

Darling Girl

Oreoluwa Oyinlola

Where other churches gently tagged their end-of-the-year services, ‘2007: My Year of Divine Glory’ and ‘Crossover, No Carryover’, our pastor was not so covert. Prophet Light had themed the last Easter retreat as ‘Nagasaki in the Enemy’s Camp’; the year before that had been ‘Operation Point and Kill’. My father has a penchant for identifying underground churches with powerful priests and prophets. From Glorious Virgin Chapel when we lived in Awka to Destiny Mechanic Ministries in Calabar and now, Emergency Salvation Church in Eket, he has never disappointed.

The treble in Prophet Light’s voice seemed to triple as he instructed us to shout ‘Hallelujah’ seven times.

‘It is time to tell the devil, “Last card. Check up.”’ He held his palm up like a referee calling a foul in a football match. He was very passionate about serving the devil eviction notices from our lives.

‘There is something miraculous about the number seven,’ he said. The fluorescent light beaming on his sweaty forehead gave him a sheen similar to Moses and Elijah’s during the transfiguration. ‘It took God seven days to divide the world into seven continents. Look at the person to your left and tell him “Seven.”’

‘Seven,’ my Auntie Ijeoma said, raising seven fingers for me to see.

‘When he destroyed it with Noah, what did he use as memorabilia of his covenant? The what? The rainbow?’ He was fond of asking questions and answering them by himself. ‘How many colours does this rainbow have? Tell the person to your right, “Seven.”’

‘Yes, pastor,’ the woman in front of me was waving her hands in the air.

‘Come with me to Deuteronomy. We will see that the Israelites cancelled debts every seven years. Are you seeing this?’ he asked, even though he had not taken us anywhere.

‘A little further down, the Lord Himself, our El Shaddai, personally instructed Joshua to march around the enemy’s camp for seven days. And what did he do next? He told the army to shout ‘Hallelujah’ seven times. Hallelujah, somebody.’

‘Hallelujah,’ a toddler screeched behind me.

‘Now, we are the new Israelites. We are the Jews today. And so, we are going to shout Hallelujah seven times. We are going to show the devil and his demons. We are going to give them a spiritual red card’.

‘Yes, prophet!’

‘With the first hallelujah, we will punch his nose. Hallelujah number two will kick his stomach. By the third hallelujah, angels would have pushed him to the ground. We will chain his hands and bind his feet. We will roll him into a ball and tie him up. Let him hear now *o*. We won’t leave him until he leaves our destiny.’

His charge was punctuated by chants of ‘yes o’, ‘today na today’ from the women around me.

The seventh hallelujah was swiftly followed by joyful cries of ‘Happy New Year.’ The adolescent boys accompanied our spirited squeals with their zestful use of knockout bangers, *Bisco* firecrackers, and unceasing rounds of fireworks. The church erupted in a festival of embraces, sisters jumping, mothers saying ‘Congratulations’ to each other, and enemies hugging each other.

‘We have crossed over.’

‘Congratulations!’

‘May we see the end of the year.’

‘Tell your neighbour, welcome to your best year yet.’

‘Tell the person to your left, “This is my year of prosperity.”’

‘Tell the person to your right, “you will beg to enter my car this year.”’

Every year is accompanied by prophecies of prosperity and promises of promotion. Every year is always ‘the year.’ My family never tired of hope and expectations. Every November, they began their petitioning in advance of the new year. ‘Faith is a doing word,’ my father would say as he ushered us into a new season of starvation. He seemed to believe that there was a queue to heaven and, by beginning our fast in November, we would be ahead of everyone else on New Year’s Day. And so, my family began their dry fast and continued until February. I would be exempted, of course. If anything, I was fed with portions large enough to feed my two adolescent brothers.

I was the main petition, you see. I was the object of their faith, the lone passenger on the ship of their prayers.

It was Auntie Ifeoma who heartily recommended the specially ordained Apostle Advantage’s House of Restoration. He had led a glorious revival in Port Harcourt City and was starting a church not too far from our house.

According to the apostle, the devil was tying my tongue. Why else would a girl perfectly capable of rambunctious chatter with her brothers become utterly mute in school?

‘Nothing is too difficult for my God to do,’ he told me as two of his assistant pastors ushered me into the tent which they used as a church. With one tall and lean and the other stout and short, deep furrows and permanent scowls on their faces, they reminded me of the eponymous Pinky and the Brain.

Apostle Advantage asked me for my name. I stared at his hands extended to me and said nothing.

He opened his Bible and instructed me to read the verse he pointed at. His fingernails had a very curious colour that made them purple against the ebony of his skin.

I tried to speak, but the words were caught in the web of my throat. Pinky’s frowns transformed into beams of encouragement. When I tried to speak again, ratty squeaks and screeches were all I could manage. The apostle handed the Bible to Brain, who immediately began to read.

‘Luke chapter eleven and verse fourteen,’ he started without clearing his throat. “‘And He was casting out a demon, and it was mute; when the demon had gone out, the mute man spoke; and the crowds were amazed.’”

‘You are possessed by Satan. Don’t worry. I will help you.’

He started by sprinkling water on me. Pinky and the Brain stood behind him, muttering prayers and chants on my behalf. As each droplet of water hit my skin, I shivered. I saw Pinky holding two long canes and knew what lay ahead. I had seen it in movies on our television in the parlour. In the movies, however, the demon-possessed person was encamped in a circle of lit candles. Here, I was surrounded by grass and dust.

It was a few minutes before Apostle Advantage struck me. His right palm landed sternly on my left cheek. I could tell that he had calculated the velocity necessary to shatter my jaw. As his palms made contact with my face the second time, I tried to speak, if only to beg. Again, not even a yelp escaped.

‘This demon is stubborn, but we will chase it out’, he said as he retrieved a cane from Pinky.

When I came to, the hitherto thick canes were feathered out on the ground. I do not recall saying anything.

A few months later, my father was returning home from work when a man in a white sultana and purple belt approached him. He had seen in the spirit that my father had something troubling him about his family.

‘It is something about a woman. Ah, the Spirit says it is your wife you have trouble with,’ the man speculated.

“A woman, yes. It is my daughter.”

‘God is merciful,’ the man said when he saw me. My father had taken me to the man’s church.

‘Solution Center’ was boldly written across the wood board. It smelt so strongly of burning incense that I almost choked. Against the banner of a rainbow was a gold statue of Jesus Christ on a cross. Next to it, cherubs surrounded a statue of the Virgin Mary dressed in blue, her white scarf teasing the face of a Baby Jesus. For the first time, I was terrified.

Baba Solution tapped my shoulder and laughed. His stomach bounced with each exhale he made, but his shoulders did not move. Seven women encircled me and forced me to kneel. As Baba Solution moved to make contact with my shoulder again, a force coursed through my body, and I fell to the floor. The women cried, ‘Hallelujah.’ As I laid on the floor, the women looked like angels to me. Their robes were made of a shiny white cloth material, and they sang songs to welcome the Holy Spirit.

‘You have come to the right place. The solution has come,’ the old man said to my father.

‘Amen. What do I need to do, Sir?’ my father responded.

‘Jesus lets us know in Matthew that not all wars are the same. Do you know what Jesus, the son of Mary, the almighty One, powerful prophet and Messiah, our mighty God incarnate,’ he trailed off and looked around as though he had forgotten what he had been trying to say.

‘Hallelujah,’ one of the women proclaimed.

‘Yes, Hallelujah to Him. When Jesus encountered a very strong demon in Matthew, he admitted that “this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting.” All glory to His name.’

‘Hallelujah,’ the women chorused.

‘This is another very strong demon,’ he said, turning to me, ‘but we have an even stronger God.’

‘Oh yes!’ one of the women hollered.

‘What is her name?’

‘China. Chinanurumogu.’

‘*Chi na nuru m ogu*. God will indeed fight her battles, but we must join Him on the battleground.’

And so, we started the fast. The women came to pray with me in the mornings and evenings. I do not know how many sunsets I spent in that room, but I never asked for food or water. I never said ‘amen’ to their prayers either. I just kept staring into space.

Whenever the Holy Ghost possessed any of the women, I disengaged. Some evenings, Baba Solution performed his deliverance sessions where he transformed his rod into a snake. On these evenings, I died and rose into an abyss of despair. At these times, my mind would float back to my older brothers at home. When I came home from Apostle Advantage’s with swollen arms and welts across my back, they nursed me and cursed my father.

‘Daddy is looking for what has already been found,’ Chizaram said, shaking his head.

‘He is chasing after something that is not running,’ Chinedu joined.

‘He is cooking what has already been eaten,’ I added with a smile. They looked at my face and smiled back.

This is the way it is with us. We do not complete one another’s sentences, but we have the same mind.

One evening, I wandered outside the hall. I wanted something to drink. As I stood, I felt the ground give way. I held a pillar for support and stilled myself until I gathered enough strength and courage to take another step. Outside, I found a bag of water leaning against the wall. I had only drunk about three sachets from the bag when one of the women saw me and dragged me back inside.

‘You’ve ruined the work! You’ve wasted our time!’ Pastor Daddy screamed at me.

He instructed the women to chain me to the pillar.

‘This is for your own good,’ he said to me with pity in his eyes. ‘Think about your father. We are all in this fast with you. We want you to be free. This is an intervention, and you have to cooperate.’

My father took me home a few days later.

‘This is not a demon at work,’ Prophet Light declared. ‘This is a child of God. Can God and the devil live together?’ he asked.

‘No. Not at all. Absolutely not!’ My father refuted this so vehemently that one would think he had never believed it.

‘This is the spirit of fear at work in her. She is scared and afraid to speak.’

I sat on the sofa directly facing the television while he turned to my brothers in the corner of the parlour.

‘You said she talks to you,’ he said to Chizaram.

‘Yes, Sir, she talks to me and him,’ Chinedu replied.

‘What does she talk about?’

‘Cartoons, storybooks,’ Chizaram looked at Chinedu for more ideas.

‘She also talks about Papa Ejima’s pregnancy that has refused to mature,’ Chinedu offered. I snickered. Prophet Light caught my eye.

‘Ah, why is he just laying there? He should stand up and do something *na*.’ Prophet Light was watching an episode of *Samurai Jack* with my brothers and me.

‘Just watch and see, Sir. Something will still happen,’ Chinedu assured. We had videotaped this particular episode on our VHS tape recorder and watched it over a hundred times.

As Aku brought the sword down the Samurai’s chest, we all tensed up with the same intensity as the first time we watched it. The Samurai’s eyes continued to widen until they closed as he said his final prayer. Our hearts beat to the rhythm of the background music. When the sword hit the Samurai’s chest, it met steel instead of flesh. I watched Prophet Light’s reaction. He looked just as confused as we were during the first screening.

I leapt with joy as the Samurai snatched the sword and slashed Aku’s legs. We all screamed when he slashed Aku in half and reduced him to the size of a rodent. Prophet Light was clapping his hands in relief.

‘You enjoyed the cartoon,’ he said to me with the authority of a geologist confirming that the earth is indeed round.

He lingered after every house fellowship, watching us watch cartoons or work on our assignments. He listened to us lie to our father about the sudden disappearance of the remote control when it was time for the news. He heard us say ‘back forward that scene’ and did not tell us to say ‘rewind’. We became so used to his presence at the corner of the room that we almost did not notice him anymore. We casually said ‘*waka*’ and ‘your mother’ as though we were alone. He observed without contributing.

‘You are drawing a flower,’ he noted as I worked on my Creative Arts assignment.

‘You did a good job at prayer today,’ he lauded even though I had only muttered to myself while my father led prayers.

‘This is a nice cartoon,’ he remarked when he saw me watching *The Adventures of Jimmy Neutron*.

One evening, after he had been coming to our house for almost a year, he called my siblings and me away from the television. He reminded us about my 10th birthday the day before and announced that he had a present for me. My brothers and I exchanged glances and tried to guess the gift.

‘A notepad for church,’ Chizaram's eyes said.

‘A Bible. She’s old enough for one now,’ Chinedu retorted.

‘A purple pencil case, perhaps,’ I offered before returning to Prophet Light.

He presented a slim box wrapped in silver wrapping paper littered with yellow prints of ‘Congratulations’. My hands trembled as the paper crinkled against my nimble fingers which were excitedly tearing the wrapping apart. I squealed and danced when I saw a glimpse of what lay within. My brothers attempted to yank it from my hand, but I gripped it tightly as I bounced across the room. It was a video cassette of *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. I was going to treasure it forever and ever.

After the first house fellowship of the year, my brothers and I gathered to watch *Avatar: The Last Airbender* for the second time that day. Pastor Light was sitting in the corner, watching it with us for the first time. By now, I could recite some parts of the dialogue alongside the actors. My father called us inside to arrange our notebooks for school the next day. We increased the volume of the film and pretended not to hear. The final scene had begun, and the movie would soon be over.

‘It is a new year,’ Prophet Light declared as he stood up to leave.

‘Yes, Sir,’ my brothers chorused.

‘Happy New Year, Sir,’ I said, my eyes glued to the closing credits on the television screen.