Where One Falls Is Where Their God Pushed Them Down

KASIMMA OKANI

They say that where one falls is where their god pushed them down. Well, I fell in the church, right at the altar of God. I know I should not have, but then, I’m only human, and my chi pushed me down.

My chi pushed me down the tunnel of temptation the first day I led the praise and worship session. She was right there in front of me, eyes closed, hands up, voice raised to God. Maybe it was the way she shook her head. Or the way her black mascara streamed down her ivory-complexioned face when she cried. My eyes darted to her curvy hips. The fishing line weave choker looked beautiful on her neck, but not to compare to the splendor of her wrinkled skin and flabby belly. I wanted to run my fingers from her neck to her breasts and downwards. Seeing her up-close for the first time sent passionate chills swimming from my head to my vagina. But I raised my voice higher in worship to God Almighty and enjoined the church to do same. When I eventually
stopped singing, the church praying in tongues, she opened her eyes and our eyes met. She caught me staring! My heart skipped a beat, but she smiled at me. I did not smile back, could not—not with the entire congregation looking at me.

After the service, I stayed glued to my seat. I knelt on the purple carpet, clasped my hands, squeezed my eyes shut, and said the Lord’s Prayer. ‘Lead me not into temptation, dear Lord,’ I repeated, ‘but deliver me from all evil. Should I fall, however, Sweet Heart of Jesus, please love me still.’ Someone tapped my shoulder. I raised my head. I saw her yellow teeth before her pink-blushed cheeks.

‘Sorry to disturb you, Ọkụchi, but Pastor Dorcas asked me to call you.’

I froze. I could still see the messenger’s red lips moving, but I heard nothing. How could it be that my chi was setting me up like this? I looked left to where I knew Pastor Dorcas sat. She was there, smiling at me. I thought of how I’d walk past all the church members sprinkled all over the hall, discussing and laughing. A woman with folded arms stood in front of a gesticulating man in an oversized suit. I saw our drummer teaching another member of our choir how to dance etighi. I sighed and grabbed my purse and Bible.

I fell on my knees when I got to Pastor Dorcas. She rubbed my back and asked me to stand. She tapped the seat beside her. I sat. She smiled at me. The devil is a liar. I lowered my head.

She held my hand. ‘Your voice is as beautiful and as graceful as you are.’

‘Thank you, ma.’

I noticed a brown triangular stain on my black, suede, high-heeled shoes. She placed her palm on my lap. ‘Would you have time to stop by my office tomorrow?’

I stiffened. Nope, can’t. I will never, ever, forever come to your office. ‘No problem, ma. Say three pm?’

‘Three is perfect, my daughter.’

I came back home to a table set for lunch. I sat on my spot, removed my shoes, and waited. On the lazy Susan were three big white covered
ceramic bowls and four metallic serving spoons. There was another flat ceramic plate with fried plantains. Soon, I heard my parents’ voices as they descended the stairs, their laughter deep-pitched. A strong hand squeezed my left shoulder. I turned and smiled at my father.

He sat to my right, his spot. ‘Ǒkùm, you should consider recording a song, you know.’

‘Thanks, Dad, I…’

‘May we say the grace,’ my mother said, her palms opened.

My father and I exchanged glances. Three of us held hands and bowed our heads as my mother led.

‘Kind God, we thank you for this meal which we are about to receive. We pray you to provide for those who cannot eat. Especially, dear God, Mr Adekunle, who has not regained his appetite. Thank you for healing him so far, Lord. Merciful God, please take away the life of Mrs. Haruna. It’s painful to see her suffer, knowing we can’t cure her again. My guess is that you will not heal her, either. So why not just put her out of her pains and take her life? And God, for Mr Onoja, I thank you for his speedy recovery from surgery. At this time, Lord…’

‘Ahem!’

The sound came from my father. I did not dare open my eyes. I heard a rasping breath from my left.

‘Please, God, forgive my husband who is so in a hurry to eat that he cannot pray for the afflicted. And may this food nourish our bodies and keep us away from the hospitals. Amen.’

‘Amen,’ my father and I responded.

I ate quietly, thinking about my tomorrow’s meeting with Pastor Dorcas. Would we be alone? What could we possibly talk about? How would I survive in a room alone with her? I heard my mother call out to our houseboy to get her a bottle of wine. I saw the wine bottle touch down on our table. I stayed focused on my plate. I saw my mother’s palm grab the bottle. I heard the soft glugs of the wine into her glass.

‘Ǒkùchukwu,’ she called.

That was what she called me when she had something serious to say. She used to call me Ǒkùm. My father has since taken over calling me Ǒkùm.
'I saw you talking to Pastor Dorcas after service.'
I tightened my grip on my fork. My armpit was suddenly moist. I looked at the AC behind my mother. The green numerals shone: 16°C.
My father’s eyes lit up. ‘Oh, you met with Pastor Dorcas?’
I mumbled. ‘Yes.’
My mother sipped from her glass of wine. ‘What do you want with her?’
I looked at my mother. She peered at me from over her eyeglasses. Her light brown pupils pierced into my eyes. I distracted myself with her hair, a mixture of black and grey. They touched her shoulders. She caressed the horn-shaped pendant on her neck.
Were it not for that pendant, one would not notice the tiny silver chain that blended with her skin, the colour of peeled Irish potato. She adjusted her flower-patterned buba gown using her forefinger and her thumb.
‘Okuchukwu, what do you want to do with Pastor Dorcas?’
I lowered my head and stared at the half-eaten rice and plantain on my plate. I heard my father’s frog-in-the-throat sound as he gulped his water.
‘Honey, what manner of question is that?’ my father asked.
‘Did I ask you?’
I looked at my father. He too had grey hairs, but not as much as my mother. His shoulders were broad and still firm for a man his age. He was sixty-seven, same as my mother.
‘Okuchukwu…’
‘Mum, Pastor Dorcas asked me to see her on Monday.’
‘Who asked to see who?’ her mother asked in a most condescending voice.
‘Mum…’
My father clapped. ‘Oh, Oka, that’s great!’
‘Thank you, Dad.’
‘I am sure she wants you to sing at her upcoming birthday party,’ he said again.
I shrugged.
‘Ọkụchukwu, how many of you did she invite to her office?’

I stabbed the plantain on my plate. ‘Mum, I don’t know, please.’

My father tore a piece of meat from his chicken thigh. ‘I’m sure it has
do with her seventieth birthday.’

My mother pointed at me. ‘Ọkụchukwu, go and get yourself a man.’

My father chuckled. ‘Honey, be nice to the girl. She will get married
when she finds Mister Right.’

My mother tapped the table. ‘She’s not even searching!’

I sighed, wiped my lips and dropped the napkin. ‘Thank you, Jesus;
thank you, Dad; thank you, Mum.’

I pushed my chair, carried my shoes and walked away. I heard my
father whisper, ‘You should be patient with her.’

My mother did not whisper her retort. ‘She should leave women
alone and go and get married. Her mates are all married.’

‘What do you mean, “leave women alone”?’

I walked faster to my room. As soon as the door was securely
locked behind me, I yanked my clothes off my body and dropped on
my bed. I spread my legs open like daisies and masturbated to orgasm.
The relief it brought came with some guilt. I began to cry. My mother
used to love me. She used to tell me that I was the light of her life.

The last time things stood well between my mother and me was when I
was in SS2. My parents came to my school on a visiting day. My mother
pinched my cornrows. Wasn’t it too tight? she asked. My father told
her to let me be. When we finished eating, she asked me to go and bring
my books and my test scripts. I ran off to my classroom. Students
and parents were everywhere. I saw a junior girl hugging her mother.
Her mother dabbed at her eyes, as if afraid of letting her tears drop. I
smiled. Sometimes I wondered if my mother’s tear glands functioned.
I remember when her mother died of cancer, after three days of loud,
agonising groaning. I wept. My mother merely said, ‘Your tears won’t
bring her back.’ During the burial, my father struggled in vain to
blink off tears, but my mother stood there, stone-faced, watching her
mother’s white coffin return to dust.
On my way out of the classroom block, I met Uchenna. My eyes fell to her breasts, but I quickly looked away.

‘Ọkụchi, I’ve been looking for you. Thank God!’

She held her chest and placed a hand on my shoulder, panting. I only hoped that she did not feel the blood rushing down my head.

‘Where are you going?’ she asked.

‘My parents are still around.’

‘Oh, that’s great. May I say hello to them?’

‘Sure.’

I held my books tight. I did not want to yield to the temptation of touching her. Thoughts of the previous night filled my mind. Uchenna and I had finished studying on my bed. She yawned, rubbed her eyes, lay down and dozed off. Her hall was opposite mine. I thought about going to her bed. But I did not want to go down to that hall alone at night, not with the eerie stories of Madam Koi-Koi and Bush Baby that had become the only gist in school. So I lay on my back, beside her. I remember when Senior Olaide touched my breasts last year: the only person to ever do that. She was the one that invited me to sleep on her bed. In the middle of the night, I felt her hand ticking my nipple left to right like a pendulum bulb. Olaide was our labour prefect. She was feared. So with her touching my breasts, I did not know what to do. I did not know if I should be angry, grateful, afraid, I did not know the right emotions. I lay there, shut my eyes and allowed her until I began to enjoy it. But I contracted my thigh muscles when her fingers slid down my vagina. She withdrew and turned her back to me. After that night, she still smiled at me, still called me ‘My Girl,’ still placed her hand around my shoulders when we strolled. She still gave my class the easiest labour. She still remained my choko, my special friend. But she never invited me to her dormitory again, and we never talked about it. Several times, I built up the courage to tell her that I wanted her to touch me again, but my courage always failed me. Then she graduated.

So with Uchenna beside me, I started to shake inwardly. My knickers were wet. I looked at Uchenna. Her silky nightgown had
lowered, exposing her nipple. In an attempt to cover her, my fingers brushed her nipple. I quickly withdrew. An odourless fart, the sound of a boiling kettle, slipped out of her. She continued to snore softly. I wanted nothing more than to touch her nipple again. So I turned to my side and fondled her nipple with my fore and middle fingers. She stopped snoring. I expected her to hit my hand off, but she turned to me, eyes still closed. Her breasts slipped out of her nightgown. I grabbed them.

Uchenna left my bed at the toll of the rising bell, and I had not seen her until now. I introduced her to my parents. My mother smiled at her and focused on my notebooks. My father engaged her in a discussion about schoolwork. When my parents were set to leave, Uchenna joined me in seeing them off to the car. I walked between my parents while she walked beside my mother, her hands buried in the side pockets of her daywear. The pressure from her hands in her pocket flattened her gown so much to her body that I thought the fabric might snap. When my parents drove away, we walked back to the dormitories, silent. Then she held my hand. We were shielded by an empty classroom, just before the first hostel. Her eyes were tearful. They looked contrite.

‘I’m sorry, Ọkụchi.’

I waited to hear a response. She shook her head and ran off.

*I came back home during the holiday to find that our house help, a girl, had been replaced with a boy, Chidi. I was surprised to see this agile boy, of about my age, wearing an apron, and coming to collect my bags from me. I turned to my mother.*

‘Mum, what of Chinazo?’

‘We had to let her go. Go inside.’

I saw my father squeeze my mother’s palm. I rushed to the sitting room, stood behind the window blinds, and eavesdropped.

‘I am not comfortable with leaving this girl with this boy in this house. It is not safe.’

He was almost stammering. My mother was not even sounding breathy when she said, ‘Just like it was not safe leaving all the house girls with you.’
‘This is not about me.’
‘Of course, my decision this time to switch to a male house help has absolutely nothing to do with you. Rest assured of that. But what about your complaints? Are they for yourself or for your daughter?’
My father sighed. ‘Don’t put our only child at risk because I made a mistake.’
‘Mistakes, you mean? Ọkụchi can take care of herself.’
I heard the koi-koi of her heels, and I ran upstairs. It now made sense to me why she changed house girls like TV channels. That was also when she stopped calling me ‘Ọkụm’. That was when she started looking at me from over her eyeglasses. That was when I concluded that things were not standing well.
When I graduated from secondary school, I remember telling my parents of my intention to become a reverend sister.
My father grinned. ‘I can see those Sisters in charge of your school have spat in your mouth, eh?’
‘Why?’ my mother asked, calmly.
I had only one reason: the convent flowed with females.
‘I like their lifestyle,’ I said.
‘Oh, that’s so sweet,’ my father said. ‘Of course, you can join them, if you want.’
‘She cannot.’
‘Honey, can she at least try?’
‘She cannot. We are not Catholics. She cannot.’
Truth, they say, is the salt of a story. I should have told my parents the truth about my sexuality that day. But adding ube to vegetable salad simply because ube is a vegetable is sheer foolishness. So I crawled back into my shell.
In university, I tried out a relationship with a boy. When we had sex, I felt as if I had opened my legs like a toilet for him to piss inside. I pushed him away. It was the first and last time.
I threw my sexuality into a bottomless pit and buried myself in the things of God. I joined the choir and got busy with the demanding church activities. Since we are what we think, I thought of myself as
someone else, a heterosexual Christian. Until my chi pushed me down on the altar of God.

The next day, I drove to the church to see Pastor Dorcas. After meeting with her, I would stay behind for choir practice. I arrived five minutes late and waited another two minutes looking into my sun visor mirror. I applied some powder, darkened my purple lipstick, and brushed the thin hairs above my temple. I arranged the white pearls on my neck. I raised the sun visor. I brought it down again. There was nothing else to retouch. Pastor Dorcas looked into my eyes the last time we saw. What if she liked me? I smiled. What if my chi was just helping me? I unbuttoned the top of my shirt, half-exposing my cleavage.

While I waited for her secretary to announce my presence, I navigated the internet. My heartbeat sounded like udu drums. Someone tapped my arm. It was the secretary.

‘I’ve been calling you,’ she said, ‘you can go in now.’

I smiled at her and picked up my bag. I knocked on the door. I heard an animated invitation to proceed. She sounded so close that I opened the door gently for fear of bumping the door on her face. She was just a foot away from the door, standing by a wooden shelf, looking into a book. She grinned at me and opened her arms. I smiled and walked closer to her, almost falling on my knees to greet her. She raised me and hugged me. I sucked in my lips to avoid my lipstick staining her shoulder.

‘Please, sit,’ she pointed to a chair, ‘I will be with you shortly.’

I nodded and managed to carry myself to the chair without falling. I settled myself into the armless upholstered chair. Her perfume lingered in my nose. I’d felt her nipples on my chest. They were hard. Or was it my imagination? My hands trembled. The joy in my heart was as big as tomorrow: never-ending. I tried not to get ahead of myself. I’ve hugged many girls in my life, after all. But this one was different. Anyway, all geckos lie on their stomachs so we cannot tell which one has a stomach-ache. I hoped that’s why she called me, not just to tell me about her stomach ache but to beg me to do something about it.
I cautioned myself again to calm down. I moved closer to the edge of my seat and my knees brushed her orange wooden table. I felt it was a wonderful colour for a table. The table top was white and its body orange. There was a white computer on it, white keyboards, white jotter, hell, even her pen was white. Was she trying to tell me she was pure? Had I not heard her preach against homosexuality in church? I exhaled. She did not buy that table because of me. I mean, why would she? Pastors often preach against adultery and fornication, yet they indulge lavishly in them. I heard her cough. I did a quick check on my cleavage to see if it was still visible. *Perfecto!*

She sat and dragged her swivel chair closer. ‘Umm ... umm....’ She tapped her temple with her forefinger, her pupils rolled upwards.

‘Forgive me, I’m trying to remember your name. Oka...’

‘Ọkụchi.’

She snapped her finger and chuckled. ‘Yes, Ọkụchi. I’m sorry I forgot.’

I smiled at her, my gaze on her stomach bulge. I imagined resting my head on it like a soft pillow and falling asleep after a thorough love-making.

‘What a unique name. What does it mean?’

‘The light of God,’ I said.

‘Wow, what a befitting name. Your voice brings light to my church, Ọkụchi. I love your purple lipstick.’

I smiled. I could not look up to meet her eyes.

‘On Sunday, you wore dark-green lipstick. Your weird colours of lipstick manage to do well on your chocolate skin. It’s amazing.’

I smiled. My body trembled so much, I could not even let her see my teeth.

‘Where do you work?’

‘St Philips Boys Secondary School.’

‘Oh, great!’

She dug out her phone from her pocket, and soon, the brightness from the screen illuminated her oily face.

‘Holidays are almost here. That means you will have time. The
question now is would you be willing to spare your time?’

‘Time for ... what, ma?’

She dropped her phone on the table, as though trusting me not to steal it. She picked up her white pen and relaxed on her chair. She rolled the pen on her fingers as she swivelled left to right.

‘There is a music festival coming up this summer at the church I attend in the USA. The pastor asked me if I could send someone over and I accepted. After listening to you sing on Sunday, I knew it just had to be you. Let’s atarodo them.’ She grinned.

I know she expected me to laugh when she said ‘atarodo’ instead of ‘pepper’, but I was engulfed in darkness. Was this why I came here? America? Ameri—

‘Ọkụchi.’

I shuddered and displayed my teeth.

‘You don’t seem to like the idea.’

‘Yes, ma. I love the idea. I’m just too excited and lost for words.’

Her phone rang. I thanked my lucky stars, not my chi. My chi has embarrassed me enough. She picked up the phone. Soon deep lines etched on her forehead. She pulled the phone down from her ears, covered the receiver and whispered to me.

‘I will see you some other time.’

I bobbed my head.

‘Thank you for coming.’

I bobbed my head.

I had not even picked up my bag when she turned her chair back to me and said into the phone, ‘Repeat what you just said.’

I left. The secretary’s face lit up when she saw me. I saw her lips moving, but I dashed out and left the door to close itself behind me. I rushed to my car, flung my bag onto the passenger’s seat, turned my key in the ignition, and screeched out of the church premises. Tears burned my eyes. My chi had ridiculed me. I’d had enough. No matter how hungry a lioness is, it cannot eat grass. It is who it is. I am a lesbian. It is who I am. I can no longer hide. I stepped on the accelerator and headed to my mother’s office.
I barged into my mother’s office, panting. There were two men on blue scrubs and rubber slippers sitting there. Their eyes ran from my hair to my face to my chest.

‘Please excuse me, gentlemen,’ my mother said.

They stood, closed their files, and walked away. My mother relaxed on her chair and folded her arms, looking at me from over her eyeglasses. Her breathing was calm. Her eyes were peaceful. Her lips were normal. No wrinkle, no squeeze, nothing to suggest concern why I barged into her office with my hair looking like Medusa’s, my face wet and smeared with black mascara, my shirt buttoned down, exposing my black bra. I opened my mouth. Just three words were what I planned to say. I am lesbian. Air flowed into my mouth. My teeth went cold and my tongue dry. I tried to talk but could not form the words in my mouth. One jerk from my stomach pushed those three words to my throat as if my body were encouraging me to speak. But the words blocked my throat, unable to come out, unable to go back in. I felt choked. Yet my mother sat there as calm as a swimming pool.

I turned, walked out and carefully shut the door.