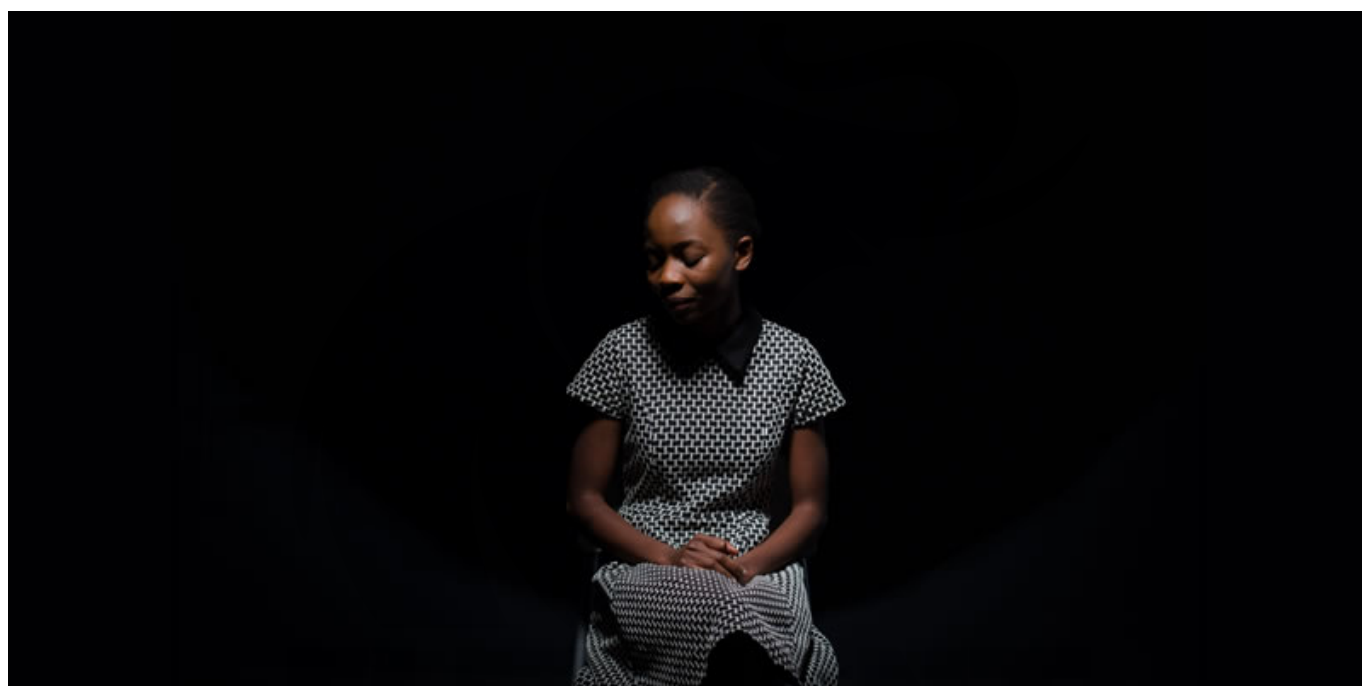




'His Odour Seemed to Be Everywhere, and It Made Me Gag': Breaking the Silence Around Sexual Violence

By Nelly Madegwa



When it happened the second time, I felt marked. I believed that the darkness would always lurk around me and people would sense the vulnerability.

Every time someone brought the topic up, I would cringe on the inside, guilt would trail my thoughts and gnaw at my soul. But that wasn't the worst. I felt shame. I was ashamed of something that wasn't my fault. I have been on the brink of losing my sanity more times than I can recall. I didn't know anyone who had gone through what I had gone through, so in my mind they couldn't relate. All I wanted was to go back, maybe make different choices, maybe the outcome would be different. I was stuck, frozen in time. But looking back now, my choices had little to do with what happened.

Prior to the first incident, a family acquaintance had given me an article cut out from a newspaper about date rape. I was turning 17 in a few days. I guess she figured I would need it; maybe it was a premonition. I skimmed through it, and would remember what it said a few days later.

I was living in Eldoret with my dad, having finished high school as I waited to join university. My dad had gone for a workshop for a week and requested I help him out with a few things at the office

while he was away. I had met this man earlier in my dad's office and he had introduced us. I would run into him many times after that, in the lift or at the supermarket, and we would chat briefly and part. In December he came in my dad's office to consult on something, and since my dad was not around I offered to help. Halfway through our conversation, as I searched for some file or other, he asked what I was up to that evening. I had another engagement, so I declined his offer for a date but asked him if we could reschedule for Thursday and he agreed.

He picked me up in Eldoret town at half past five. He had already chosen a place that I had no objection to, despite it being far off. I had known him for close to five months. He was friendly and cheerful. We chatted about his new job and my expectations of university, about the books we were reading. We ate, had juice, and at around a quarter to seven we headed out for him to drop me home, well within my curfew time. I had just turned 17 three days before.

On our way back, he asked if he could stop by his place. There was nothing sneaky about his character, so I didn't think anything was off. I entered his house, and sat there, clueless really, until he came back from the bedroom in boxers. I froze at the thought of what was about to happen. I remember thinking with utter and sudden dismay that the charade was over; he was no longer the charming guy I had known. He was aggressive and relentless at having his way, fumbling with my clothes. I said no, many times, but my pleas seemed to fuel his aggression. I remember thinking about how short it would probably last, and that I would soon be home and forget everything. But I also knew that things would never be the same again if this happened, and so I kept fighting him off, knowing that there was a very slim chance that he would stop.

He raped me, and I thought it was over. But my nightmare was just beginning. He lifted his body from mine, mumbled something and went to the bathroom. I sat there for seasons, coiled up, shaking. I didn't know which emotion to feel first - disgust, shame, guilt, anger, anger, anger...I fixed up my dress and took what was left of who I was, and walked to the door. He came out of the bedroom, and drove me home. I should have run, or screamed, or lashed out at him. But I didn't. I was afraid of what might happen if I did.

And he did not fit the description of a rapist. He was not a stranger; I had known him for a while. As I showered at home that evening, I wished I had claws. His odour seemed to be everywhere, and it made me gag. It was like I had carried him with me. I lay there in the dark; it felt like an eerie living phantasm. I wanted it to stop. The agony and desolation was beyond what I could bear. I had never felt that powerless.

My dad had been misdiagnosed with hypertension a while before, and he still had a stack of pills in the house that he now never used. I knew they had the effect of slowing your heart rate, and I figured if I took enough of them my heart would slow down until it came to a complete stop. I'm one of those people who generally have a phobia of tablets, pills, medications of all kinds. But this time I didn't need a nudge. I took a handful of them, and as I lay on my bed, within minutes I was spaced out, quiet, waiting for the end.

I had never thought of the world as ideal; neither did I think of it as that cruel. Of course I had heard stories; that so-and-so was "allegedly" assaulted or raped. Even in our language we always give power and the benefit of doubt to the perpetrator, and we reserve our default judgment for the victim - her demeanor, her character, it's always her choices that resulted in rape. For the longest time after this I was deluded into thinking that there were factors that predisposed me to assault. I knew nothing about the experience of sex; I was a virgin. The information I had was abstract, basically warnings about the effects of premarital sex. That was all, and with just that information, how was I to presume that I could be assaulted? The assumption was that abstinence was a choice.

But even my first kiss was an unwanted one - a wet, sloppy, detestable, dreadful act. I couldn't report it to anyone because I was ashamed, and worse, who would believe me? Maybe it was my fault. He was a hardworking man, active in church, and I felt like I was not going to ruin reputation because of an assault. I actually thought he felt sorry and that is why he stopped before it went any further. I convinced myself that leaving it in the past was ideal. Now I think of how many young women might have met my fate with him because I didn't take an action against him. The guilt still breaks me.

After I took the pills, I woke up the next day feeling hazy and run down. The memory of the previous evening was so unreal that even the sun was numbing and hurt my eyes. I sent my dad a message telling him I was ill so I could not go to the office. But he told me he needed me to send a parcel to Nairobi. So I showered and dragged myself to town, trying not to pass out. Just as I was about to get into the lift, I saw him. For a moment I froze. I knew I could not tough it out with him in the lift and so I ran for the stairs, running hard until the fourth floor and only stopping to catch my breath when I was in the office, the door locked behind me.

Over the next few months, I worked hard at trying to forget what had happened, suppressing any memory I associated with the assault, until it almost felt like it never happened as I refused to believe it had happened. But the second incident unearthed everything. I felt denuded, and I didn't realise how much of a toll it had been taking on my mind to hold it in for all that long.

I was at the University of Nairobi, studying what I loved, and everything was on course. It was the second year of my study, the second semester in late January, and classes had not fully started so we had lots of free time on our hands. Esther, my roommate, and I had gone to the graduation square for some fresh air, feeling guilty that we had spent the day indoors alternating between sleeping and watching movies. It began drizzling so we started to walk back. I ran into a friend just before the tunnel that passes under Uhuru Highway; we had not seen each for a while, since before we closed school for Christmas.

Esther was not well acquainted with him so she excused herself, leaving me behind. It was a little bit past seven, and not very dark - sunset comes later in January to March in Nairobi, so it was still twilight. As we took cover from the light drizzle, reminiscing at how we had spent Christmas, he mentioned a comedy series he had, which I was happy to check out. He even offered to upload it on my flash disk, and as we walked up to his room I grumbled about the how long the flight of stairs was. We got into his room and he locked the door behind him. That wasn't unusual in student rooms - we all did it to avoid random people barging in. There was always that crazy student moving up and down the hallways. By now the rain had intensified. We rarely experience such a downpour in January; it is typically the driest, hottest month of the year. Maybe that should have been my cue that this wasn't going to be a normal evening. I sat on his bed as he scrolled through his laptop.

Out of nowhere he tried to kiss me, and I quickly rebuffed him. But there was this look in his eyes; he definitely did not take well to rejection. Maybe I shouldn't have been so curt. He shifted suddenly from being friendly to purely aggressive. He threatened to call his friends, which was really a threat of gang rape, adding I would be doing myself a favour if I agreed to just him.

My mind couldn't fathom it. I could not think of a life after that. So I pleaded, too scared to scream as I didn't know who might hear me or come in, or worse, whether I might agitate him even more. He tried taking off my tights as he undid his pants. And then, maybe he got tired, or he changed his mind with all my fighting and squirming. He stopped, sat there and stared at the wall. I was afraid to move or even breathe. After what seemed like an eternity, he turned to me and apologised. He opened the door and insisted on walking me back to my room. But I just ran, and ran, and ran.

For the next few days I felt like his shadow was always trailing me. I was scared to go to classes as I had to go through a route that was next to his hostel. Again, I told no one. The fear of being ashamed made it even harder. Silence was preferable to being called a slut.

This time I couldn't push it away. It triggered everything, and hit hard like a mudslide. It bore a hole into my soul and my sense of security. I kept up appearances, got better at dry laughs and feigning interest as I barely held on, crying myself to sleep for almost three months.

As days went by, I was hardly making it through the day. I stopped going for lectures. I know how it feels to not be dead yet not feel alive. I knew it had reached a critical point when I walked into traffic and it was the screeching of cars that brought me back to reality. When I got back to my room, I googled places I might find help, and I did find one place somewhere in Upper Hill. I booked a session that Friday, but ended up having only one session out of the five that were prescribed. Each cost Sh2,000, and even that was a student discount from the usual Sh3,500, I couldn't afford all those sessions unless I talked to my parents to chip in, something I couldn't do because it would have risked them knowing what had happened.

I instead enrolled in a programme on sexual and reproductive health rights at the Young Christian Women's Association (YWCA) next to the university. That was my saving grace. There I met Camilla who took us through the programme. She opened up about going through rape. I no longer felt isolated. I spent a lot of time crying it out.

At the end of the session, I talked to a group of young girls about consent and sexual violence. I had more than fifty notes with questions on them, and that's how I got to know about three other girls who had been raped. The statement that stood out was: "I am embarrassed and ashamed."

One of the girls had been raped during the last school holidays. It happened on a day when she had not finished up some work that her mum had left for her to do. So when her mom returned, she was furious and wanted to hit her. The girl ran out of the house, into the darkness. She hid, terrified, trying to figure out her next move.

Then someone grabbed her, pinning her down in the thicket, tearing off her clothes. He raped her, and when he was done, he walked away like nothing had happened. She lay there, bleeding and overwhelmed.

She limped home, nauseated by the experience. Her mom is a nurse so she figured she would know what to do. But her mother looked at her torn clothes, and her tear-stained face, and instead of comforting her, shamed and berated her. She told her to shower and to go to the health facility alone the next morning, and not to mention her mother's name - she did not want to be known as the woman whose daughter had been raped.

When she went back to school, she was traumatised. She began experiencing nightmares. Thankfully her friends noticed and informed the teacher in charge of counselling. I hope she and the other two girls get the help they need.

Sexual violence is about power. Men's sexual desires are not uncontrollable. My experiences, and those of so many others like me, are the result of socialisation that makes boys feel entitled to girls' bodies. That encourages silence and compliance in girls.

The conversation around sexual abuse and mental illness needs to shift; the stigma makes it a shameful secret that has to be hidden. Young girls and boys need to be talked to about consent and sexual violence. It has to be a priority, not an afterthought.

During orientation week when I joined university, there was a day they had mentioned drug and alcohol abuse, but no one talked about sexual violence. Maybe they had planned to do so the next day, but then a strike got in the way.

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