

The Second Coming

by Chukwuemeka Famous

Maria is in the backseat of my old Volkswagen, probably giving God reasons why He shouldn't let her be put to shame. I am behind the wheels waiting for the stupid, fat traffic warden to let us pass. There is a long queue of cars behind, honking annoyingly. Everyone is in a hurry. But the traffic warden ignores us and chases after a black-tinted Lexus car going the way opposite her stand. The driver slows down, winds down his window, throws a fifty naira note at her and speeds off immediately. The traffic warden pockets the money and walks back like a penguin to finally let us pass.

I glance at Maria from the rearview mirror. She is gritting her teeth in agony and clutching the door tightly. Her face is blushed by the distress that comes with carrying another life. I feel the same way she feels too, if not more, and that is why I am speeding. The hospital, which is usually twenty minutes-drive from our flat, seems too far away this morning. *Okada* riders are meandering through traffic as though they are in a priceless race contest. Hawkers don't mind stepping in the way of vehicles as long as they sell off their petty wares. And as a driver, you have to watch out for them, or else other road users will accuse you of being sent by the devil to kill someone.

At the T junction where we are supposed to turn right, a big truck carrying sachets of pure water has broken down, the driver and his two companions are busy trying to direct other vehicles. At least, that is the most they can do for compensating other road users.

"Where are we?" Maria mutters through the pains encircling her. Hearing her faint voice makes goose bumps appear all over my skin. I press hard on the throttle, making the woman selling corn by the street side wonder if the devil has possessed me. Right now, I am between trying to compose myself and great fear. This isn't the first time I am in this situation. Previously, I had sped,

I had disobeyed traffic laws, even once, I hit a traffic warden who tried to flag me down, yet they died, two of them. It seemed as though all my efforts to aid a creation were all in vain. But this morning, I am determined to make sure there will not be a repeat. I glance at Maria through the rear mirror again. She is silent now, her eyes are closed and her mouth is slightly ajar. It is only her heavy breaths that assures me she is still with me.

The hospital entrance is crowded with food sellers, *okada* riders lolling on their motorcycles- probably they had been contracted to ferry dying people to the hospital- other people sitting on benches. I park the car near a mango tree. I jump out almost at the same time I turn off the ignition. I open the backdoor and tap Maria. She opens her eyes weakly.

“We are at the hospital,” I tell her reassuringly. She bites her lips and squeezes her toes.

I beckon to a nurse who has just emerged from the hospital. When she understands my gesticulations, she runs back inside and reappears some minutes later with a stretcher and another nurse. Together, they help Maria get on the stretcher, while I hold the car door.

“Whoa!” the second nurse screams. “Her belly is so big!”

“The baby must be very big!” the first nurse utters. They roll the stretcher together and at the front door, some of the young men standing around help with easing the stretcher through the smaller doorway.

Maria is taken into the labour room immediately. I insist on being there with her but the doctor- a young woman whose skill I doubted when I first saw her- objects to that.

“We agreed that I would be in there with her,” I tell her, almost shouting. She finally gives up and lets me into the room with them.

The nurses have raised Maria's legs and are holding her hands to keep her steady. The doctor moves closer, puts her hand into her vagina, and brings it out immediately. Then the pushing starts.

I turn to face the wall, not because I am scared of watching Maria get delivered of them, but because I am trying to think of how best to welcome them. When the scan results showed that Maria had twins- a boy and a girl (the previous two were single babies, the first being a girl and the second a girl) - forming in her, I knew they had come back. They had promised to come back healthier, stronger, and happier. As I stare at the wall, tears trickle down my cheeks. The room, even though spacious, is hot and Maria's screams are hitting hard against the walls of my heart. The doctor is shouting, urging her, and the nurses too, are all cheering her up, and telling her that she is doing well, just a little more effort and she will be free. In the bare wall, I see their faces, and then I remember, when this promise was made.

Ma Rose's demeanor, likewise, her husband, before their eventual death, mirrored poverty, and depression.

Ma Rose, in her youth, was extremely beautiful. She was the delight of many. When it was time to get married, she had to struggle with choosing from a queue of worthy suitors. They were all good, handsome, humane, and rich. Her mother wanted Mr. Lawrence because he knew how to cook very scrumptious meals. Her father- a man with an insatiable love for politics-wanted Mr. Jamike because he was interested in vying for the office of councilor. Her sisters and brothers wanted Mr. Udeh because he sent them money each time they went back to school. Ma Rose was, of all the men, in love with one simply called A.J – initials for his full name, Abraham Jidenna. A.J was a grade eight civil servant in the Ministry of Works at that time. He drove a motorcycle and lived in a two-bedroom apartment in one of the developing areas of the state. Ma Rose loved him, particularly

because he was persuasive. Some of the other suitors were too, but not as good as A.J. The latter knew how to convince one lovingly. He knew how to make Ma Rose eat her worst food and still enjoy it. He knew how to make her wear clothes she didn't initially like. And she would eventually find herself falling in love with those clothes. He was the kind of man who turned impossibilities into possibilities with his words. The kind with a magical tongue. And so, she loved him and married him because she believed that, with him, they would achieve a lot.

After their marriage, Ma Rose got a job as a religion teacher in a secondary school. The couple worked hard enough, saved enough, and bought their first car. Eyes saw, and ears heard, that they were climbing the ladder of success. Soon, they began to build a house. It was at that time that Ma Rose took in. A.J had to suspend the building to take care of his wife better. He persuaded her to quit her job, and as much as Ma Rose loved her job so much, and felt that pregnancy wasn't enough reason to quit, she did and stayed at home. When the baby inside began to increase in size, and there was no one to help with the chores since A.J was always at work, a maid- a girl from the riverine areas- was hired. After she gave birth to a baby boy whom they named Tochi, Ma Rose began to seek another job with her husband's consent. She eventually found one in a law firm, where she was to work as a secretary. After two years of working at the law firm and completing their own house with her husband, Ma Rose took in the second time. Again, upon her husband's persuasion, she quit her job.

A second child- a boy- was born and was named Kalu. After his birth, A.J announced that he was fine with the two boys. Ma Rose wanted more children. She protested but A.J had his way, and she succumbed to his words and gave up on having more children. The two boys grew rapidly and soon, settled in the same university. They were all their parents had. As A.J would put it, his investments.

But there was a skeleton somewhere in their cupboard. They didn't know that their two boys were walking hand in hand with destruction. When the news of their arrest during a police raid on campus got to them, A.J and Ma Rose knew their hopes were getting dashed.

"Your sons are cultists!" the policeman at the counter yelled at them when they arrived at the station. He was visibly angry at them for raising cultists to disrupt the peace of society. A.J threatened to slap the police officer for calling his innocent sons' cultists. The policeman, in turn, threatened to lock him up in the same cell as his sons if he did not keep quiet. Ma Rose watched her husband shout back at the officer, calling them thieves and devils who get pleasure in tormenting innocent citizens when the real thieves were out there in Aso Rock and government houses looting the nation's treasury. That same day, A.J was arrested and locked up. Ma Rose screamed and yelled at the officers to release her husband and her sons or else she was going to burn down the police station. *You cannot arrest him for speaking his mind! And my sons, what proof do you have that they are cultists? None! You just arrest and lock up people just to collect money from them.* That same day too, Ma Rose was arrested and locked up.

When they were given a chance to call family members who would bail them, Ma Rose called her younger brother. He arrived at the station immediately and was able to secure their release. But the police refused to let their sons go. A.J pleaded with the officers to at least let them see their boys, but their request was declined. They didn't see their sons until the news about five cultists from the University of Benin who were executed by firing squad hit the screens and airwaves. When they saw their sons' names amongst those who were killed, A.J and Ma Rose slumped. They were rushed to the hospital by a neighbour who had been with them when the news arrived. The doctors confirmed that they were both affected by stroke. They remained in the hospital for one month before they were discharged.

Ma Rose's younger brother came to their house one day, with two teenage boys.

"Their names are Chidi and Chibuzor. They are twins and they are orphans. I brought them from the orphanage home. You should accept them. At least they can help in the house chores" he persuaded. But A.J and Ma Rose were too weak to utter a reply.

For the first two months, the boys tried adjusting to their new environment. Soon, they began to run the house effectively. They learned how to feed their new parents, how to code their sign languages since they could not talk effectively as the stroke had also damaged their speeches. When it was time to bathe them, a woman who lived next door- who had taken it upon herself to bathe Ma Rose and look after them when the boys left for school- would come in to assist, while the boys bathe their father. Despite the damaged physiques of their parents, a healthy bond began to develop between them. Whenever they came back from school to meet their parents still sitting side by side in the parlour, they would quickly fling their bags and hug them. The boys vowed to make them proud, to make money, and take care of them properly. On weekends they would cook tasty meals and feed them.

One day, Ma Rose's younger brother visited and was excited to see the boys getting along well with their new parents.

"I sense joy everywhere!" he screamed and hugged the boys. Then turning to A.J and Ma Rose, he said, "your two boys have come back to you!"

The day they finally died; the twins were in their room. They were talking about the just concluded jamb exams which they had just passed when they heard laughter ringing from the parlour. They hesitated and listened, to be sure it was their parents laughing. The laughter was getting louder. They ran out immediately. Their parents were holding hands affectionately.

“What makes you laugh *ndi nwem?*” Chidi asked.

Their parents stopped laughing. From their gesticulations, they knew they were being asked to sit. Ma Rose pointed to a book on the table. Chibuzor picked up the book and a piece of paper fell from it. He straightened it and read silently first, then aloud.

‘We won’t be long. We will surely come back. We will live again’

“What does that mean?” Chidi asked and their parents resumed laughing. The twins, dumbfounded, kept watching them until A.J stopped laughing and stayed still, his right palm still clasped in Ma Rose’s. Seconds later, Ma Rose too, stopped laughing, and reclining backward, she spoke clearly to the shock of the twins, “We will be back, stronger!” Then she closed her eyes and stayed still.

“Sir... sir!”

I turn away from the wall. One of the nurses is standing before me, smiling. The doctor is no longer in the room. Maria is calm now and her legs are fully stretched on the bed.

“I have been calling you sir,” the nurse says. I ignore her and walk up to Maria. Her eyes are fully open, and her face has come back to life. She turns to me and smiles. Leaning in, I kiss her on the lips and finally turn to face the nurse.

“Where are the babies?” I ask.

“Come with me,” she says, still smiling. She leads me to another end of the room where there is a baby cot. I peer into the bed and I see them. They are smiling at me and bubbling with life.

“Congratulations Sir,” the nurse says. “*Papa ejima!*” she yells happily and leaves me to watch them. Somehow *papa ejima*- which translates to father of twins- sounds good to me. But I know that I am not their father. Rather, they are my parents that have come back to me. I retrieve my phone from my pocket and dial a number. After the second buzz, he picks.

“Hello, Chibuzor,” I say.

“Chidi, *kee kwani?*” Chibuzor asks.

“I am fine *nwanne m,*” I say and quickly put in, “Mama and Papa are back”

“Eeh... you say... hello”

“I said Mama and Papa are back!” I yell to get my voice across the hurdle of network issues.

“Papa and Mama! Where?” Chibuzor screams.

“They are here with me. At St. Luke’s Hospital”

“Wait for me, I am coming now!” Chibuzor says and hangs up immediately.

I turn to look at them. They are still smiling.

