowers me and removes my shame because she accepts all of me, my past, my present, my story.

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My mum's ill health means she is only able to come and see me once in the almost five months I spend in treatment. Despite some initial progress, I end my time in treatment in a state of complete relapse. But I decide to stay in the area to continue outpatient treatment in the hopes of finding my way to recovery.

The tiring nature of treatment and the fact that I am completely divorced from all that is familiar leaves me craving my mother even more. The day she steps off the coach for her week-long visit, I burst into tears because I know that she is the one person in the world who truly knows me, and this truth has a strange effect on me.

She arrives at night with a suitcase as heavy as two grown men.

'I just wanted to bring you a few things.'

She begins to perform her *Mary Poppins* trick and out come two yam tubers, three plantains, fresh cutlery and plates, an iron and a liquidiser. In an alternate universe, this would be an episode of the *Generation Game*.

She is tired and so am I but still she insists on a tour of my flat.

'This place is lovely,' she says. 'I might have to move in with you.'

'Not on your nelly,' I tell her.

We laugh in unison.

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Seven years of sickness become seven years of learning for my mother and for me. I know she loves the cold in England not the humidity of Nigeria. I know laughter and storytelling are her best painkillers. I know that at the height of my sickness, she used to call out to me in the mornings, to check that I was still here, in the land of the living. I know she loves the company of good friends and thoughtful gestures like flowers and spontaneous hugs. I know she loves monetary gifts, my sister's carrot cake and big cards because the size of a card is her yardstick of love.

What I do not know is that she has not just come to say hello.

When we are alone at night in my flat, I turn on the electric heater to warm up her room before she goes to sleep. At times, I catch her sitting on the edge of the king-sized bed, staring out of the window into the dark void. I do not know what has captured her attention.

Soon she will return to London with her worries and her suitcase. On the eve of her departure, she tells me that I am still not eating enough. I am annoyed that she cannot see the effort I've made for her but I treasure my final morning with her, desperate to leave on good terms.

We joke, kiss, then embrace before she boards the coach.

I do not know that this will be our final separation.



I do not know that she came to say goodbye not hello.

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On the day my mother dies in Nigeria almost five thousand miles away from me, I, oblivious to this fact, am sitting in the middle of a food festival in Sheffield with my bike as my sole companion. By now, I am an accomplished cyclist. The crowd is full of food and sun-induced joy. I am suddenly struck by an immense feeling of loneliness, as though I am dead to the world and the world to me.

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My grandmother too died in Lagos, some years before my mother's death.

My mother tells me another story.

'Your granny was sitting in the bedroom one day. She said she wanted to see every room in my house. I asked her why, that she had already seen the rooms before. She kept on disturbing me so I said okay. I took her to all the rooms and then the balcony. She just sat there looking out.'

\*\*\*

In the drip drop of time which follows my mother's death, after the buckling of knees and the wretched groaning of grief, I become afraid of sleep. I am afraid of my mother coming to me like some ghostly apparition.

Months later when I begin to dream of her, I take comfort in sleep. In these dreams, I sense our time together is limited. Sometimes I cling to her, tell her she is not allowed to go anywhere. Other times, I calmly rest my head in the space between her shoulder and neck.

\*\*\*

My mother tells me other stories.

She tells me about my grandmother, who as a midwife delivered triplets and twins and as a mother, delivered my mother into the arms of my great grandmother. My grandmother did not wish to bear witness to the death of her sickly firstborn.

My mother tells me that she did not recognise her own mother when the latter finally came to reclaim her teenage daughter. She tells me how she fell in love with my grandmother, so full of mystery, beauty and a desire to indulge her daughter. She tells me about their separation when my mother, aged nineteen, was sent to live in England.

She tells me that when she was pregnant with me, her waters broke in Marks & Spencer but she carried on shopping as though nothing had happened. She tells me that I spent the first year of my life with an English nanny outside London because this was what people did back then. 'We couldn't work and take care of our children at the same time.'

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My mother will not live to see me in recovery. She will not hear my stories of hallucination and mental decimation in the wake of her death. She will not know that it is my bike that gives me temporary relief from the furnace of grief. She will not know that surviving this season gives me the strength to begin recovering. She will not hear how I end this story of life and death.

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I see her in my dreams,  
Early in the morning, when silence is king.  
She comes, to watch the rise and fall of my chest,  
She comes, to see that I still have breath.

## About the Author

Oluwafunmilayo (Funmi) Adewale is a former teacher and an eternal student. She is currently doing a Creative Writing MA at St. Mary's University. She enjoys writing in all its forms and recently had a short story published in the anthology, Gains and Losses. Funmi blogs about mental health and other issues at [www.in-sane-mind.com](http://www.in-sane-mind.com) and can be found on Twitter @Fumtastic. Through her writing on mental health issues, she hopes to gain more insight into herself and encourage greater openness in others. She is most at home when playfully conversing in Yoruba or when weaving her way through London traffic on her beloved green bike.