**A Dream for Clemency**

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I must have been five or six years old when I had the dream. By that time, my father, after whom I was named, was long gone and my mother had moved in two of her cousins, so our home felt full.

I remember most distinctly the moments when my brother and I were left to our own devices. Practicing to become the next Picassos with our coloring books, reprising the arithmetic concepts first discovered by the Egyptians, and honing our shaky penmanship to perfection, my brother and I lived riveting lives in our preschool days.

Even then, my mother was brutally honest with us. I remember asking once where my father was. She said matter-of-factly that he had died and gone to heaven.

Uncle Desmond was the one who broke the news to her. I remembered Uncle Desmond fondly because he lived in London and every time he visited us in Nigeria, he brought a Toblerone for me and my brother. He told my mother that they had been driving to the naming ceremony of my father’s other daughter who had been born just over a year after she gave birth to my brother.

I don’t remember anyone mentioning what caused the accident—other than negligence. I guess at that point, it didn’t really matter. My father had been driving over 90 miles per hour on barely paved roads. I suppose he had been in a hurry to get to the ceremony—which, when I think about it now, was inconsiderate given that the occasion was taking place two days before my third birthday. My father lost control of the car and back in those days, seat belts and road safety were instruments for lip service. Over the years, my mind would amplify the accident with somersaults. I imagined him being catapulted through the windshield as the car flipped, while his three passengers including Uncle Desmond were knocked senseless inside. My father was the only one to meet his maker that day.

So, when I had the dream, I knew immediately that it was a message from him. But I wasn’t sure whether the message had come from heaven as my mother proclaimed, or the depths of hell.

You see, I was born in a land where witches and wizards abounded, street hawkers brought fresh baked breads from *Agege* and home cooked foods straight from the farm by way of the market. Every face ranged in color from the darkest onyx to a minted caramel. Every other person spoke a different language. I was taught to christen each morning with “*Otofe ma!*” to my mother and aunties, and “*Aje sir!*” to my uncles. To those who were not of my tribe, a simple “Good morning ma or sir” would do.

It was at church that I got to see the aunties and uncles shine in all their glory. Like the women in Nollywood movies, the bigger the aunties, the more established they were. It did not matter what size the uncle. With a cane and his agbada, he could be established as long as he took his time moving, for the world would wait for him regardless. These aunties and uncles weren’t always aunties and uncles, but we called them that regardless. They laughed loudly and shouted louder, whispering only when they spoke of the unfortunate soul whose life had been sacrificed at the altar of a local oracle for the sake of money, jealousy, or vengeance.

But although the witches and wizards abounded—*never let anyone tell you otherwise*—God abounded right along with them.

So, in my youth, I wondered whether my dream was a signal of latent witchery in my genes. The women in my father’s family had certainly suspected my mother of using witchcraft to kill my father because of his infidelity. But I would later think as a teenager growing deeper in my faith, *Well, if the accident wasn’t a sign of God’s divine justice, I don’t know what is.*

I suppose I should feel relief then, that my father apologized in the dream. Or perhaps, after learning the difference between heaven and hell, my subconscious conjured up this vision in the hopes that my father had repented post-life and indeed found his way to heaven.

Regardless, in a sea of white, my parents’ wedding photo appeared to me, drawing nearer until it stopped just beyond my reach. They both gazed straight ahead at the implied crowd, my father smiling confidently and my mother straight-faced because she disliked the gap between her two front teeth. I felt the effervescence of my father in the stillness, and he seemed to see me too.

Suddenly, I heard his disembodied voice emerge like the toll of a bell in the silence although his mouth did not move. *I’m sorry,* he said.

My mother remained a static image of the somber bride, holding the bouquet of her happily ever after firmly in one hand, and her husband in the other while his spirit outshined and transcended her.

For weeks, I agonized over whether to tell her about the dream. Was it even real? Was I being too presumptuous, meddling in grown folks’ business?

I said nothing.

Then, one day, my mother came back from work, and I was laying on her bed while she rifled through some paperwork. The silence brought that image of their wedding picture to my mind and my secret pressed heavily on my chest. In a fit of courage, or perhaps to fill the silence, I told her about the dream. She smiled and I could feel the gravity that she gave to my words.

*Wow, thank you,* she said. *I truly believe that was a message from your dad in heaven.*

At the time, I felt relieved that she hadn’t dismissed me. Now, I realize how comforted she must have been because of my dream. At least, I could give her that.