

# How my only son, first and second husbands died –Ebonyi woman who escaped being burnt alive

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opoke

*A woman believed to be in her 80s, Mrs Regina Opoke, almost lost her life recently in the Ishielu Local Government Area of Ebonyi State when an assailant set her house on fire and allegedly tried to kill her. She shares her experience with EDWARD NNACHI*

*Your house was burnt by an assailant who allegedly tried to kill you. How did you escape?*

It happened at midnight; I was in my house and suddenly, I heard a sound as if someone banged on my door. But before that, I had heard a violent altercation outside as if two people were fighting. So, when I heard a bang on the door and it opened, I saw the suspect looking everywhere and shouting, “Where are matches? Where are matches?” It was then I quietly opened the back door and ran away into the bush. That was how I escaped.

***Where were you when he set your house on fire?***

I was in the bush when he set the house on fire. I hid behind a door when he was searching for me and could not find me. When he started looking for matches, I ran into the bush. I waited there for a while before I ran to see Rev Fr Malachy Arinzechukwu Nkannebe at St Joseph Catholic Church in Eguho village, Ezzagu community, in the Ishielu Local Government Area.

***Why did he want to kill you?***

I didn’t do anything to him. I never had any quarrel with him. After he was apprehended, some people in the community asked if I did anything wrong to him and he said no. I think he was possessed by the devil.

***Did anyone else see him when he came to your house?***

As he approached the house, I could hear someone’s footsteps. But thank God, his younger brother, whose name is Chisom, saw him and asked him what the problem was. He pushed his brother away and smashed through the door. At that point, I carefully approached the back door and hid there. It was when he was saying he needed matches that I carefully opened the back door and ran into the bush.

His younger brother begged him, but he did not listen to him as he went on to set my house on fire.

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***Does he live in the same village with you?***

Yes. We live very close to each other; in fact, it is almost like the same compound. His house is only a stone’s throw from mine. At Onunweke Ubia village, in Eguho-Ezzagu community, villagers build houses close to one another. So, we live in the same village or compound.

***Did you have any encounter with him before then?***

No! Since I moved into that compound, I had never had any quarrel or altercation with him. Everyone knows me to be a gentle and peaceful person. I don't look for people's trouble.

***What could have led the suspect to behave the way he did, to the extent of burning your house?***

I don't know. I'm still very surprised and completely dumbfounded by the incident. Sometimes, I think the devil must have pushed him to do what he did. Sometimes, I think it must be sheer wickedness, and at other times, I think he must have had a mental illness. But he doesn't have any mental ailment. And I cannot say he was envious of me; what do I have that would make him to be envious of me? He was just wicked.

***The suspect reportedly confessed that he killed a woman in this same village two years ago. Did you know the woman?***

Yes. He reportedly confessed that he was responsible for the woman's death when villagers apprehended him. He said it openly in the community. But initially, he denied he was the one who killed the woman, Chinelo Edeh. The late Chinelo Edeh and I used to live in the same place. One day, she went to her farm and did not return. We looked for her everywhere but it wasn't until the third day that we saw her corpse under palm fronds in the bush.

This Chima Edeh, who set my house on fire, at that time, denied he had a hand in the death of Chinelo and the villagers believed him then. But the truth came out recently when he confessed he killed her.

***Who did the villagers think was responsible for the woman's death at the time?***

We thought she was killed by someone from a neighbouring village. Chinelo's body had been cut into pieces and covered by palm fronds when we saw it.

It was after he was caught that he confessed that he was the one who killed Chinelo. But I keep thinking, would he have confessed to committing the crime if he had succeeded in killing me? I'm not sure. I think he would have continued in his wicked ways. God just wanted to expose him.

***Where have you been sleeping since your house was burnt?***

My condition, I must tell you, is very pathetic. I feel the whole world has turned against me and life is meaningless to me now. But there is hope. My head is still on my neck, so there is hope because with God, all things are possible.

I have been sleeping in the church – St Joseph Catholic Church, Eguho-Ezzagu. It is where I worship. And God has been using the priest here, Rev. Fr. Malachy Arinzechukwu Nkannebe, to take care of me. Life has to go on. I'm grateful to the Father.

***How difficult has the situation been for you, particularly as you don't have any child?***

The situation has been very bad for me. Consider it: how will a childless woman feel? She will always feel sad. Life has been difficult for me to be honest. That I'm alive today is because of the people God has directed to assist me. I would have been dead if not for the benevolence of God's people. I did everything and went to different places, just to have a child, but all to no avail.

***Did you not have any child or you lost them?***

I had one child with my first husband, but he died during the Nigerian Civil War. Later, my first husband died of cholera. I remarried and shortly after the marriage, something happened. I was told his (my second husband's) cousin, who was an apprentice with a businessman in Onitsha, Anambra State, allegedly stole his boss' money; they said it was a lot of money. So his boss asked the apprentice's relations to come to Onitsha so that the matter could be resolved. My second husband had an accident on his way to Onitsha and died. He died within two months of our marriage. We had no child.

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***Since then, how have you been coping as a widow?***

To be honest with you, I went into a relationship with a man after my husband died. But I asked myself, "What is the essence of being in relationship with a man who is not your husband?" I could not answer that question. On several occasions, I thought about my life and decided to quit the relationship. I didn't think it was worth it so I quit the relationship. Honestly, life has not been meaningful. It has been a difficult experience.

***What do you do to survive?***

I was an active subsistence farmer from my 20s to when I was in my 60s. But these days, I have not been as active as I used to be. I have suffered so much. Soon after I gave birth to my child, who died during the Biafran War, I became very ill. All the parts of my body were swollen. Afraid that the illness might be contagious, villagers drove me into the bush. I lived in the bush for close to three months. It was during this period that my first and only child died.

***Reports say you are 80 years old, what makes you so sure of your age?***

During our time, people hardly kept registers for births and deaths. But I have been to hospitals several times and the doctors there always say I'm over 80 years old. I don't know my real age. I think I will learn to agree with numerous people who have repeatedly said I'm 80 years old.

***Where is the assailant now?***

He is with the police. The day he set my house on fire, the villagers were able to apprehend him. They handed him over to the police. I was invited by the police recently; I went there and told them what happened. While I was there, I heard someone saying, "Good evening, good evening." I turned around and saw he was the one greeting me. I answered him. I have since forgiven him but the police should do their job thoroughly.

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