



The Very Unusual Fate of Daniel and Ruth

All dreams are unusual. But a dream I had last week was more unusual than most. In fact, it was really a dream recalling a dream of 38 years earlier and the series of events that followed over the ensuing months.

The event portrayed in both dreams took place in 1973 in a town called Eldama Ravine. At the time, I was the “Father-in-charge” of the sprawling parish known by the same name. It had 37 outstations in each of which I celebrated a “safari mass” on a monthly cycle. The central church of the parish was called, appropriately enough, St. Patrick’s; and the parish was bifurcated by the equator.

The story has to do with a young Tugen couple, Daniel Arap Chumo and Ruth Chelagat, who were betrothed to each other; but, as the custom was, the parents were still haggling over the “bride price” - typically paid in goats and cattle. In the midst of the protracted negotiations, Daniel and Ruth disappeared. The immediate conclusion to which everyone jumped was that they had eloped; but a month after their disappearance, I had a dream about them in which I was told that they *hadn’t* eloped but had been cursed by a “Mchawi” (a medicine man/witchdoctor) at the behest of an

“enemy.” In my dream, I was reminded of a very famous story from Irish mythology called, “The Children of Lir.” It tells of the fate of four children, the eldest a girl called Fionnuala and her three brothers, Aedh, Fiachra and Conn. Their evil stepmother, who was also sister to their dead mother, was madly jealous of them and through druidical spells changed them into four white swans. The terrible curse she pronounced over them was that they would spend the next 900 years in three different locations: 300 years on Lake Derravaragh, 300 years on the Sea of Moyle, between Ireland and Scotland, and 300 years on Inis Glora in the Western Sea (the Atlantic) - until the tolling of the Christian bell of Saint Patrick would release them.

Well, in my 1973 dream, in Eldama Ravine, the dream-maker told me that a similar fate had befallen Daniel and Ruth - that they had been changed into animal form and that I would shortly encounter them. I woke up thinking, “What a very strange dream!”

But I soon forgot about it in the daily activities of managing a large parish. About a week later I was travelling along a dusty, red, murrum track in my sky-blue-colored VW bug, when I noticed what appeared to be a large hump-backed rock in the middle of the road. I slowed down only to have the car-generated plume of red dust, which I had been keeping ahead of, catch up with me and invade my eyes, ears and nostrils. I slowed down more forcibly and then I noticed that the rock was *moving* - very slowly. I stopped the car and got out. The “rock”, I realized, was a very large tortoise, about 24 inches in diameter; and he was lumbering ponderously and painfully across the track, right on the equator. I wondered how long it would take him to circumambulate the globe at that pace.

As soon as I approached him, he retracted his four legs and folded his head back into his neck, resting his huge weight on his flat, stony belly. I waited patiently and, eventually, he peeped out. I remained absolutely still and quiet, so he extended his four legs, peeled his neck from around his head and began, once more, to trundle along the equator.

In a moment of strangeness, I thought, “Is this Daniel Arap Chumo? Is this what my dream promised me?” I debated with myself for several minutes, noting that the tortoise had now stopped moving and was watching me intently. I made a decision and wrestled his 90 pounds frame into the trunk of the Beetle. He rewarded me by urinating all over me. Now African tortoises don’t pee a whole lot, because they want to conserve all the moisture they can. So was this just coincidence, a call of nature, fear induced, a rebuff to me, or a blessing? I decided on the latter, closed the trunk and continued on my safari.

I kept him in the garden of the Mission, where he had a plentiful diet of fibrous greens. But he kept wandering off. Every two days or so a group of little children from Shauri Yako (the “illegal” village/slum at the edge of town) would return him and claim their “sumuni” reward. Finally, I bored a small hole in his carapace and attached him, by a long rope, to the wooden fence. Next day I discovered that he had pulled down the fence and dragged it across the compound until it got jammed so tightly that he couldn’t pull it any further.

Exactly a month from the day of our first meeting, I was driving on the same track, at the same place, when lo and behold I met Ruth! She was a little smaller than Daniel and she, too, was ambling across the roadway. It was a kind of a *déjà vu*

situation. “Bingo!” I thought and maneuvered her into the trunk. She, also, peed on me. A *double* blessing.

I introduced them to each other and they got on famously. A few days later, I spotted them consummating their union - not an easy job given their construction. I heaved a sigh of relief and wondered how many “kids” they’d have.

I never found out. A month later I left Eldama Ravine to spend three months in a language school in Tabora, Tanzania, to learn Kiswahili. While I was there I received a letter from the bishop of Nakuru - bishop Raphael S. Ndingi Mwana ‘a Nzeki - telling me that upon my return from Tanzania, I was to take up an appointment as headmaster of Kipchimchim Harambee (Self-help) Secondary School.

When I finally did manage a visit to Eldama Ravine, almost a year later, nobody could tell me what had become of Daniel and Ruth. I wondered if they had *really* eloped this time or had they been consigned, like the Children of Lir, to the next location of their spell. Or, perhaps, the Christian bell of St. Patrick’s Church had finally lifted the curse and set them free, once more, be human lovers?

May God continue to hold you tenderly in the hollow of Her hand.

Namasté,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Seán". The signature is written in black ink on a white background.

Tír na nÓg
October 2011