

Shattered trust: Sheltered after deportation, German returnee accused of killing mother, daughter on the run

Tessy Igomu 30 May 2021

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*An air of mystery still surrounds the circumstances that led to the death of a mother and daughter in Lagos State. With the alleged prime suspect still on the run and the police claiming to be on his trail, closure for the family seems like finding a needle in a haystack, **TESSY IGOMU** writes.*

IF the dead could speak, they would publicly decry inherent evil in humanity, more so, in some of those referred to as family. This inbuilt evil played out in Lagos, as a mother and daughter were sent to untimely graves in a gruesome rape saga allegedly perpetrated by a relative.

The crime scene was as grisly as details that emerged later. The unfortunate incident has since left an air of mystery.

Tragic March

For Uche Nnaama, the month of March will always be a sad reminder of the tragedy that befell his home, turning it into a convergence zone for mourners. It was a time he lost his 49-year-old wife, Nkechinyere and 16-year-old daughter, Ifunanya, in the most gruesome manner.

Sunday PUNCH reliably gathered that they allegedly died from injuries sustained in a suspected botched rape attempt on March 30, 2021.

The incident took place in their one room and parlour apartment at No. 8, Yisa Oroki Street, Coker Orile.

The matter, which was reported at the Orile Police Station, was later transferred to the State Criminal Investigation and Intelligence Department, Panti, Lagos.

It was learnt that Nkechinyere, a teacher at Vibrant Team Nursery and Primary School in Aguda, Surulere, Lagos, allegedly walked in on a relative, Chijioke Okafor, attempting to rape her daughter, and when she tried to raise an alarm, the suspect attacked and inflicted life-threatening injuries on them. He was alleged to have gone ahead to set the apartment on fire in an attempt to cover up the crime.

Sadly, the two didn't survive the ordeal, as they died hours apart at the Lagos University Teaching Hospital, Idi-Araba.

Already, arrangements have been concluded to bury them on Friday, June 4, in Umuonaga village in the Awka South Local Government Area of Anambra State.

The deaths shattered my heart – Widower

Uche said the incident left him miserable and lost. The businessman described his wife as his best friend, mother and pillar of support.

Chronicling the events of that day, the 56-year-old said he left his wife and three daughters at home for his business place, only to get a call from his first daughter, Amaka, around 4pm, that there was an emergency at home.

He recounted, "My daughter said I was urgently needed at Randle Hospital in Surulere. She said there was a fire outbreak in our apartment and that my wife was in a critical condition. I left everything I was doing and we rushed to the place.

"When I got to the hospital, I saw my wife and second daughter unconscious. Aside from sustaining severe burn injuries, they had deep cuts on their bodies. I was shocked. My daughter had cuts on her head, neck and leg, while my wife had a deep cut on her neck and head. With what I saw, I felt it couldn't have been an ordinary fire incident."

Continuing, he said, "I was told my daughter was initially taken to His Stripes Hospital in Orile, and later referred to LUTH, where she was placed on oxygen at the Accident and Emergency Unit.

"Less than an hour later, my wife was also taken to the same hospital, but she died 30 minutes later. My life crumbled before me. I cried and rolled on the ground.

"This was someone that I hugged and kissed before leaving home in the morning, only to meet her dead body in the evening. It was obvious she was attacked."

The widower revealed that his late wife's corpse was conveyed that same day to his hometown and deposited in the morgue.

An emotional Uche said he became grief stricken when his daughter died the next day, noting that she was still bleeding from the cuts inflicted on her.

He told our correspondent that he became overwhelmed by the suddenness of the deaths, and yet to make sense of the whole incident.

"I have been trying to process the fact that I could lose my wife and daughter in the twinkling of an eye. This is a huge loss. I still pray for strength," the distraught Uche said.

Neighbours' account

Recalling what neighbours said about the incident, Uche said he was told that when his wife returned from work, she sat outside for a while before

going into the house.

He recounted, “They said not long after, they saw thick smoke coming out from the apartment. They had to break into the house to put out the fire and rushed my wife and daughter to the hospital.”

Suspect’s alleged link to the deaths

On how the suspect, Chijioke, was allegedly linked to the deaths, Uche explained that since he had been living with them for three years, he decided to call him while going to the hospital, to find out if he heard about the incident.

“When I called Chijioke, I asked him where he was and if he had heard what happened to my family members. He told me he was at Ijesha and that a neighbour, Kabiru, had called to tell him about it. He told me he was on his way to the house. Chijioke was the one that accompanied my wife’s corpse to the village. When he returned to Lagos, I asked him if he was at home when the incident happened.

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“He said he wasn’t at home and didn’t know what happened, and that he left my daughter at home with her friends. Since I knew all my late daughter’s friends, I went to look for a particular one that she’s always with,

to verify Chijioke's claim. I was shocked when the girl said she left Ifunanya at home with Chijioke.

Continuing, he said, "This was a big contradiction. It was from that point that I started suspecting him. The next day, I told him to go to Orile Police Station, to write a statement since he lives with us. Chijioke left the house and never returned. He also didn't go to the police station. He called me one morning to say he would be coming to see me, only to show up around 10.30pm.

"I called the policemen in charge of the case, but they didn't pick their calls. I still pleaded with him to go to the police station, but he didn't go. The police have issued a warrant for his arrest.

"When I travelled to finalise arrangements for my wife and daughter's burial, my kinsmen met with Chijioke's family, and an ultimatum was given to them to produce him. They have yet to see him."

Relationship with Chijioke

When *Sunday PUNCH* sought to know the suspect's relationship with the family, Uche revealed that he was a German returnee introduced to them by his wife's younger brother.

"He is a distant relative to my wife. He is from my wife's maternal village. He used to live in Germany, but was deported. He came to live with us temporarily because he had an accommodation challenge," he explained.

Asked why he allowed Chijioke, whom he suspected to be the brain behind the gruesome act, to convey the remains of his wife to the village, Uche said he never thought he could be complicit in the incident.

“I never thought he could have a hand in the killing of my wife and daughter. It was after policemen at Panti declared him a prime suspect that I started piecing things together. Chijioke has not been arrested and is still on the run. He called some days ago to deny any involvement in the deaths, but I told him to stop calling me. I told him to hand himself over to the police or to his family members in the village,” Uche said.

No autopsy conducted

Sunday PUNCH learnt that no autopsy was carried out on the victims to ascertain the actual cause of death.

Uche, however, explained that he took the decision not to carry out a post-mortem on them because police investigations concluded that they were murdered.

“There should be an attempted rape because it was obvious Ifunanya was the first to be attacked by the assailant before my wife entered the apartment. They were murdered and set ablaze. The inner room was completely burnt.

“When policemen from Orile Police Station went to the house, they took pictures of the crime scene. They also went to the mortuary to take pictures of my wife and daughter’s corpses. Based on the outcome of their investigation, they realised that the place was set ablaze to cover up a crime.

A visit to the crime scene

When our correspondent visited the place where the incident took place, a deep sense of mourning still pervaded the environment.

Neighbours wore solemn looks and were a bit hesitant to speak on the matter.

However, one of them, who spoke on condition of anonymity, claimed that the suspect opened the door for the late Ifunanya, when she returned from school. The neighbour refused to comment further when asked if he was seen exiting the compound.

Chijioke rebuffs enquiries

Chijioke didn't respond to requests for comments on the allegations levelled against him when he was contacted.

During one of the phone calls, he desperately wanted to know how our correspondent got his three mobile telephone numbers.

The suspect later promised to get in touch after speaking with Uche. However, several attempts to reach him later failed, as his phones were switched off. He had yet to respond to a message sent to him as of the time of filing this report.

Police still searching

Meanwhile, the Lagos State Police Command said it had launched a manhunt for the fleeing suspect.

While confirming the incident, the state police spokesperson, Muyiwa Adejobi, disclosed that Nkechinyere and Ifunanya were suspected to have been murdered and set ablaze. He said the investigation was still ongoing.

He said, "A case of arson and suspected murder was recorded at Orile Police Division, and subsequently transferred to the State CIID, Panti, for discreet investigation. The fact of the case is that both mother and daughter were suspected to have been murdered and set ablaze. The only person who was at home with them will be interrogated. However, since he has been alleged of the incident, he has been on the run. Effort is on to arrest the fleeing suspect."