



Abandoned Church of God: Akron, Alabama. Digital photograph. ©2010 April Dobbins.

Miracle

from the forthcoming novel *The Proximity of Distance*

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OUR HEADS MOVE simultaneously, and we smile at the tall, svelte man who strides purposefully down the aisle to the pulpit. Once there, he raises both of his hands then lowers them slightly. He raises his chin and says *let us pray*.

“Dear Father, we come to you today, on the occasion of this revival, and we ask that you bless us abundantly, we who have made it to America, because we know we are here for a reason. We ask for your blessings because we are not here alone. Each of us represents dozens, sometimes hundreds of people back home. So many lives depend on us Lord, and the burden on our shoulders is great. Jesus, bless this service, and bless us. We ask that we will not be the same people at the end of the service as we were at the beginning. All this we ask of you, our dear savior, Amen.”

The pastor sits, and someone bolts from the front row to the piano and begins to play. The music we hear is familiar and at the same time new; the bandleader punches up a pre-programmed beat on the cheap electronic piano and plays a few Nigerian gospel songs to get us in the mood for revival. We sing along, though we have to wait a few moments at the beginning of each song to figure out what he’s playing. We sing joyful songs to the Lord, then songs of redemption, and then we sing songs of hope, hope that tomorrow will be better than today, hope that, one day soon, our lives will begin to resemble the dreams that brought us to America.

The tinny Nigerian gospel music ends when the pastor stands, and he prays over us again. He prays so long and so hard that we feel the weight of his words pressing down on us. His prayer is so insistent, so sincere, that his words emerge from the dark chrysalis of his mouth as bright, fluttering prophesies. In our hearts we stop asking *if* and begin wondering *when* our deeply held wishes will come true. After his sweating and shaking and cajoling he shouts another *Amen*, a word that now seems defiant, not pleading. We echo his defiance as loudly as we can, and when we open our eyes we see him pointing to the back of the church.

Our eyes follow the line of his finger, and we see the short old man hunched over in the back, two men on either side of him. Many of us have seen him before, in this very space; we’ve seen the old man perform miracles that were previously only possible in the pages of our Bibles. We’ve

seen him command the infirm to be well, the crippled to walk, the poor to become wealthy. Even those of us who are new, who know nothing of him, can sense the power emanating from him.

We have come from all over North Texas to see him. Some of us have come from Oklahoma, some of us from Arkansas, a few of us from Louisiana and a couple from New Mexico. We own his books, his tapes, his holy water, his anointing oil. We know that he is an instrument of God's will, and we have come because we need miracles.

We need jobs. We need good grades. We need green cards. We need American passports. We need our parents to understand that we are Americans. We need our children to understand they are Nigerians. We need new kidneys, new lungs, new limbs, new hearts. We need to forget the harsh rigid-

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ity of our lives, to remember why we believe, to be beloved, and to hope.

We need miracles.

We murmur as the two men help him to the front, and in this charged atmosphere everything about him makes sense, even the irony of his blindness, his inability to see the wonders that God performs through his hand. His blindness is a confirmation of his power. It's the burden he bears on our behalf; his residence in a space of perpetual darkness has only sharpened his spiritual vision over the years. He can see more than we will ever see.

When the old man reaches the pulpit his attendants turn him around so he's facing us. He's nearly bald—a few white hairs cling precariously to the sides of his shining head—and he's wearing a large pair of black sunglasses. A bulky white robe falls from his neck to the floor. Beneath, he's wearing a flowing white *agbada*.

He remains quiet for a few moments—we can feel the anticipation building, breath by breath, in the air. He smiles. Then he begins to hum. A haunting, discordant melody. The bandleader tries to find the tune among the keys of his piano, but the old man slaps the air and the bandleader allows the searching music to die.

He continues to hum and we listen to his music. Suddenly he turns to our left and points to a space somewhere on the ceiling:

"I DEMAND YOU TO LEAVE THIS PLACE!" he screams, and we know there is something malevolent in our midst. We search the area his sightless eyes are probing, somewhere in the open space above our heads. We can't see anything, but we raise our voices in response to the prophet's call. Soon our voices are a cacophonous stew of Yoruba and English, shouting and singing, spitting and humming, and the prophet from Nigeria speaks once more:

"We must continue to pray ladies and gentlemen! There are forces here that do not wish for this to be a successful service. If we are successful in our

prayers that means they have failed! They do not wish to fail! So we cannot expect that our prayers will simply come true; we must fight!”

We make our stew thicker; we throw in more screams and prayers until we can no longer distinguish one voice from another. Finally, after several long minutes, the prophet raises his hands:

“We are finished. It is done.”

And we begin to celebrate, but our celebration lacks conviction—we haven’t yet received what we came here for.

The prophet sways to the beat of our tepid praise. The man on his left stands and dabs his forehead. The prophet clears his throat and reaches forward with his right hand until he finds the microphone. He grabs it, leans into it.

“I have been in the U.S. for two months now...” he begins, rhythmically moving his head left and right, “I have been to New York, to Delaware, to Philadelphia, to Washington, to Florida, to Atlanta, to Minnesota, to Kansas, to Oklahoma, and now, finally, I have arrived here.”

We cheer loudly.

“I will visit Houston and San Antonio before I leave here, and then I will go to Nevada, and then California. I will travel all over this country for the next month, visiting Nigerians across this great land, but I feel in my spirit that the most powerful blessings will happen *here*.”

We holler and whoop and hug each other, for his words are confirmation of the feelings we’ve been carrying within ourselves since the beginning of the service.

“The reason I am saying that the most powerful blessings will happen here is because God has told me that you have been the most faithful of his flock in the U.S. You haven’t forgotten your people back home. You haven’t forgotten your parents and siblings who sent you here, who pray for you every day. You have remained disciplined and industrious in this place, the land of temptation. And for all your hard work, for your faithfulness, God is going to reward you today.”

Some of us raise our hands and praise the Father. A few of us bow our heads, a few of us begin to weep with happiness.

“But in order for your blessings to be complete, you will have to pray today like you have never prayed before. You will have to believe today like you have never believed before. The only barrier to your blessing is the threshold of your belief. Today the only thing I will be talking about is belief. If I have learned anything during my visits to this country, it is that belief is only possible for those who have dollars. I am here to tell you that belief comes *before* dollars. If you have belief, then the dollars will follow.”

Silence again. We search our hearts for the seedlings of doubt that reside there. Many of us have to cut through thickets of doubt before we can find our own hearts again. We use the silence to uproot our doubt and we pray that our hearts will remain pure for the remainder of the service.

“Let me tell you, great miracles will be performed here today. People will be talking about this day for years and years to come. And the only thing that will prevent you from receiving your share is your unbelief...”

At this moment he begins to cough violently, and the man on his right rushes forward with a handkerchief. He places the handkerchief in the prophet’s hand, and the prophet coughs into it for a few seconds, and then he wipes his mouth. We wait anxiously for him to recover.

He laughs. “I am an old man now. You will have to excuse me. Just pray for me!”

“We will pray for you Prophet!” we yell in response.

“Yes, just pray for me, and I will continue to pray for you.”

“Thank you Prophet! Amen! Amen!”

“And because you have been faithful, God will continue to bless you, he will anoint you, he will appoint you!”

“Amen!”

“Now God is telling me that there is someone here who is struggling with something big, a handicap that has lasted for many, many years.”

We fall quiet because we know he is talking about us.

“He’s telling me that you have been suffering in silence with this problem, and that you have come to accept the problem as part of yourself.”

We nod in agreement. How many indignities have we accepted as a natural part of our lives?

“The purpose of my presence in your midst is to let you know that you should no longer accept the bad things that have become normal in your lives. America is trying to teach you to accept your failures, your setbacks. Now is the time to reject them! To claim the success that is rightfully yours!”

His sunglasses fall from his face, and we see the brilliant white orbs quivering frantically in their sockets, two full moons that have forgotten their roles in the drama of the universe. His attendants lunge to the floor to recover them, and together they place the glasses back on his ancient face. The prophet continues as if nothing happened.

“I do not perform these miracles because I wish to be celebrated. I perform these miracles because God works through me, and he has given me the grace to show all of you what is possible in your *physical* and *spiritual* lives. And now God is telling me; you, come up here.”

We remain standing because we don’t know to whom he is referring.

“YOU! You! You! YOU! Come up here!”

We begin to walk forward, shyly, slowly. I turn around suddenly, and I realize I’m no longer a part of the whole. I notice, then, that the lights are too bright, and the muggy air in the room settles, fog-like, on my face. Now I am in the aisle, and I see the blind old man pointing at me.

“You, young man. Come here. Come up here for your miracle!”

I just stand there, and I feel something red and frightening bubbling within me. I stand there as the prophet points at me, and I feel hands



***The
Handshake:
Greensboro,
Alabama.***

Digital
photograph.
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pushing me, forcing me to the front. I don't have enough time to wrap up my unbelief and tuck it away.

Then I'm standing on the stage, next to the prophet.

The prophet moves closer to me and places a hand on top of my head. He presses down until I'm kneeling before him. He rocks my head back and forth.

"Young man, you have great things ahead of you, but I can sense that something is ailing you. There is some disease, some disorder that has colonized your body, and it is threatening to colonize your soul. Tell me, are you having problems breathing?"

I find myself surprised at his indirect reference to my asthma. But now the doubts are bombarding me from every direction. Maybe he can hear my wheezing? It's always harder for me to breathe when I'm nervous, and I'm certainly nervous now.

"Yes sir," I reply.

"Ah, you do not need to confirm. I now have a fix on your soul, and the Holy Spirit is telling me about the healings you need." He brushes his fingers down my face, and my glasses fall to the ground. Everything becomes dim.

"How long have you been wearing glasses my son?"

"Since I was five, sir."

"And tell me, how bad is your vision?"

Really bad. I have the thickest lenses in school, the kind that make my eyes seem like two giant fish floating in blurry, separate ponds.

"It's bad sir."

The prophet removes his hand from my head and I can feel him thrashing about, as if he's swimming in air, until an attendant thrusts a microphone into his groping hand.

"As you guys can see, I know a little about eye problems," he booms, and although it sounds like he's attempting a joke, no one laughs, and his words crash against the back wall and wash over us a second time, and then a third.

"And no one this young should be wearing glasses that are so thick!"

The congregation cheers in approval. I hear a whispered *yes prophet*.

"I can already tell that you have become too comfortable with your handicap," he roars, "and that is one of the main problems in this country. Handicaps have become *normal* here." I see the many heads nodding in

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response. "People accept that they are damaged in some fashion, and instead of asking God to intervene, they accept the fact that they are broken!"

More head nodding, more *Amens*.

"Let me tell you something," he continues. He's sweating profusely; some of it dribbles onto my head. My scalp is burning. "God gives us these ailments so that we are humbled, so that we are forced to build a relationship with him. That is why all of us, in some way or another, are damaged. And the reason they have come to accept handicaps in this country is because these Americans do not want to build a relationship with God. They want to remain forever disconnected from His grace, and you can already see what is happening to this country."

The *Amens* explode from many mouths; some louder, some softer, some gruff, some pleading.

“So the first step to getting closer to God, to demonstrating that you are a serious Christian, is declaring to God all of your problems and ailments, and asking him to heal you.”

A few *Amens* from the back overwhelm everything. I squint to see if I can connect the praise to the faces, but I can only see the featureless faces swathed in fog.

“So now I’m going to ask God to heal this young man who has become accustomed to his deformity. But before I touch you, before I ask the Holy Spirit to do its work, I must ask you, before everyone here—are you ready for your miracle?”

I stare at the congregation. I see some nodding. I’ve never thought of a life without glasses, but now my head is filled with visions of perfect clarity. I can see myself playing basketball without the nerdy, annoying straps that I always attach to my glasses so they won’t fall off my face. I imagine evenings without headaches, headaches that come after hours spent peering through lenses that give me sight while rejecting my eyes.

“Are you ready?” he asks again, and I can feel the openness in the air that exists when people are waiting for a response. I know I’m waiting for my response as well.

“I’m ready.”

“Amen!”

“AMEN! AMEN!” Their *Amens* batter me; I bow beneath the harsh blows of their spiritual desperation.

“My son, you are ready to receive your gift from God.”

His two attendants scramble from his side, drag me to my feet, and bring me down to the floor. One positions himself next to me, the other behind me. When I look over my shoulder I see the attendant standing there with his arms extended before him.

“I feel something very powerful coursing through my spirit,” the prophet yells. “This is going to be a big miracle. Bring me to the boy!”

The attendant beside me strides up to the stage and helps the prophet down the steps. He positions the prophet before me, and I notice that the prophet seems even shorter than before. He is only a few inches taller than me. His hot breath causes my eyes to water; I resist the urge to reach up and rub them.

The prophet suddenly pulls off his sunglasses. He stares at me with his sightless eyes. I become uncomfortable, so I lean slightly to the right and his face follows. I lean slightly to the left and his face does the same. A sly smile begins to unfurl itself across his face. My heart begins to beat itself to death.

“Do not be frightened. I can see you through my spiritual eyes,” he says. “And after this miracle, if you are a diligent Christian, you will be able to do the same.”

Before I can respond, his right hand shoots forward, and he presses my temples. I stumble backwards but maintain my balance. I turn to gaze at



Grandfather on the Porch: Greensboro, Alabama. Digital photograph. ©2011 April Dobbins.

all the people in front of me, and though I can't see individual faces I see befuddlement in its many, various forms. I see random expressions contort themselves into a uniform expression of confusion. I actually manage to separate my brother from the masses because his presence is the only one in the room that seems to match my own. We're both confused, but our confusion isn't laced with fear.

The prophet presses my temples again, and again, and each time I regain my balance. His attendants are ignoring me now. They're both looking down at the prophet, inquiring with their eyes about something. I'm not sure what. Then I hear the shuffling feet, and I know that the people are becoming restless.

"The spirit of bad sight is very strong in him, and it won't let go," the prophet yells.

Life returns to the church like air filling up a balloon. I see the prophet's attendants nod, and the new *Amens* that tunnel into my ears all have an edge of determination.

"This healing will require special Holy Ghost healing power. Come, take my robe!" The attendant closest to me pulls the robe from his back, and the prophet stands before me even smaller and less imposing than before. "While I am working on this spirit everyone in this room must pray. You must pray that I will receive the power I need to overcome this spirit within him!"

I see many heads moving up and down in prayer, and I hear loud pleading, and snapping, and impassioned howling.

"That is very good!"

The prophet steps forward and blows in my eyes, and then he rubs my temples. I remain standing. He blows and rubs again. The same. He does it again, and again, and each time the praying grows louder and more insistent. The prophet moves even closer to me, and this time when he presses my temples he does not let go. He shoves my head back until I fall, and the attendant behind me eases me to the floor. I finally understand. I remain on the floor while his attendants cover me with a white sheet. Above, I hear the prophet clapping his hands, and I know that he's praying. The fluorescent lights on the ceiling are shining so brightly that the light seems to be huddling in the sheet with me. I hug the embodied light close.

After a few minutes the prophet stops clapping.

"It is finished! Pick the young man up."

His attendants grab my arms and haul me up. I hear a cheer building up in the crowd, gaining form and weight, but the prophet cuts everything off with a loud grunt.

"Not yet. It is too soon. And young man, keep your eyes closed." I realize that my eyes are still closed, and I wonder how he knows.

I begin to believe in miracles. I realize that many miracles have already happened; the old prophet can see me even though he's blind, and my eyes feel different somehow, huddled beneath their thin lids. I think about the miracle of my family, the fact that we've remained together despite the terror of my mother's abrupt departure, and I even think about the miracle of my presence in America. My father reminds my brother and me almost every day how lucky we are to be living in poverty in America, he claims that all of our cousins in Nigeria would die for the chance, but his words were meaningless before. Compared to what I have already experienced in life, compared to the tribulations that my family has already weathered, the matter of my eyesight seems almost insignificant. *Of course I can be healed! This is nothing. God has already done more for me than I can imagine. This healing isn't even for me. It is to show others, who believe less, whose belief requires new fuel, that God is still working in our lives.*

Then the Prophet yells in my ear: OPEN YOUR EYES.

My lids slap open, and I see the same fog as before. The disembodied heads are swelling with unreleased joy. I know what I have to do.

"I can see!" I cry, and the loud cheers and sobbing are like new clothing.

"We must test his eyes, just to make sure! We are not done yet!" yells the prophet, and nervousness slowly creeps up my spine like a centipede. "We have to confirm so the doubters in here and the doubters in the world can know that God's work is real!"

One of his attendants walks a few feet in front of me and holds up a few fingers. I squint and lean forward. I pray I get it right.

"Three!" I yell, and the crowd cheers more loudly than before.

"Four!" I scream, and the cheers themselves gain sentience. They last long after mouths have closed.

"One!" I cry, and the mouths open again, to give birth to new species of joy.

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THIS IS WHAT I learned during my first visit to a Nigerian church: that a community is made up of truths and lies. Both must be cultivated in order for the community to survive.

The prophet performed many more miracles that day. My father beamed all the way home, and I felt that I had been healed, in a way, even if my eyes were the same as before.

That evening, after tucking my brother and me in, my father dropped my glasses into a brown paper bag, and he placed the bag on the nightstand by my bed.

“You should keep this as evidence, so that you always remember the power of God,” he whispered in my ear.

The next morning, when I woke up, I opened my eyes, and I couldn’t see a thing. I reached into the bag and put on my glasses without thinking. My sight miraculously returned. 🌐