

I remember the first time I told my mother that I was never going to get married. I had said it so casually like it was nothing. Maybe because it actually was nothing to me then. I was merely a teenager, fourteen at the time and had just witnessed for the hundredth time, my mother conceding to my father in a mild who-has-the-final-say-in-this-house battle. My sisters and I had planned to attend a holiday camp – which was usually organized by Scripture Union for teenagers during the long holiday break in the month of August – and had been hoping that our mother would somehow convince our father to let us attend. All my friends at school could never understand why we always had to beg my father for permission to attend the camp, especially seeing that it was a Christian camp meeting and my father was a pastor. I could never explain to them that my father, for some strange reason, believed that his brand of Christianity was the most ideal. He believed he was practicing true Christianity and every other person who did not subscribe to his patterns, were merely impostors who were preaching heresies and would all eventually find themselves in hell. We had been able to convince him that his beliefs and that of the Scripture Union, were not so far apart. Then he came up with another reason why we could not attend: we were not truly interested in the Christian activities in the camp but were just using it as an excuse to meet boys. He was not entirely wrong, but rather than admitting and giving up, we would spend the weeks leading up to the camp date displaying our best Christian attitudes for him to see and be convinced that perhaps, we were truly interested in a revival. Because my father never wanted to “get in the way of God,” it worked all the time. This was usually our last resort after trying to get our mother to convince him.

On that fateful day, my mother had brought up the topic of the camp meeting as she sat with my father at the dining table. I could hear them arguing from where I lay in the sitting room.

“Mine,” she said softly, calling him by the pet name they both used, “why won’t you let them go *nau*? It’s just for one week. Shouldn’t you be happy that your children are interested in the things of God?”

“Let them stay at home and develop their interest, starting with morning devotion.”

“But Mine, they have been coming out for morning devotions.”

“After you must have woken them up three times and even splashed water on them.”

“*Eh*, but they still come out and pray with us *nau*. Even at the camp, they do early morning devotion in the hostels, so they must attend. Don’t you think it will help them?”

“Mine,” he said as he slowly stood up to leave, “they are not going and that is final.”

“But

He shot her a disapproving glance and she sighed, “hmmm, okay.”

I got up from the sitting room floor and walked to the dining room where my mum still sat alone, looking disappointed. “I can’t believe you still try,” I said dryly. “I would’ve given up on him a long time ago. This is why I can never get married.”

“Dinachi!” she shouted “Don’t say that. In marriage you can’t always expect to have the final say.”

“You never seem to even have a say.”

“Well, you must agree to disagree.”

“Hmmm, okay,” I said as I walked out.

My father was a man difficult to understand. He worked as a full-time pastor in one of the well-known churches in Port Harcourt. He would always tell us of the time he had worked at sea with an oil company, years before my immediate elder sister, Naza and I were born. He would tell the story of how he'd been aboard a small boat on the high sea with a few of his colleagues when their boat broke and capsized after being hit by waves and they were thrown into the water. They'd struggled for a long time to stay afloat and he had thought he was going to die there. Then he'd said a prayer, promising God that if He saved him, he would serve Him for the rest of his life. Shortly after saying the prayer, they were found by a rescue boat. He then went on to resign from his well-paying job and attached himself to the church. After serving faithfully for some time, he was given a small branch of the church to pastor. “Your mother would've become a widow at such a young age and Naza and Dinachi would never have been born,” he would conclude. My follow up thought to this story was always how wonderful it would've been to not be born as a daughter to him.

My mother who was a nurse working at a federal hospital, became the primary breadwinner, bearing the weight of every major financial responsibility in the house. She was the one who paid our school fees, from primary education to university. Knowing that our father was not really making much money, we always went to her for all of our needs. Until she one day told us to start asking our father for whatever we needed. “Why?” I had asked.

“Because he's your father and he also wants to be responsible for you,” she had responded.

Apparently, my father had a problem with us always going to my mother for money and not him, even though he almost always never had the money to give to us. We would later come to find out that he made my mother give him the monies she planned to give to us, so that when we came asking him for money, he would then give to us. That didn't make asking him for things any easier. We would always rehearse what we wanted to say before going forward to meet him.

My father never socialized and didn't have any friends, so we were not allowed to do so too. He was of the opinion that other children were highly corrupt and badly trained and being friendly with them would influence us. This applied mainly to my older sisters and I. My older brother, Chukwuma, was allowed to keep a few friends, provided he didn't let them visit our house. My father would not hesitate to embarrass my brother and his friends if he ever saw any of them come visiting. “They're just using you as an excuse to come and see your sisters,” he would say before chasing them out of the house.

Growing up, we could never label him a bad father because he never hit us. If you did something wrong at home, there was no corporal punishment, but you would likely never hear the end of it. You would become the subject of his teaching during our morning devotions and a reference point for every moral instruction, as we liked to call it. When the subject matter was entirely different from your offence, he would find a way to draw a parallel to it and tell you how your behaviour was terrible and akin to witchcraft. “Rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft,” he would say. “That's what the Bible says. I didn't write it. So, if you continue to do things like this, you're simply telling us that you're a witch, you're possessed and you need deliverance.” He liked to call his method of correction the spiritual *koboko*.

We wouldn't have been so bothered if that was where it ended. He would proceed to make a mockery of you by using your offence as an example in his sermon on Sunday. The first time he did it to me, I would never forget.

I remember walking out of the teenagers' church at the close of service one Sunday, wondering why people were giving me funny looks as I stepped into the adult church to wait for my parents. Until someone walked up to me and said "Dinachi, fine girl but you cannot cook common yam. At your age, you should know how to cook properly, not the salt filled yam you prepared for your father."

I was terribly shocked, embarrassed and couldn't process how that information got to them. Realization dawned on me when Amara, my eldest sister walked up to me laughing. "Welcome to the club *nne*, your mistakes will now be televised."

Other times, he would threaten to curse and disown us, citing his elder brother as an example. According to him, his brother had been wicked to their mother, who finally cursed him on her dying bed. He would tell us that his brother was facing terrible times in the hands of his own children as a result of that curse.

Every one in my family could easily quote Jeremiah 35, not because we were Bible scholars, but my father had constantly drummed it into our ears in different forms, relating it to a thousand different scenarios. "The Rechabites were commanded by their father to not drink wine, even after his death, they never disobeyed," he would say. "In this house, we don't drink or smoke. Women don't wear trousers, pierce their ears or wear jewelry. God knows why he made you with your earlobes closed. We don't paint our faces like *ajaju calabar* and call it makeup. You are beautiful the way God made you."

My father did not keep his rules within the confines of his own family. He extended it to the church he pastored. Even though the church had their own rules for members to live by, my father took them overboard. He would threaten to not wed a couple because the bride had makeup on or because the bridesmaids' dresses were not long enough. The wedding ceremony would only go on after the bride must have cleaned off all traces of makeup from her face and the offending bridesmaids, sent out of the church auditorium. There were seldom happy brides wedded in his church. Young boys and girls would avoid being seen by him on the streets to avoid being embarrassed.

We didn't know it at the time, but we were gradually building resentment and indifference towards him.

One would expect that children raised under such strict conditions would eventually grow up to become wild when they got the slightest bit of freedom. But that was not the case for my siblings. My father had a heavy influence on them, even when they left home and went to university. I would not say the same for myself, as I left home and never looked back.

When my brother, Chukwuma was about to get married, he had introduced his soon-to-be wife to my parents and my father outrightly said no to their union. His reasons, she was from a different church denomination and so the wedding would have to be held in her church, which he didn't want, and "she adorned herself with the attires of an harlot." My brother and mother tried to make him understand that she was a good Christian girl, even though she wore makeup and jewelries, but he was adamant as ever. I was livid when I heard about it. Who did my father really think he was to dictate to my brother who he should or shouldn't marry? I had told my brother that he was old enough to make his own decisions and advised him to go ahead with his marriage plans without my father's approval, but he

refused as my father had threatened to place a curse on him and his wife. “No one cares about him and his curses,” I had shouted. “You should know by now that this is one of his cheap emotional blackmails. “Go ahead with your wedding plans, nothing will happen to you.”

But my brother didn’t listen. He waited around, begging and trying to convince my father till he finally agreed. This stalled the marriage proceedings for almost two years.

The wedding ceremony was eventually held at the bride’s church. My father gave the officiating ministers a hard time, frowning his face in disagreement at almost all parts of the service. There was a lot of confusion on that day as everyone was trying hard to not get on my father’s bad side. After the couples said their vows and the exchange of rings began, my father stood up and angrily walked out of the church. He had earlier warned my brother that they were never to wear rings at the wedding ceremony or even later on in their marriage. As usual, he cited the Rechabites in Jeremiah 35 and reminded my brother that “we do not drink wine in this family.” He wore a disapproving frown for the rest of the day.

My father went on to lay a complaint to the general overseer of the headquarter church, where my brother served as a youth coordinator. He broke down in tears and reported that my brother was trying to make him die of a broken heart with his disobedience. The G.O, who had respect for my father and regarded him as an elder brother, called out my brother in front of the large congregation and suspended him. I had asked my brother to leave the church but he’d refused, saying he didn’t want to leave on such a bad note.

My brother, in his bid to make peace, had gone with his wife to visit my father who launched a tirade, bemoaning my brother’s act of rebellion and disobedience. My brother had tried to make him understand, but he’d refused to listen. “If you want to have a successful marriage, do as I say.” He took the rings from them, prayed for them and they left.

I was completely infuriated when I heard about it. “Why would you allow him disrespect you and your wife in that manner?” I’d shouted at my brother over the phone.

“We just wanted some peace,” he’d responded. “We will never visit him again.”

“You better not!” I retorted.

I was still steamed up after the call with my brother. So irritated was I that I called my mother to vent.

“You should’ve left him a long time ago. We wouldn’t have to put up with all of his self-righteous and annoying behaviours.”

“He’s still your father, even though I don’t agree with him,” she replied.

My father had walked into the room and was now listening to our conversation.

“Is this what your daughters would have to deal with when we have to get married?” I asked.

“We’ll cross that bridge when we get to it.”

“I’m afraid, you’ll never have to get to that bridge with me, mom.”

“And what does that mean?”

“It means exactly what you think it does. I am never getting married and this time, I mean it.”

“Dinachi, don’t say that,” my mother said softly.

“Daddy, I know you can hear me. I want you to know that you will not have your way with me. You have hurt us all emotionally for years and I will hurt the thing that you cherish the most, your pride. It’s a promise.” I ended the call.

Somewhere along the line, Emmanuel, my long-time boyfriend proposed to me and I convinced him to have a private court marriage without my parents’ knowledge. When I became pregnant with our first child, I visited my parents. News started to spread that I had become pregnant out of wedlock and I made no effort to correct them. By the time I came home again while pregnant with our second child, my father could no longer speak publicly without being reminded that his daughter had twice fallen pregnant out of wedlock.