

## **THE CRADLE AND THE GRAVE**

# THE CRADLE

It may be the coldest day of the year. She stared out of the tiny window as she hopes for the catastrophe of her life to seem beautiful again. Maybe she was a fool to still believe or even dare hope or maybe she has simply found herself again.

A look of sadness, like a shadow, passed across her face as the pictures of her childhood came rushing towards her. She made a grab for one, a picture of her painting. Tiny hands moving awkwardly, brush in hand, untidy paint strokes on what could hardly pass for a canvas. It was a used milk carton actually. It was a magical time of her life, when all things were possible, long before she knew that life was full of unpleasant surprises. Like every other little girl she was filled with dreams and hopes of a colourful and bright tomorrow. A tomorrow filled with laughter and free of sorrow, pain, penury. The little her saw her thirty year old self surrounded by the laughter of her beautiful kids, the keen loving eyes of her fine husband following her. She saw herself floating across the hospital ward in immaculate white doctor's coat and the patients looking at her with awe, reverencing her. She saw herself nipping, tucking, gifted hands working briskly, expertly too. How then is she standing here, thirty years old, lost? Could it be the choices she made?

Choice. We have been given the power of choice but only over the little things; the feeble things. We have been given the power to choose who to date, what to eat, what to wear, where to go and how to live our lives. Even the power of becoming what and what not may seem like in our hands when in truth, it is not. You may choose to take a particular route in destiny but fate has a funny way of pushing you off course. Although, a lot of people do succeed in their chosen path of destiny and you can't help but wonder why. Why would one person's life work out so right and the other so wrong. Could it be the choices they made? But those choices seemed the best at that time. It may even work for one and then fail another. Who then decides who gets favoured and who gets disfavoured. The Bible did say "It is not of he that runneth nor willeth. The race is not of the swift or strong. I will show mercy to whom I will show mercy" These quotes may be the answer to the question of who decides. But that births other questions. What makes a man qualify for this unmerited favour? Why was this child born whole and the other handicapped? Why is she white and her black? Why did he die just when his political career is about to hit its zenith? Why did she die without even seeing the face of the pretty baby she just brought into this world? Which child gets a cradle and which child gets a straw bed? Questions, questions, questions. The choice of birth and death sadly has not been placed in our hands. Neither is the choice of how you come and how you go. But in between the journey from the cradle to the grave, the power over some choices has been placed in our hands. They may seem feeble but these feeble choices end up deciding our whole lives.

# THE JOURNEY

As a young teenage girl, Diane had equipped her mental archive with what she saw as the best relationship advice. Advice that made it easy for her and girls like her become so eager to overcompensate. She was willing to give everything to a man she barely knew, without him having to invest so much in the relationship. She gave blindly because she thought it was the only way to get her attention reciprocated. She went along with what she thought her man would like or want because she wanted to keep the relationship. She chose him from the sea heads of desperate young boys wanting to court her. Dotun was a tall dark boy with coarse

features. He smiled readily and spoke with a voice rich with persuasion. But he had a dark side as well. A dark side she saw but chose to ignore because she felt if she gave him all, her love would someday illuminate him.

Night after night they made love with a wild, reckless abandon. She didn't for once stop to consider the implications of their exuberance. And then the inevitable happened.

The afternoon sun hung high in the sky, a steamy red disk that burned hot on the city below. The window of Diane's room opened wide to the outside, but no breeze could cool the stifling room. There she sweated and fidgeted, anxious to know how he would take the news. And when he came, the whole telling process was like one big fast forward motion because it happened all too quickly. He paced up and down the room mad with rage. "No, this is so wrong. You will only destroy my future if you decide to keep that baby" he storms. There was no love in his eyes. She had no intention of keeping the child. She had no idea what she wanted to do with the eight weeks pregnancy, but she sure knew his reaction was not what she hoped for. What did she hope for by the way? He left, breathing malevolence, cursing and swearing. So it came as a big surprise to her when he showed up at her door step two weeks later, bearing gifts and smiling warmly. She was quick to take him back, and too quick to swallow up all his promises of a better tomorrow, for them and their baby. She was yet to decide what she wanted to do with the pregnancy, but when she heard him say those promises, her mind became certain, she was going to keep it. "I am going to be a good father to our baby" he said. And they drank to that. With much enjoyment, she drank the mixed juice he brought her. She drank, they laughed and she refused to worry about tomorrow and the welfare of their unborn child.

Though she was lethargic and delirious, she was able to recognise her environment. She was in the hospital and her mind has refused to register how she got there. Her skin was pale. Her lips cracked with fever. She tried to speak but her voice was so hoarse and weak that no sound escaped her lips. Once the doctor came, it became apparent that her condition was critical. His voice harboured so much warmth. "You were poisoned, but you will live". With many medical jargons, he explained why her womb needed to be evacuated. All through his speech, the only question on her mind was "How did I get here?"

She did not die. Over the following weeks, she began to feel warm again. She remained awake more of the time, without falling into the deep and dreamless of her dark nights.

Although her child was no more, she gradually regained her health and vitality. It was only in the quiet moments of the dark night that she grieved for the small child and the evil meted on her by the one she loved. She grieved only in the dark, for she has come to understand that time spent in grief was time wasted. It was with that mind she went back to school.

She saw Dotun regularly, in the arms of his new girlfriend. And every time, he looked right through her like she was somewhat invincible. He acted like he never knew her, like she never carried his baby, albeit a brief period. He acted like he didn't kill their baby. She knew for certain that his intention was to kill the baby and not her because she later found out that it was he who rushed her to the hospital and paid for the bills. She chose to forgive Dotun and to keep his secret as she hoped for a better tomorrow.

Over the years she met a lot of guys. Quite a few of them became lovers. But they were all boys, callow, bullying, glory seeking, gold digging, lying boys. None could align with her dreams and visions. They choked in her intellect. In no time, she knew that what she wanted was a man.

Getting a job as a project manager in an IT firm was the best thing that had happened to her in a long time. She went into the job prepared to conquer and dominate. Her boss was man of high intellect. He was on top of some many things at the same time and all succeeded. He had the wisdom of a sage. He was a jack of all trade and a master of all. He had bright eyes, sweet smile, boisterous laugh and a pleasing disposition. Above all, he was a man. Sadly, a married

man. They spent virtually every day together, working, researching and conquering new career grounds. It was only natural for feelings to evolve. From mutual likeness and respect into something they both couldn't understand. He wouldn't pass for handsome but he oozed a masculinity that made him desirable, in a sensual kind of way. She wanted him and she wanted all of him.

It was easy for them to blame their first night together on the alcohol they consumed at a client's party. The night ended with both them making love in a way that made her feel feminine. He touched her like a woman should be touched. He wasn't too fast, he wasn't too slow. He was a man making love to a woman. That night was like a precious flower to her. And a life without flowers is not a life at all. The next day began with them promising never to repeat the night. A promise they couldn't keep. That night was repeated over and over and over again. They would spend hours making love, talking about everything and nothing in particular. He would laugh showing dazzling white teeth. She forgot he was twenty years her senior. She forgot he was with a wife and three kids. Akinola became her boss and her lover. The months they spent together had been the happiest time of her life, a time when the dreams of her childhood seemed to come true. She was in love with him. She felt an enormous liquid peace flow through her body whenever she was with him.

During the day, they both worked so hard. At the close of work, he would drive her home, and she would prepare something for them to eat. They would eat, drink, make love and talk late into the night. He would kiss her goodnight before going back home to his family. He only spent the night when his family was out of town. She looked forward to those nights. This one night started out like every other magical night of theirs. But as the night wore on, he began to feel extremely tired and very hot. He began to pale and to sweat. He started to burn with fever and was barely able to speak. He became cold, clammy and deathly pale. She begged to take him to his doctor but he assured her it was just a fever that would pass. He gave her a reassuring smile. In his head it was a peaceful smile but what she saw was only a grimace. She was sick with worry. She held him close, kissed his forehead and said a silent prayer for him. Suddenly he began to tremble and he began to cough and choke. It was all happening so fast. She couldn't decide whether to run for help or not. In that moment of absolute confusion, she felt his chest rise and fall. She heard him drag his last hiss of a breathe. She felt the world stop or maybe it was her heart. For her heart did stop with his. But only his was permanent. She felt her scream could be heard in the entire world, and yet she had not made a sound. Her breath came hard and short. She could not think. She could decide nothing. Finally she reached for his phone and made a call to his best friend, Dayo. She couldn't recall what she said and she couldn't remember collapsing and total darkness obliterating her thoughts.

"Speak to me Akin", she said, when she opened her eyes. "Fill my head with any thoughts but those that fill it now." She watched as his body was being carried away by the paramedics. She couldn't cry yet, for her tears were far too deep to reach. She was destroyed by grief. Dayo reached out to her but she recoiled from his touch. He asked her if she would like to accompany Akinola's body. She found herself following them into the car and down to the morgue. She couldn't utter a word.

In the morgue, she leaned wearily against the white washed wall. She felt a little dizzy and her eyes burned with unshed tears. She tried to figure out what went wrong. What she could have done differently to save him. She heard angry footsteps matching towards her. She looked up to see Akinola's wife storming towards her. Idowu's eyes were swollen with weeping. Dayo sensing an ugly situation quickly threw himself between both women. Diane fell to her knees at Idowu's feet. Diane covered her face with her hands and then she wept. The tears flowed uncontrollably as she begged Idowu for forgiveness. She continued to beg even though she didn't know what exactly she was seeking forgiveness for. Was it for falling

in love with her husband or for watching him die in her arms? She couldn't bear to see the hate emitting from Idowu's eyes. Dayo led the bereaved widow away.

## THE GRAVE

Dayo assured her the Police only wanted a recount of what happened that night in the form of a written statement. The picture of that night had carved a deep sadness in her heart. A sadness that would live with her forever. At the police station, she was never given the chance to recount what happened that night in the form of a written statement. Rather she was led away like a common criminal in handcuffs. She felt so betrayed, she could say nothing. As she was being led away, she felt a sharp pain surge through her from behind. She turned only to find the Idowu's cold, hard eyes shoot daggers at her. The eyes were without remorse and dispassionate in all regards. Idowu knew Diane had no hand in the death of her husband, but she was willing to make Diane pay for those nights Akinola came home tired, too tired to touch her. She was willing to make Diane pay for robbing her and the kids precious family moments. Paying the police to have Diane locked up without an investigation and court process came easy to her. She didn't have a second thought about it. And she was glad Dayo was willing to shut his mouth for a few millions of naira.

Diane could not breathe; there was no air for her even though she struggled for it. Silent as a statue, tears clouding her eyes, she was led into a tiny cell. She looked around the cell, taking on the dirty blackened wall, the mold covered floor and the foul smelling shit bucket. Could this be her home for the rest of her life?

Days passed, then weeks. She tried to keep her mind alert by counting things. The ceiling, the flies and the rats. Was this better than death? Diane wondered. Still weeks turned into months and her situation remained the same. No one came for her. Not even her family. She wouldn't blame them if they chose to stay away. She had not been much of a good child to them. It could even be that her whereabouts was not known to them. Her poor mother. She tried with all her might to resist her own panic, for she was certain that if she gave in, it could make a mad woman of her. There were times she was certain she had gone mad, when she forgot where she was, when she imagined herself in her home with her family, or arguing good-naturedly with her friends. She tried not to think of him, and yet there were times he seemed to be with her in the same cell, stroking her hair, kissing her lips, telling her everything was going to be alright. "Akinola" she cried.

From the cells around her she could hear the cries and screams of the others, who moaned and shouted obscenities about the federal government. She was taunted by some, and others wondered why such a fine fashioned young girl like her could have placed herself in such a situation. The light that used to shine so brightly in her eyes has been extinguished.

It may be the coldest day of the year. Staring out of the tiny window she hoped for the catastrophe of her life to seem beautiful again. Maybe she was a fool to still believe or even dare hope or maybe she had simply found herself again. Her once full round body was now sickly thin. Her hair was wild and gnarled with knots. Tears filled her eyes as she wondered if the court of law would ever try her case. She wondered if a doctor would ever prove that she

had no hand in his death. She wondered if the world would justify her for loving a married man so dearly. The only crime she committed was loving someone else's husband. She wondered why he had to die. He was at his prime. He had just started to conquer the world. He was a healthy, strong, vibrant man.

We were given the power of choice over a few feeble things. And deciding who to love happened to be one of them. She wondered if she did wrong choosing to love another woman's husband right. She wondered if she did wrong choosing to be happy. Why should one man die and another live? What did they do differently? Was the living one more worthy to be on earth than the one six feet under the ground? Why should one child come to the world surrounded by loving parents smiling down at him, in his nice fluffy cradle? And why should another child be born within the confines of a cell? Who gets favoured and who gets disfavoured?

Tears filled her eyes. She cried, tears for herself, as well for him and the love they shared. She cried, tears for her the child growing inside of her. His child. She cried, tears for love lost. She cried, tears for the grave she saw right there, in front of her. She cried.

THE END.