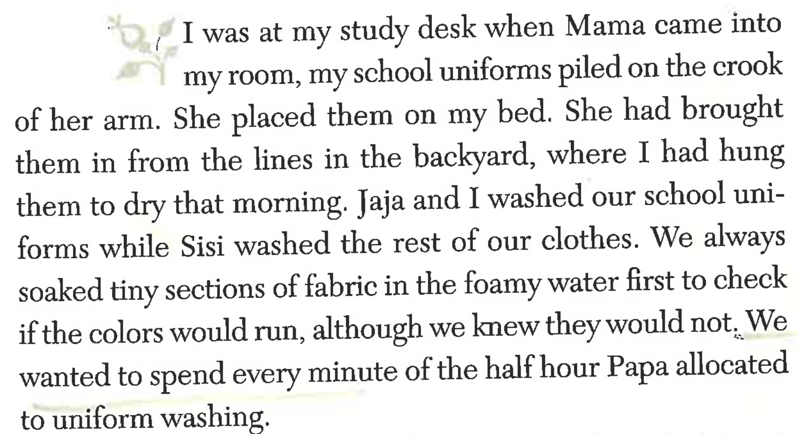
SPEAKING WITH OUR SPIRITS

Before Palm Sunday



I was at my study desk when Mama came into my room, my school uniforms piled on the crook of her arm. She placed them on my bed. She had brought them in from the lines in the backyard, where I had hung them to dry that morning. Jaja and I washed our school uniforms while Sisi washed the rest of our clothes. We always soaked tiny sections of fabric in the foamy water first to check if the colors would run, although we knew they would not. We wanted to spend every minute of the half hour Papa allocated to uniform washing.

"Thank you, Mama, I was about to bring them in," I said, getting up to fold the clothes. It was not proper to let an older person do your chores, but Mama did not mind; there was so much that she did not mind.

"A drizzle is coming. I did not want them to get wet." She ran her hand across my uniform, a gray skirt with a darker-toned

waistband, long enough to show no calf when I wore it. "*Nne,* you're going to have a brother or a sister."

I stared. She was sitting on my bed, knees close together. "You're going to have a baby?"

"Yes." She smiled, still running her hand over my skirt.

"When?"

"In October. I went to Park Lane yesterday to see my doctor."

"Thanks be to God." It was what Jaja and I said, what Papa expected us to say, when good things happened.

"Yes." Mama let go of my skirt, almost reluctantly. "God is faithful. You know after you came and I had the miscarriages, the villagers started to whisper. The members of our umunna even sent people to your father to urge him to have children with someone else. So many people had willing daughters, and many of them were university graduates, too. They might have borne many sons and taken over our home and driven us out, like Mr. Ezendu's second wife did. But your father stayed with me, with us." She did not usually say so much at one time. She spoke the way a bird eats, in small amounts.

"Yes," I said. Papa deserved praise for not choosing to have more sons with another woman, of course, for not choosing to take a second wife. But then, Papa was different. I wished that Mama would not compare him with Mr. Ezendu, with anybody; it lowered him, soiled him.

"They even said somebody had tied up my womb with *ogwu.*" Mama shook her head and smiled, the indulgent smile that stretched across her face when she talked about people who believed in oracles, or when relatives suggested she consult a witch doctor, or when people recounted tales of digging up hair tufts and animal bones wrapped in cloth that had been

buried in their front yards to ward off progress. "They do not know that God works in mysterious ways."

"Yes," I said. I held the clothes carefully, making sure the folded edges were even. "God works in mysterious ways." I did not know she had been trying to have a baby since the last miscarriage almost six years ago. I could not even think of her and Papa together, on the bed they shared, custom-made and wider than the conventional king-size. When I thought of affection between them, I thought of them exchanging the sign of peace at Mass, the way Papa would hold her tenderly in his arms after they had clasped hands.

"Did school go well?" Mama asked, rising. She had asked me earlier.

"Yes."

"Sisi and I are cooking *moi-moi* for the sisters; they will be here soon," Mama said, before going back downstairs. I followed her and placed my folded uniforms on the table in the hallway, where Sisi would get them for ironing.

The sisters, members of Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal prayer group, soon arrived, and their Igbo songs, accompanied by robust hand clapping, echoed upstairs. They would pray and sing for about half an hour, and then Mama would interrupt in her low voice, which barely carried upstairs even with my door open, to tell them she had prepared a "little something" for them. When Sisi started to bring in the platters of moi-moi and jollof rice and fried chicken, the women would gently chastise Mama. "Sister Beatrice, what is it? Why have you done this? Are we not content with the *anara* we are offered in other sisters' homes? You shouldn't have, really." Then a piping voice would say, "Praise the Lord!" dragging out the

first word as long as she could. The "Alleluia" response would push against the walls of my room, against the glass furnishings of the living room. Then they would pray, asking God to reward Sister Beatrice's generosity, and add more blessings to the many she already had. Then the *clink-clink-clink* of forks and spoons scraping against plates would echo over the house. Mama never used plastic cutlery, no matter how big the group was.

They had just started to pray over the food when I heard Jaja bound up the stairs. I knew he would come into my room first because Papa was not home. If Papa was home, Jaja would go into his own room first to change.

"Ke kwanu?" I asked when he came in. His school uniform, blue shorts, and white shirt with the St. Nicholas badge blazing from his left breast still had the ironed lines running down the front and back. He was voted neatest junior boy last year, and Papa had hugged him so tight that Jaja thought his back had snapped.

"Fine." He stood by my desk, flipped idly through the *Introductory Technology* textbook open before me. "What did you eat?"

"Garri."

I wish we still had lunch together, Jaja said with his eyes.

"Me, too," I said, aloud.

Before, our driver, Kevin, would pick me up first at Daughters of the Immaculate Heart, and then we would drive over to get Jaja at St. Nicholas. Jaja and I would have lunch together when we got home. Now, because Jaja was in the new gifted student program at St. Nicholas, he attended after-school lessons. Papa had revised his schedule but not mine, and I could

not wait to have lunch with him. I was to have had lunch, taken my siesta, and started studying by the time Jaja came home.

Still, Jaja knew what I ate for lunch every day. We had a menu on the kitchen wall that Mama changed twice a month. But he always asked me, anyway. We did that often, asking each other questions whose answers we already knew. Perhaps it was so that we would not ask the other questions, the ones whose answers we did not want to know.

"I have three assignments to do," Jaja said, turning to leave.

"Mama is pregnant," I said.

Jaja came back and sat down at the edge of my bed. "She told you?"

"Yes. She's due in October."

Jaja closed his eyes for a while and then opened them. "We will take care of the baby; we will protect him."

I knew that Jaja meant from Papa, but I did not say anything about protecting the baby. Instead, I asked, "How do you know it will be a he?"

"I feel it. What do you think?"

"I don't know."

Jaja sat on my bed for a while longer before he went downstairs to have lunch; I pushed my textbook aside, looked up, and stared at my daily schedule, pasted on the wall above me. *Kambili* was written in bold letters on top of the white sheet of paper, just as *Jaja* was written on the schedule above Jaja's desk in his room. I wondered when Papa would draw up a schedule for the baby, my new brother, if he would do it right after the baby was born or wait until he was a toddler. Papa liked order. It showed even in the schedules themselves, the way his meticulously drawn lines, in black ink, cut across each

day, separating study from siesta, siesta from family time, family time from eating, eating from prayer, prayer from sleep. He revised them often. When we were in school, we had less siesta time and more study time, even on weekends. When we were on vacation, we had a little more family time, a little more time to read newspapers, play chess or monopoly, and listen to the radio.

It was during family time the next day, a Saturday, that the coup happened. Papa had just checkmated Jaja when we heard the martial music on the radio, the solemn strains making us stop to listen. A general with a strong Hausa accent came on and announced that there had been a coup and that we had a new government. We would be told shortly who our new head of state was.

Papa pushed the chessboard aside and excused himself to use the phone in his study. Jaja and Mama and I waited for him, silently. I knew he was calling his editor, Ade Coker, perhaps to tell him something about covering the coup. When he came back, we drank the mango juice, which Sisi served in tall glasses, while he talked about the coup. He looked sad; his rectangular lips seemed to sag. Coups begat coups, he said, telling us about the bloody coups of the sixties, which ended up in civil war just after he left Nigeria to study in England. A coup always began a vicious cycle. Military men would always overthrow one another, because they could, because they were all power drunk.

Of course, Papa told us, the politicians were corrupt, and the *Standard* had written many stories about the cabinet ministers who stashed money in foreign bank accounts, money meant for paying teachers' salaries and building roads. But

what we Nigerians needed was not soldiers ruling us, what we needed was a renewed democracy. *Renewed Democracy*. It sounded important, the way he said it, but then most of what Papa said sounded important. He liked to lean back and look upwards when he talked, as though he were searching for something in the air. I would focus on his lips, the movement, and sometimes I forgot myself, sometimes I wanted to stay like that forever, listening to his voice, to the important things he said. It was the same way I felt when he smiled, his face breaking open like a coconut with the brilliant white meat inside.

The day after the coup, before we left for evening benediction at St. Agnes, we sat in the living room and read the newspapers; our vendor delivered the major papers every morning, four copies each, on Papa's orders. We read the *Standard* first. Only the *Standard* had a critical editorial, calling on the new military government to quickly implement a return to democracy plan. Papa read one of the articles in *Nigeria Today* out aloud, an opinion column by a writer who insisted that it was indeed time for a military president, since the politicians had gone out of control and our economy was in a mess.

"The *Standard* would never write this nonsense," Papa said, putting the paper down. "Not to talk of calling the man a 'president.'"

"'President' assumes he was elected," Jaja said. "'Head of state' is the right term."

Papa smiled, and I wished I had said that before Jaja had.

"The *Standard* editorial is well done," Mama said.

"Ade is easily the best out there," Papa said, with an offhand pride, while scanning another paper. "'Change of Guard.' What

a headline. They are all afraid. Writing about how corrupt the civilian government was, as if they think the military will not be corrupt. This country is going down, way down."

"God will deliver us," I said, knowing Papa would like my saying that.

"Yes, yes," Papa said, nodding. Then he reached out and held my hand, and I felt as though my mouth were full of melting sugar.