

The Journey

By

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By all accounts, and heaven knows there were many, I came from a sprawling family in the midst of relatives breeding like rabbits. With endless siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins and second cousins, there was no shortage of excitement, arguments, confusion and smart-aleck remarks hurled back and forth. Our family of nine children was a real piece of work for our parents, especially during our more rebellious phases. While keeping tabs on five teenagers day in and day out, I seldom saw happiness flash across Father's face. Yet he ploughed through life, and as the years passed, collected worry lines on his face for every baby girl he brought into this world.

The village where I was born, was tucked a good distance away from the town and to boot in the middle of nowhere. Taking the place by storm, my parents arrived here as newlyweds. Father, a charismatic fella with a remarkable crop of hair and a good dab of Brylcreem holding it in place, married to my mother, a shy teenager with striking features. Everybody knew everyone by name and were related one way or other through 'pumpkin vine'.

There was no downtown to speak of, just a school annexed to a church with a cemetery at the back and a corner shop with a post office. Located along the narrow paved road full of potholes were whitewashed concrete mileposts looking like graveyard headstones embossed with black numbers. The village was made up of crumbling wooden homes and thatched-roof mud huts were scattered here and there on both sides of the road. Father's house was built on wooden stilts, with decaying timber held together by rusty nails. The whole house was rundown, with a leaking roof and an army of wood-lice eating the flooring. But Father was not picky as he was building a spanking new house. With his meagre teacher's salary and plenty of mouths to feed, he wasn't rich but did whatever it took to keep his family comfortable. When not at school or assisting at the pulpit on Sundays, he listened to the voice of the BBC while sitting on his rocker in the gallery

moving back and forth greeting everyone who passed by as if he owned the village.

Stuck like ‘the finger’ in the middle between two boys, my coming into this world was no big thing, but rather another headache for my parents. Anxious to get out, at the first sign of Mother’s labour pain, Father panicked and started running around dotishly; leaving three toddlers plopped down on a burlap bag, bawling with their arms out-stretched begging to be picked up. He slipped on his sandals, ran down the rickety wooden steps, jumped in the car, cranked it up and went down the cattle trace to pick up the doula responsible for my delivery. She came with a piece of not-so-clean cloth tied around her forehead, a grin showing off her only two remaining front teeth and carrying in her hand, a pair of dull scissors. She immediately fetched a calabash of water from the barrel and poured it in a pot over the fireside.

Without an epidural or sanitized space and with a candle burning in a small dark gloomy room with no air circulation, this midwife, unqualified and definitely not unionized, was mopping sweat from Mother’s face. Groaning in agony, Mother let out one long shattering shriek and just like that, in record time, I came shooting down the spouting popping right out. The umbilical cord was cut, and with my first howl, I was dunked in the chipped white enamel basin filled with warm water sitting between the uneven wooden flooring next to the bed. There were no twisted cords, nor deformities, so there was no cause for Mother to bawl. Neither did I provide her with anything of significant jubilation which required her to coo over me. On the other hand Father was pacing the gallery illuminated by a full moon, mulling things over, as though he was waiting all his life for news of a baby girl! I was presented like the world’s most precious gift, wriggling quietly in his trembling hands. He bent down smacking his lips on my forehead starting the journey from scratch.

The entire event when I emerged was miraculous, although in truth, there was probably great disappointment when my parents saw another baby girl, as if it was my choice. There was no ootchy-kootchy gurgling once I arrived, or a crib or pampers stacked in a corner. Once out in the open, and after careful inspection of every inch of me including my fingers and toes, a skin tag was found at the back of my ear, and forever I was teased “plum ears” by my siblings. But my name, unlike me, sounded so pure, so spiritual,

like a new set of wings ready to fly all over the place. A gentle rock in the hammock made out of a flour sack kept me quiet when I was hungry, and as I grew older a chewed up hand-me-down plastic rattle kept me from screaming.

Struggling to find my place in the universe, my thumb, when not jammed in my mouth, was holding my ear, and sucking my tongue brought me peace and comfort. In this place where villagefolks had little news, word of the newest addition spread like wildfire; before long, they trickled into the drawing room from down the road and across the street feasting their eyes on the brand new museum piece. Enjoying my moment of fame, with a cutesy pink bow plopped on my head, they fussed over me and in a team effort, uncles and aunties merrily passed me around. Poking here and there, tickling my belly and feet, pinching my cheeks and nose, crisscrossing my legs and arms, I was bounced around on laps and knees. Like professional jugglers, the braver ones, chitchatting away and going nuts, tossed me in the air like a sack of potatoes. I was traumatized every which way, whimpering, peeing and vomiting with every hurl, while providing cheap entertainment for my adoring audience.

The cock-a-doodle-doo crowing of roosters everywhere woke Mother, and it wasn't daylight yet. She headed straight to the kitchen to the pile of dry wood and sticks, a haven for mice, scorpions, cockroaches and centipedes. Mother laid some of these twigs in the middle of the fireside which was made out of a mixture of mud and cow dung. It was twelve inches high, in the shape of a horseshoe, and sitting on top was an iron pot with coconut oil ready to cook the day's meal. She lit and blew at the embers then 'chooked' the fire with a stick to make it flare up. Jostling me on her hip, she spent all day washing and cooking while dusting the flour and sugar off her hands to pick up another hysterical child. But she never curry favour, she always found places for us to crawl upon her lap while she nursed the baby. The poor soul walked around either pregnant with a growing belly, or had just given birth and was tired beyond belief. But she dashed around lugging water from the outside barrel for cooking and for washing the enamel wares. On Saturdays using a bucket of water, a loofah and the blue and white slab of soap, I got a good scrubbing. Everyday I snuggled like a koala poking my head between her legs while she washed and hung the clothes on a twine line to dry. And soon after, much to her dismay, corbeau droppings were smeared all over them.

With food stuff so dear, chickens and eggs came from the coop and vegetables from Mother's home-grown garden. On Fridays at the sound of ding-aling, Mother dropped whatever she was doing to catch the fisherman chanting "*herring again*"! Pedalling his rusty bike, attached to his wooden cart was fresh fish laid on a block of ice. On a wooden block, he slit and cleaned the belly, scaled and sliced the fish for her. Our supply of milk was delivered daily at the front door and once a week, Father travelled down the road with his list to the shopkeeper. Buying and paying by "trust" everytime Father doled out his bit by bit payments, the shopkeeper pulled from under the counter, a copy book dangling from a string, and updated his totals. The cost of items he piled into the cardboard box was noted in the crumpled pages filled with dog ears and stained with sweetdrink and curry.

When I was a little bigger, as soon as I saw Father coming from work I would jump in the air, throwing up my hands begging to be picked up. He would stoop down, ruffle my hair, sweep me up in his big strong arms and twirled me around. A pitch oil lamp was lit as soon as the sun went down and with his melodic voice, he rocked me to sleep, belching out words to *Clementine* and *Danny Boy*. When my eyes began drooping, he lowered his voice and putting a finger to his lips motioned to the next sibling waiting in line to be picked up. With no other form of entertainment, it was the only way to spend an evening.

Father's car, the colour of green pigeon peas was a marvel in the village. He had to crank up the old jalopy a few times before it actually kicked in. The tuck-tuck noise of it attracted attention bumping down the road in low gear, stalling and starting. As he navigated his way swerving to avoid bleating goats, he gathered barefoot wayward kids who were hollering, chasing the car and clinging to the back fender. Beeping the horn, and using his hand as a signal he by-passed overloaded sugarcane carts pulled by oxen with farmers cracking the whip on their backsides to move faster. The road stank of manure, but at sundown when the bullock carts passed by with bales of sugarcane, the farmer would haul me up for a ride. Sitting on the bundle and reaching for a piece of sugarcane, I ripped the peel off with my teeth sucking every bit of sweetness until the fibres went dry. The juice dribbled down my chin and with the back of my hand I wiped and dried it on my dress. Then hopping off the cart and scooting across the road, I jumped over the drainage ditch to play-fight and sneak in a wash with the village children loafing around the standpipe.

I was about five when we packed our things and moved into the big town with an exotic name. Promoted to headmaster, Father nodded and waved to the villagefolks as they watched us drive away. Crouched together like puppies in the backseat, hot and suffocating, his seven bony children fought for a window seat cuffing, kicking, pinching and going ballistic. Angry, scrunching up his brow and barking the same tune over and over, we ducked Father's swift back hand swings as he tried his damndest to discipline his brood while driving.

Our big new concrete house stood on pillars, built on a hill overlooking the ocean. Numbed at the sight, my eyes lit up and my heart galloped as I tumbled out of the car and bolted up the steps. I began traipsing around this rambling house smelling of new paint with shiny wooden flooring not yet covered in dust. At that age it was quite the spectacle with three bedrooms, kitchen and a wrap around gallery. It had faucets with running water, lights that worked with the flick of a switch, doors with proper locks, a room where my poop was washed away with the pull of a long chain, and the list went on and on. My tiny brain, taking in everything with pomposity, told me I was going to be living in a nice little palace, continuing the journey with some fresh starts.