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**You Die Dancing**  
A SHORT STORY

About 2700 words

## **YOU DIE DANCING**

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The beat of Timaya’s bang-bang perfuses the club and Irete shimmies in her black gown. She is waiting for me to join her; to let my limbs loose and throw decorum to the musky dance floor. She is waiting for her best friend to return to youth, and because I appreciate her faith in me, I do not tell her what I have since come to terms with; this body will never dance again.

The song manages to drown out the music in my head, so I pay keen attention. The music in my head is Tchaikovsky’s Swan Lake. Slow and enchanting, stirring your soul until it rouses everything you wish to bury, and you are dancing with the ghosts in your room. Dancing. I do not want to dance.

It is just one night to her anniversary, and everyone has long moved on. I don’t care about that, but I hate the fact that they also expect me to have moved on, to forget all the memories and become that wild 19-year-old again. They gave me a period to grieve, and I have abused their generosity.

“Chimezie, come on now, why are you being selfish?” Anna says, her pouty lips threatening to drip its gloss on an unsuspecting person. I know she did not want to invite me because she feared this exact scenario, but she wanted Irete here; she has always envied my place as Irete’s best friend and had no choice but to extend the invite.

“Yeah, Chi, to be honest you’re killing the vibes,” Amina supplies.

Anna watches me for a long time, then takes a gulp of her drink and drags Amina away with her but not before she throws a backhand statement. “Acting like she’s the first person on earth to lose her mother.”

I am not, and I don’t pretend I am. I hope she finds peace; her own mother died six months before mine. I stare at her glass and wonder if her mother ever taught her it is dangerous to leave your drink uncovered in public.

I feel bad for dampening the mood of her birthday bash though, so I grab my purse and signal my departure to Ireti. I shake my head when she makes to come over and mouth ‘I’ll be fine’. Neither of us believe me, but she respects my decision and lets Daniel put his arms around her, the two gyrating to the music. I don’t belong here.

Outside, the air is crisp and sobering. It makes me want to cry. Everything makes me want to cry these days. Yesterday, I saw a girl feeding bits of akara to her doll and I shed a tear. It wasn’t until I got home that I realized the girl was wearing ballet flats; very worn and probably bought only for its comfort. Everything reminds me of her.

The day she fell, we were supposed to bake a cake for Daddy. He just got promoted at work after seven years of being denied that right, and mummy wanted to bake his favourite; carrot cake. In truth, it was her favourite and Daddy only claimed it was his because he knew she loved it. I don’t know if she ever noticed that he never ate more than a pathetically thin slice, then claim that was too much sugar for his blood levels. We never got to the store that day.

I pass it now on my way home and glare at the curtains indicating it is closed. It must miss her—she knew how to inject joy into everything.

I don't know to do that—I don't know how to do much with my feelings and tend to give in to the erratic moods of teenagerhood, it doesn't matter that I dropped the suffix 'teen' a year ago. I do know too much about a few things though; grief, aneurysms and Swan Lake being at the top of the short list. I know about the darkness of a world without your first best friend in it. I know about nights in my room listening to Ogbuefi Chukwudili cry into his fist and ask his 'Vero baby' why she left him alone in this world. I don't know why she left him, but I agree with him—she left me alone too.

People said my mother was spoiling me when she would pause to get my opinions and feelings about an issue. Everyone thought it strange that a Nigerian mother would consult her child before making decisions, but then they knew how much my mother struggled before conceiving me so they could sympathise. It was the caprices of a mother with her sole and precious child. Besides, Veronica was a strange woman anyway; always off in that pretentious studio in Asaba where she taught girls how to stand on their toes and swirl, teaching them the white man's dance instead of the art of bending backs and shaking waists like proper children of the soil.

My mother was highly educated, yes, but somehow, I think even if she wasn't she would still act the same. She was a woman sensitive to the emotional demands of everyone around her, and she could calm conflicts before they even arose. She could proffer solutions to problems before they registered as problems. It was like a superpower, one I did not inherit, and one made all too obvious with her absence. Every interaction I have these days end with dissatisfaction, usually on the end of whomever is unlucky enough to interact with me.

They say people grieve in different ways. I believe them. On the day she died, I cried a few tears then threw myself into the preparations to lay her to rest. I made sure to find out

everything I could about her cause of death, I questioned whoever cared to listen. Why did it have to be her? These were acceptable, within the bounds of normal grief. They told me time would make it better, but I soon realized I grieve backwards. Time is a vengeful boa, and it steals the breath from my lungs each day that passes. It constricts, just a little bit tighter so I can wheeze for breath and have the illusion of life with each air that trickles in.

*I am not supposed to be here. I should have gone with her.*

I trouble my lips as I enter our compound and lock the gate, wondering if I should have stayed at the club. People are good distractions when they're just living their life and ignoring your existence. I don't want to go into my room—that is where my grief darkens and takes shape.

I find Daddy sleeping when I walk in, his snores too even to be a breathing problem. Uuuuhmmm-uuuhmmm uuuuu hmmm. He looks ten years older; his grey hair devoid of its sheen, the bags underneath his eyes deep-set and the wrinkles on his face dry river paths. I wonder if his tears trace those paths on the nights he gives in to the pain. Even in sleep, he looks broken.

Mummy was the glue that kept this home together, her easy laughter and wise eyes easily a bridge between father and daughter. Oh, we never had any issues, my father and me. We just didn't know how to love each other without her around. He'd lived with her for so long without a child, that when I came, I was just a nice present for his wife and another reason her eyes lit up every day. We never knew what to talk about, and when we were forced to be alone together, our shyness towards each other was palpable; he would hold a newspaper to his face and steal glances at me, and I would pretend to use my phone while catching his stolen glances. We must

have silently agreed at one point to stop trying and found a common ground in the sole object of our affection; his Vero baby, and my mummy.

My father was an electrician when he met my mother, long before he got his current job with the National Electric Power Authority. The first son to struggling parents and with six siblings dependent on him, he worked harder than everyone else in the shop. She said the day she met him, she thought he was a baboon. He says he saw her and felt like a baboon.

She was visiting her uncle's family in Asaba and noticed that the sockets in the house were not working. Her uncle and his family could do without charging their phones until they went to Church in the evenings, but she couldn't, so she marched to the electrician's intent on fixing those sockets. My father was the only one in the shop, working late into the evening as usual, and like is normal to do when you are alone with yourself, let out a loud fart as he worked. My mother had been walking towards him and was blown away by the strength of his flatulence. Her need to charge her phone was stronger than her disgust though so she demanded he come with her at once.

She gave him oranges when he was leaving 'to cleanse his bowels' and he gave her a ring soon after to cleanse his heart. My mother was the one who told me the story; anyone else, and it would've been dirty. Only she knew how to tell stories where an unpalatable event becomes romantic.

I adjust his neck on the throw pillow and retire to my room.

Here, the music finds me. It is soft at first, a symphony of oboes and harps, and it does what it always does; relaxes my flesh. It invades my head, swims in the grooves of my brain, drip into my soul. My spirit becomes pliable.

*Dance with me, Chimezie.* It sounds so much like her.

Once, the music came up when Irete and I were talking, and I blinked to find Irete screaming and shaking me. She said I was humming something, and it made her skin crawl.

“Chimezie, you know I don’t believe in all these spiritualisms, but that song was death.”

I told her it was a classical music and googled it for her. After listening, she was calm enough to smile. “Never go into the music industry, I take God beg you.”

I heard the voice then, my mother’s voice, but not really. I knew from the start it was my grief, but the attempt was too good, I allowed it.

The form moves in the darkness, side to side, rocking to the sound of the music. I want it to go, but if it does, I will lose the sound of my mother. Forever. Every day that passes, I struggle to hold on to her memory; the sound of her laughter, the feel of her fingers in my hair, the way she yawned—mouth wide open then lips suddenly slanted to the right to terminate the yawn. How is it that I think of her every day, yet her face has begun to blur in my mind?

As the music crescendos, trying to pull my body into form, I dig my heels into my mattress. The form stands there. We both know the truth. If I start dancing, I will never stop. It begins to rain, the wind slamming the parlour windows against their panes. I move to close them, my body still sluggish from the onslaught of the music. My father is standing there, in front of the offending windows, inhaling the chill. His eyes fall on me and he smiles.

“Chimchim.” He has not called me that since primary school. I walk to him, and he places his heavy arms on my shoulders. “You look just like Vero. Just like Vero. Good girl.”

He gives me another smile and hobbles to his room. I shut the windows and sit in the parlour until my head begins to droop. Rainy nights are the best nights for sleeping. When I return to my room, grief has given way to the imminent natural phenomenon of sleep.

I hear the day as it breaks, and I sigh. I don't want to get up. Not today. Nico and Vinz's Am I Wrong blasts from my phone next to my head and a headache immediately starts. Ireti.

“What?”

“Omo, don't bite my head off jare. Get ready, we're going out. No way I'll leave you by yourself today.”

She remembers. “Mm-hmm.”

“I'm already on my way o. *Baff* like flash.”

She cuts the call and I groan, snuggling into my blanket. I'll get up in five minutes.

The smell of carrot cake jerks me awake and my heart pounds a staccato. It smells too real to be imagined, so I leap from the bed and rush into the kitchen. It does not originate from the kitchen—the kitchen smells dead, aluminum and steel. I retrace my steps and follow the aroma diligently this time, straight to my father's bedroom door. Did he order her cake to remember her properly? Not the way we remember her, in pain and anger; the way we should if we grieved properly. My father grieves like me—backwards, the pain escalating with time until it is all we can do to not burst.

When I push the door open, the aroma immediately takes a sour tang and I step back, gasping. I get my bearings and walk in fully, and it is then I see him.

He is stiff as a board as he watches me, but it is not guilt that makes him stay as straight, it is defiance. No, there is no guilt in his eyes: he was never my father, he was Veronica's baby. I turn away immediately, furious and disappointed. He of all people should know. He of all people should know!

"That's not how you do it!" My voice bounces off the walls and screech in my ears, distorted. I storm into my room and pull my ballet drawer off its hinges, searching for my costume. My fingernails tear lines on my skin as I pull on my leotard and tights. I ram my feet into my too-small flats and make the ropes tight enough to stop any blood flow. Let me feel the pain.

The music starts slowly, befitting a funeral procession. Like the day we walked into the cemetery, my hand in my father's. Sign of our healing, if we grieved properly.

*Heels together, toes pointed outwards.*

He loved her so much. Why would he betray her in this manner? Like Judas.

*Legs moved apart; toes pointed outwards.*

My mother loved consistency. It soothed her. Why would he disregard the pattern she started?

*Feet pointed outwards, a foot in front of the other.*

I hear Ireti's salutations from the gate, and I feel a pang of regret. She shouldn't see this. The music is insistent though, it drowns out her voice. Like the day I drowned my mother in the soil. *A fistful of earth*, the pastor had said.

I lose myself in the music. I spin and leap, spin and leap, and my fists catch the occasional fleshes as they try to hold me down. The voices are a cacophony, but the music drowns them all out.

*That's not how you do it! No, no, no! That's not how you do it. That's not how you do it!*  
*That's nothowyoudoit!*

“He did it all wrong! All wrong!”

A pain shoots up from my ankle, and I assume there was a preceding snap. I did not hear it, just as I did not hear the snap yesterday.

Ireti wails, her slender arms going around my body, pinning me in place.

“Who, Chimezie? Who did what all wrong?”

She is the only one who might understand.

“That's not how you die! You die dancing.”

In the house, someone screams. “Ewoo, Ogbuefi! Alu!”

They have found the body. If I dance hard enough, they might not find mine.