

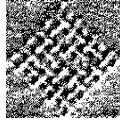
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Born Too Soon



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People told him all the time that it was the wife, “that woman,” who had tried to kill him while he was still in his mother’s womb, but he didn’t know whether to believe it. He lived in this way, in a state of confusion, hearing, reading, sometimes believing but never understanding why and always wondering whether he should try harder to reason. Tales of his birth always included a few of the same details. His mother, Agnes, felt a sharp pain in her belly shortly after sunset one Saturday in February. She screamed her mother's name from the bedroom where she, Agnes, was lying down. Margaret, his grandmother, was having a rare and very fortunate night of sobriety weaving mats from dried straw in the kitchen to sell at the artisan's market the following morning. Margaret dashed to the bedroom at the sound of her daughter's agony and realized immediately that the pain was more than labour. He had been due twelve days later. He was coming too soon. When they tell him this story, his family always emphasizes that his father was nowhere to be found. They all assumed that on that chilly, February night, he was warm, at home, with the woman whom he had allegedly divorced when he was wooing Margaret's young daughter fresh out of secondary school. He only ever saw her twice, the woman. One of those times, she walked swiftly passed him on his way from Math lessons, holding a puzzled stare until she disappeared around the corner. His mother later told him that she was probably wondering why he was still alive after she had done all in her power to see him emerge into the world a corpse. His father's indecency was known. On the rare occasion of spending a few hours with his father, he would observe him flirting with a woman or two and notice their defenses weakening, their blushing and their slow entanglement into his father's web of charm. He would see this happen to grown women and imagine how powerless his mother must have been as a teenager overwhelmed by a man of such allure. Margaret told him all the time about this charm and how he had disappeared after the deed was done, leaving Agnes to bear the pain and the shame, and him, then a defenseless baby growing in the womb, exposed to the wrath of his father's then-wife, the woman.

On the night of his birth, the entire street had gathered outside while his neighbours and family were in his mother’s room. His mother was holding onto her belly, yanking her head back in pain and intermittently expressing shame through the agony on her face in response to the judgmental stares of villagers and the blatant invasion of her privacy. Margaret had left for ten minutes to fetch Ms. Julie, the village midwife and spiritual healer, during which time the villagers had

intruded. Ms. Julie entered the space with relaxed confidence, adorned, as always, with a head-tie and ankle-length frock of African print. Around her neck was a rosary with an elaborate wooden cross on the end and another beaded necklace with a stone ankh. She placed her hand on Agnes' head and ran it down the side of her agonizing face as if to let Agnes know that she, Ms. Julie, had arrived and it would all be okay. After demanding silence, she placed her left hand gently on Agnes' belly, on the navel, and pressed several parts of the swollen, low-hanging abdomen with her right hand, all the while keeping her eyes closed and concentrating deeply on what she was feeling. During this time, only Agnes' screams disturbed the eerie silence. She then opened her eyes and proclaimed, "da baby tie around da navel string. Somebody tryin' an' kill dis boy." The silence was broken by an eruption of conversation. Speculation ensued immediately. It was the wife, "that woman", who had done it; the woman who would not dare lose her husband, though his indecency was known, to a barely educated little girl from Bayside. She had wrapped his own life-giving navel string around his neck, so that he would never see the light of day, so that her shame would never be borne through her husband's likeness on the baby's living face.

Ms. Julie had a solution. Agnes' two older siblings, Joseph and Teresa, had been gazing on helplessly. "Go by da river an' take some sand on the left side where da river touching da sea," Ms. Julie instructed a confused, then fourteen-year-old, Joseph. People say that with no hesitation, Joseph grabbed a pot from the kitchen counter and sprinted into the dark night, before emerging after twenty or so minutes, completely drenched and with the pot full of black, clayish sand. They say that Agnes ate of this sand seven times and then he, the baby doomed in her womb, stilled and uncoiled himself, and came gently into the world. People even claim that the river sand had given him a calm and loving temperament.

Villagers love to retell the story, especially about how Ms. Julie, "God rest her soul," saved the little boy and Agnes' life; how well-behaved he was at school and how smart he was; that he would not be here today, if not for the miracles that took place at his birth. Every time he heard a version of the story, he wondered the same thing. How did his uncle Joseph know which side of the river was left? Surely, it would have depended on which way he was looking or where he was standing. How could something so subjective be the source of his salvation and the reason he is here today?

He had asked Uncle Joe about that night and about what happened at the river several times. Uncle Joe was an untrained but successful mechanic. He could fix anything and always had customers. He would always say that if he were born in a different time, he would have been an engineer and he would have done something big in their village. He prided himself on being a systematic and methodical man. But Uncle Joe never answered his questions directly. Instead, Uncle Joe would always retell the entire story of that fateful night emphasizing that it was his precision and dutifulness in following the instruction of Ms. Julie that had saved a life. Joe once explained that even though Ms. Julie never explicitly said it, when she had instructed him to scoop the sand, she used a twisting, raking motion with her hand that he had replicated exactly when

taking the clay in order to ensure that the remedy to the life-threatening malady was precisely administered. This twisting motion must have had some effect on the untwisting of the navel-string. Although Uncle Joe was always a man of reason who believed that the cause of anything could be discovered and explained with adequate investigation, he maintained that there were powers beyond human understanding at play that night. Joe had done his duty as a brother and a son, and all he knew for sure was that in so doing he had contributed, in part, to saving a life.

His neighbour, whose real name was Barbara Greene, but was affectionately known as Bell because she always announced when the church bells were about to ring, tells how she watched the whole thing carefully on that night. Bell was never a fan of Ms. Julie or stories about Ms. Julie's miracles. She contends that her late grandaunt was a much better healer. Ms. Julie, she said, had never taken time to learn the remedies well, the way they used to do them, "long, long ago." One day, he was sitting on her step, eating the coconut candies that she always made on Tuesday afternoons, when she confessed to him that she had a hand to play in his salvation as well. Bell explained that while Ms. Julie was not looking, she had gone close to the bed to raise Agnes' head with pillow when she observed that the conditions were not right for spiritual healing to take place. In her pain, Agnes had contorted her finger so much that the index and middle fingers were crossed on her right hand. The river sand had not taken immediate effect. She had to uncross his mother's fingers and had also taken the opportunity to tilt her head to left, facing east to the rising sun, consequently creating the perfect physical and spiritual conditions for the clay remedy to take full effect.

People often did that, what Bell did. They explained the hand that they had to play in saving his life. Even his grandmother Margaret who rarely spoke of her part in his salvation, save a few select occasions when she was under the influence of her daily spirits. Her drinking was notorious. She had taken him with her to Charlie Boy's rum shop when he was seven or so, he remembered. She often did that. He distinctly recalls many afternoons when she would pick him up from school while his mother was still at work at the supermarket in town and digress briefly on their way home for a quick pick-me-up from Charlie. She seldom sat down and she always drank in the same way. Upon entry, she would greet everyone elaborately, then proceed to the counter where "Mr. Charlie", as she had schooled him in referring to the tiny, half-Indian man, would begin to pour an odorous, clear liquid into two shot glasses and empty half a bottle of water into a bigger glass. Margaret would attack both shot glasses aggressively, swiftly gulping the contents of the two in quick succession. She would then exhale through her mouth producing a scratchy hiss as if what she had just consumed was terribly hot, spicy or immensely unpleasant. Then, she would slowly drink the entire glass of water all the while holding his hand firmly. She seldom paid, he noted. Mr. Charlie usually scribbled a few things on what seemed like the same, old, folded piece of paper and then she would exit when he had noted her debt.

Margaret never lingered to chat after the ritual, always jetting out of the shop and tugging him along, save one day when what seemed like the oldest men he had ever seen inquired about him

before Margaret had finished her glass of water. That day, she sat down and told her version of the glorious story, all about Ms. Julie, “God rest her soul,” who saved him on that cold, February night. She recounted every detail of that night which finally ended when his navel string was snipped in the early hours of the morning. Margaret made it clear to the man that she had no small part to play in the boy’s existence. “People always think I drunk and my head not on, but that boy would not be here today if I din’ do what I had to do for my daughter Agnes,” she said. She explained that she had heard, long before that night, all the rumours about the woman wanting to tie the child and kill him in the womb, and that she, who always loved her pictures of animals, went all about her home taking them all down and putting them into a box under the sink. These pictures, she clarified, were not inherently bad but when a woman is pregnant, especially a young, vulnerable woman, they can become channels through which evil spirits that have been cast upon someone can manifest in a space. She had known all along that she would invite Ms. Julie to deliver the baby at home and so she, in addition to preparing the bed, the bath pan, and the towels, had prepared the space spiritually to receive him. She had even drawn a little cross on the box, and after having her drink, inspired by the spirit, had a prayer to St. Michael imploring his protection inscribed on two pieces of cardboard. She had placed one piece under the bed where he was to be delivered and another on the box of pictures that should the evil spirits still manifest in the box, they would be kept at bay.

‘Bondyé pa ka domi¹,’ she testified. After having made all the preparations, the same Holy Spirit that had guided her in preparing her home manifested that very night and came to her aid again. She recalled that Ms. Julie had fed Agnes the river sand once but there was no effect. Ms. Julie then decided to give two more servings, administering the remedy three times, “a perfect number,” Ms Julie had said, in order that the baby settle in the womb and come gently. With each dose, she rubbed Agnes’ abdomen, massaging the baby into position. But still, nothing! He had coiled himself in the womb, tied by a spirit that had broken all defenses, a spirit sent by a powerful sorcerer, extremely motivated who would see Agnes push out his lifeless body. Ms. Julie, in an act of desperation, Margaret concluded, had decided that seven instead of three, seven doses would save the baby. It was in that moment that she saw them, while the four desperate, additional doses of sand were being administered. When everyone thought the “rum was in her head,” and she wasn’t in possession of all her faculties, she noticed the insidious knot in the bedroom curtain. There had been six windows and two doors in the small wooden house and Margaret recounts having tied up all the curtains earlier in the afternoon because of how warm it had been while she was weaving her straw mats. “I save da boy,” she boasted. “By the grace of God, I fix da problem one time.” At the critical moment, when even the legendary Ms. Julie had no more remedies, inspired by her spirit, Margaret moved quickly to loosen all the six knots in the house and finally close every channel that permitted darkness into the space. She recounted that it was at the final window, which serendipitously coincided with the seventh gulp of river sand, that Agnes had

¹ God does not sleep

stopped screaming and had subdued to a calmer moan that Ms. Julie, massaging the belly one last time, exclaimed to the delight of all present, “da head coming!”

Unlike most of the people around him, his mother, Agnes, did not like to speak about the night of his birth and she never spoke to him directly about what happened. Whenever the story was being told and she was inescapably a part of the conversation, she’d usually say, “I was just glad da baby come out alive!” He only ever heard her describe his life but never his birth. One afternoon, while talking to his homeroom teacher who had offered them a drop to their bus-shelter after a parent-teacher meeting, she confessed that she had to, “fight to keep da boy alive.” He remembered her words distinctly. “The birth wasn't the end, you know. After he was born, if you had see how dehydrated dat boy was. And diarrhoea, diarrhoea, diarrhoea, Mrs. Thomas! There was a day it look like he was not going to make it. My spirit tell me to put a little bless salt on his tongue and start making a cross with the pins on the diapers and just like dat, he start getting better.” He observed Mrs. Thomas nodding with approval of what his mother had done which inspired her to open up some more. She told Mrs. Thomas about the three drops of red lavender that she had mixed into his hair gel to protect him from any evil attack while he was at school and how she had instructed him to wear his boxers and vests inside out in order to confuse any maleficent teachers who may interfere with him. His protection from evil, he realized that day, was his mother main occupation. The small open pair of scissors that she had taped to the head of his bed one night after hearing noises on the roof and the three wrapped up pieces of garlic that she had instructed him to keep in his pencil case at all times were all to give him a chance in the world. She wanted to protect him from the evil that she was sure would befall him if she had not taken drastic measures. Those conversations, that he often overheard, were themselves the reason that he did well at school. When he heard his mother say these things, he was always motivated to work a little bit harder, to do his very best. He knew that his welfare was greatest occupation and even as a young boy, he felt guilty. He knew that he had been born too soon in his mother’s life to give her any chance of selfish pursuit and he was determined to repay the miracles of his birth with good grades and good behaviour.

His aunt Teresa had a unique spin on the events of that night. She would constantly tell him that he was a “blessed child.” Teresa was a very prayerful woman. She often wrapped a rosary around her hand as she did household chores and she was the only woman, who was not very old by his estimation, who would cover her hair with a lace veil when attending mass. Teresa often reminded him, particularly when he was naughty, that she was the reason he was alive today. She had saved his life twice. On one occasion, while stirring seasonings into her famous cowheel soup, she told him that his mother had decided to end his life before he was born. “Long before you were tied in the womb, you were doomed,” she said. “Praise God I was around after Agnes was seduced by your father. Your mother kept saying that she had no space in her life for a child and your father is another woman's husband and I knew she was planning it. When I saw her get dressed, I followed her and she walked all the way up to Dr. Ambrose. Everybody knows the sort of thing that man does. I stopped her. I pledged to support her and told her that I would be there

for her no matter what happened.” She had stopped stirring at that point and had looked directly into his eyes before adding, “and there you are!” He remembered feeling gratitude when she said those words. “You were destined to live, not to die,” She had added. “While they were feeding my sister sand, I was praying.” She recalled that as his grandmother was releasing curtains in the living room, and Ms. Julie was feeding Agnes river sand, she finished the rosary and a cold breeze rushed into the room and brought peace. Agnes had stopped screaming and his head had emerged. It was that breath of God, Teresa preached to him, which had miraculously untied him in the womb and dispelled every sorcery that had been set against him. She added that she felt that same cold, refreshing breeze rush into the church on the day of his baptism at the moment that the water touched his head. She seemed to remember it distinctly, pausing her stirring again as she issued each detail. Father Maloney, an old, Irish, Caucasian Priest, had poured the first of three helpings of water on his head as his mother held him over the fountain. She remembered how the wind, at the moment, entered the space and so ruffled his little white garment, that she had had to hold it in place, covering his diaper as Father Maloney poured water twice more. Teresa believed that on that day, an anointing had been placed on him that guarded him against all witchcraft and any further attacks of the woman. She explained that the woman would always be surprised to see him in good health and doing well at school but she did not know about the power of that holy breeze that had sealed him. Teresa considered Agnes’ antics useless. Often, when she would catch him turning his vest inside out after showering at her home, she would express her disapproval, claiming that his mother clung too much to her superstitions. His baptism was enough. “God is enough,” she would say. Sometimes, she added words like “that woman will never succeed.”

The second time that he saw “the woman” he was standing with a large group of villagers waiting to buy fresh bread from the old, stone bakery in his village. He noticed her as soon as she appeared around the corner. She was wearing a long, worn out, red skirt and a loose, old white T-shirt and had a straw bag hanging from her arm. He remembered how she was dressed very clearly because she had looked the way his mother looked when she was in and around the house. He turned his head for a moment and focused ahead to make sure that the bread was not yet being sold and by the time he had turned back in her direction, she was near him. She did not see him at first but when the baker came out with a basket of loaves and he began shouting, “two bread in a paper bag,” to the baker, the woman noticed him. She came closer and stared deeply into his face. She was not menacing. She did not look the way he had imagined a witch would look. Up close, he noticed her short, neat, afro hair and her pleasant almond-shaped eyes. He was engrossed in her curious expression when the baker demanded his attention. He grabbed the paper bag with the two loaves and handed the baker a five-dollar bill. By the time he got the change, the woman was even closer. He froze. She was smiling. She raised her right hand and touched his hair. Then, she ran her cold hand down the side of his right cheek and propped it under his chin. He stood there, dazed, motionless, letting it happen. Then, she stopped smiling and her expression evolved into pain. She sighed, looked down at his hands, grabbed his right wrist and looking back up at face said in soft, deep voice, “you look like your father.” He yanked his hand away from her grasp. One

of the loaves fell out the paper bag but he left it on the ground and ran all the way home never looking back.

He did not tell his mother about the woman. He was afraid to admit to her that he had let the woman touch him. He was afraid that after all that the people around him had done to save him, he had let it all go to waste because he was in shock. When his mother asked him about the missing loaf, he said that he had been hungry and had eaten his loaf on the way home. After that encounter, he wondered for long-time whether the woman's touch had affected him in some way. After a while, when nothing changed, he wondered what had protected him. He wondered whether all was okay because of the river sand, or the red lavender that was in his hair at the time, or the breeze at his baptism, or whether the woman was not a witch at all. The brief moment of pain on the woman's face haunted him and he wondered whether the woman was trapped, as his mother had once been, in his father's web of charm.

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