

Mother's Day

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Growing up with love, but without a mother

Paige Atwiine was raised by relatives who gave her stability, education, and care after losing her parents at a young age. But beneath the structure of a "normal" childhood was a quiet, enduring grief.

BY PROMISE TWINAMUKYE

Atwiine lost both her parents before she was 10. Raised across different homes, she grew up with care, structure, and opportunity, but also with a quiet absence that continues to shape how she sees herself, relationships, and the idea of family.

On Mother's Day, Paige Atwiine does not make plans.

While others mark the day with calls, visits, and social media tributes, she often withdraws, avoiding the celebrations as much as she can. It is not resentment, she explains, but a feeling she has never been able to shake.

"Those days, Christmas, Easter, Mother's Day, they make me feel so sad. Even when I am surrounded by people, I feel like... where is my family?" she says.

It is a question rooted in a childhood marked by loss.

Atwiine's father died when she was just three months old. Her mother passed away when she was 10. Between those two losses, and in the years that followed, she moved through different homes under the care of relatives who stepped in where they could.

Change comes

Her earliest years after her mother's death were spent with a cousin, who had just started working as a primary school teacher in a remote area.

"It was quite a different environment, far from Kampala. But it taught me how to live with a family, how to adjust," she recalls.

After about three years, she moved to live with her paternal uncle in Kampala once his circumstances had stabilised. Here, her life took on a different rhythm.

"Growing up with my uncle was a good experience. It was a complete home with a mother and a father. We had tuition, food, and holidays. We would go to parks and, even travel elsewhere," she recounts.

Her uncle's job allowed the family a modest but comfortable life. At 12, she boarded a plane for the first time.

"It felt like a normal childhood," she says.

She grew up alongside cousins close to her age, sharing daily routines and family



Paige Atwiine lost her father at three months and mother at 10. PHOTO/PROMISE TWINAMUKYE

life. From the outside, there was little to suggest anything was missing.

But for Atwiine, there was always an awareness that her story was different.

Atwiine's memory of her mother is tied mostly to sensory details.

"I remember she cooked rice and groundnuts. And she had flowers outside her house... purple, maroon," she says.

She pauses.

"That is what I remember."

She was about five years old during that visit. After her father's death, her parents' families had disagreed, and her mother had gone back home. Decisions about where Atwiine should live were shaped as much by financial ability as by family ties.

"My father's family could afford tuition and a good home. So, it became about what is good for the child, not necessarily being with my mother," she explains.

As a result, she grew up largely away from her. Even now, her mother's face is not something she can easily recall.

"I cannot remember her face unless I see a photo. And sometimes I doubt if it is really her," she says.

Still, the idea of her mother offered

comfort.

"All my life, I told myself I have a mother somewhere. Even if I did not see her, I believed she loved me. That was my consolation when things were hard," she says.

When Atwiine was 10, word came that her mother was unwell and that she should go and see her. For Atwiine, it was a long-awaited moment.

"I was so excited. I wanted to tell her everything; what I had gone through, who had been kind, who had not. I wanted to just be with my mother," she says.

She set off believing she would finally get that chance. But somewhere along the journey, the story changed.

"We were travelling from Kampala to Kabale. I thought I was going to see her at hospital," she recalls.

Before they arrived, she was told her mother had passed on.

"I remember I started crying, wailing. People on the bus were asking what was wrong with this child," she says.

When her aunt explained, strangers responded immediately.

"They were saying, 'Bambi, poor child, poor child.'"

At the burial, she was asked to view the body.

"I could not bring myself to do it. I did not want that to be my last image of her," she says.

But some images stayed: the coffin, the burial, the finality.

"I remember the hole where they put her in the grave," she says quietly.

That day shifted her understanding of the world.

"I sat myself down and told myself I am now alone. Because all my life, the only consolation I had was that I have a mother somewhere," she says.

With that gone, she felt she had nothing left to hold onto.

Raised by many

In the years that followed, Atwiine was raised by a network of relatives who each played different roles.

Her uncle became her anchor.

"I feel like he filled the father and mother gap more than anyone else," she says.

His wife stepped into a maternal role too.

"She did her best. She never missed my visitation days at school. She showed up," Atwiine says.

But that relationship was not without challenges.

"There were things she would say about me, about my body. And those things stayed," she says. "I still hear that voice telling me what I can or cannot wear."

Later, while living with her paternal aunt, Atwiine found different care.

"She talked to me about my body. She told me I had a beautiful body, that I was fine. There is no confidence like that. If anyone says anything now, I remember what she told me," she says.

Looking back, Atwiine sees these women as having shaped her life in different ways. None replaced her mother, but each filled part of the gap.

Growing up without guidance

Despite the support she received, some parts of growing up felt deeply lonely.

One of the hardest was puberty.

When she got her first period in Primary Six, she told no one.

"For a whole year, I used cloth and toilet paper. I was scared to tell my aunt," she says.

Atwiine relied on what little she had learnt in school.

"I would wash the cloth and hide it in the room. Sometimes I would stain my uniform, so I would tie a sweater around my waist," she says.

Only later did the situation come to light.

"There are things you figure out on your own. But maybe if I had a mother, she would have told me," she says.

Despite all she received, something remained missing.

"They did 90 percent, but there is always that 10 percent no one can fill. I became independent and guarded," she says.

That absence has shaped her relationships.

"When my mother died, it felt like everything was temporary, especially the people you love," she explains.

Sometimes, grief resurfaces unexpectedly.

"I do not think I ever really cried about it. But when bad things happen, I find myself crying about my mother," she says.

Mother's Day is especially difficult.

"I always feel left out. Even when I am with people, I feel like... where is my family?" she says.

Today, she does not romanticise her experience.

"You do not gain anything from loss. Loss is loss," she says.

She is grateful for the people who raised her, but clear about what could not be replaced.

"There is a love that comes from your mother that no one else can give. No matter what they do," she says.

And on days such as Mother's Day, she leaves a message.

"I hope people who have their mothers know what they have. And cherish it."

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Childhood She grew up alongside cousins close to her age, sharing daily routines and family life. From the outside, there was little to suggest anything was missing. But for Atwiine, there was always an awareness that her story was different.