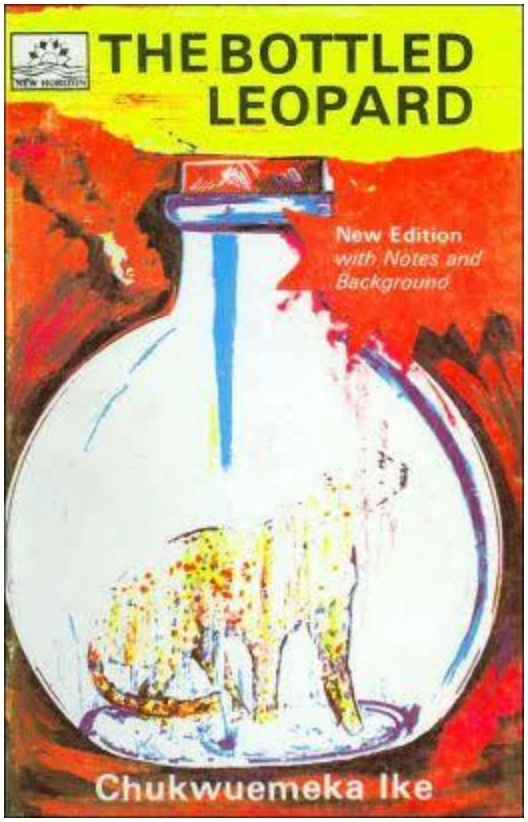
The Bottled Leopard

Chukwuemeka Ike


THE BOTTLED LEOPARD
New Edition
with Notes and Background
Chukwuemeka Ike

Digitalized by **warlordbooks.com**

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter One

One clean jump, and the leopard sailed effortlessly over the wall, landing noiselessly inside
Nma's father's compound. It made straight for the pen. At the last count in the afternoon, before
the knotted omu nkwu was flung backwards into the compound, the pen held five adult goats,
two of them nursing mothers. The Hausa goat, so designated because it came from the northern
part of Nigeria, towered above the local breed; like the giant Alakuku standing five heads above
ordinary men. Nma's father had acquired it at Eke Ogbu for next to nothing, and fed it so
devotedly that it had in no time been transformed from a moving skeleton to a young cow. The
money it would fetch him at the next Ikeji festival, he reckoned, would pay the bride price for a new wife any time Mama Nma began to pass water like a man.

Teleguided by the omu nkwu, the leopard advanced stealthily, its eyes sparkling in the pitch
darkness as they closed in on its target, the defenceless Hausa goat, sleeping unconcernedly on its side like a sack of grated cassava...

'Wow! Wow!' barked Waggy, Nma's father's dog.

The leopard, again as if teleguided, instantly changed course, to silence the audacious dog before
making for the goat. A window sprang open, revealing a double-barrel shotgun, its nozzle pointed at the leopard's heart.

'Nnem, O! I'm dead, O!'

'Who's that?' Amobi's House Captain shouted from his cubicle.

Ugochukwu Amobi flung aside his red school blanket and levered up his trunk towards the voice. He was still in a daze, breathing heavily and sweating, when the prefect rushed out of his cubicle into the dormitory, torch in hand, to ascertain the cause of the scream.

'It's you, Amobi, eh? What's the matter?'

Amobi shook his head as if he was warding off sleep, rubbed his eyes, and stared in front of him, his eyes blinking rapidly.

'Have you gone deaf and dumb?' the prefect continued, his torch and anxious eyes searching around the bed for possible clues.

'No, please.'

'It's only that you've lost your manners, right?' The prefect was astonished that Amobi, a fag, dared answer him sitting down comfortably.

'I'm sorry, please,' Amobi apologized, scrambling to his feet.

'It's obvious that you haven't returned to your senses yet,' the prefect pronounced. 'Report at the Prefect's Room immediately after breakfast tomorrow, before morning assembly, with a full explanation of your strange behaviour just now. And make sure you don't interrupt my sleep again tonight!'

* * * *

Amobi rolled from one plank of his three-plank wooden bed to the other, unable to sleep. It had been only a dream. Thank God. But why a leopard? Why not dream about his classmates? About 2

chickens or even dogs? If he must dream about a leopard, why scream, rath er than rejoice, when a gun was pointed at the leopard's heart?

He had seen only one live leopard in his thirteen years, but that experience had left an indelible
impression on him. It was in his home town, Ndikelionwu, when he was about the age of his
younger sister, Adaobi. Six plus. His parents were away all night at the wak e-keeping ceremony
of a late uncle. He and his elder sister, Obiageli, who had been instructed to look after him, had
fallen asleep on a mat, in the front verandah of their mother's hut where the y ate their supper. He
could not remember what made him open his eyes at the time he did, but str aight in front of him not too far away, glowed two tiny lights.

Glowworms, he'd thought at first, seeing how they sparkled brightly a gainst the encircling
darkness. But then they remained stationary, glowing steadily instead of blinking on and off.

Everything else was charcoal black, and frighteningly still.

The tiny lights advanced, glowing steadily. The only moving objects i n the pitch darkness.

Amobi began to tremble. Glowworms zig-
zagged when in motion, and kept switching on and off. This pair of lights moved in a straight line and never blinked. What could they be?

Suddenly, up they sprang! And ... ma–a-a-
a! From a goat sleeping just off the verandah. One
agonized bleat, but piercing enough to wake even the heavy sleeper, Obiageli. The sound of a

few steps, then of something leaping into the air, scaling the compou nd wall. It took Obiageli
some time to locate where she was, and to ask herself why she was there rat her than inside the
bedroom. Thank God, Papa and Mama had not returned from the wa ke-keeping; Mama would
have peppered her eyes for going to sleep with Amobi on the verandah. She struck a match and 3

lit the kerosene lamp, to find out what had made the goat bleat. The goat ... where was it? No goat! Instead, some red blood. And some impressions in the sand.

'A leopard!' Obiageli screamed, her hands restraini ng her head from fleeing . 'And it has carried
away our goat!' She grabbed Amobi and fled into their mother's bedr oom, goose pimples popping up all over her.

For a while, Amobi thought his skin was moulting. A leopard, a live leopard , had been that close
to him! What he thought were glowworms were the eyes of a leopard, adva ncing towards him!

Every part of him vibrated as if he had been dipped into the stream on a harmattan morning.

Obiageli had hurriedly bolted the door as soon as they were securely inside the room. All the
same, Amobi insisted that the lantern be kept burning until Papa and Mama returned, or until day break. He could not stand seeing those leopard's eyes again!

Mazi Ezeanya Amobi, his father, nearly brought down thunder when he learnt what had

happened. 'It is Nwafo's leopard!' he bellowed. 'It is Nwafo! And this is not the first time! But it will be his last! The hen which tramples on soldier ants must not take to its heels thereafter!'

After tempers had cooled down, Amobi had corn ered his mother and got answers to the
numerous questions which had been jostling with one another inside his you ng, troubled mind.

Yes, a few men at Ndikelionwu possessed supernatural powers which enabl ed them to take the
form of leopards whenever they so desired. Mazi Nwafo was one suc h person, as was widely
acknowledged far and near. Each time he took the form of a leopard, someone in the town
became one goat or sheep poorer. The leopard which appeared that ni ght could not have been
anybody else's. The goat it captured had belonged to Mazi Nwafo. The Alad inma Age Grade had 4

impounded it from him for not participating in a communal road building pr oject, and kept it in Mazi Ezeanya's custody until Nwafo paid the stipulated fine ...

No. No question of camouflaging himself to resemble a leopard. Mazi Nwaf o operated through a
live leopard, a proper leopard, which he 'possessed' at will and directed to d o his bidding. At that
point, a spirit of excitement had chased away Amobi's fears. He saw himself 'possessing' a
leopard, and instructing it to catch one grasscutter for Papa, one for Mama, one for himself, one
for Obiageli ... He saw himself as the terror of the village. The excit ement had vapourized as

soon as he learnt what became of the leopard owner if his leopard ran into a trap. Or if a hunter
shot it dead. God forbid! Who wanted to live the life of a mosquito: the terr or of the house in one breath; the next breath a blood smear on the wall!

Fortunately Papa had assured him that such powers would never come his way. Theirs had been a well-
k nown leopard family, but the last man to inherit the powers had died with out passing on
the powers to any of his children. All connection with leopards in their fami ly had therefore died with him.

* * * *

All this had happened seven good years back, and Amobi had long forgotte n about leopards and
leopard 'owners'. Why then, he wondered as he lay restless on his bed, shoul d he now have such a vivid dream of a leopard? Did the dream portend anything?

Before he went back to sleep, he made a resolution. He would take advanta ge of his entry into
Government College to get at the full facts about leopards and their 'possess ors'. From the little
he had already seen of the college, there could be no mystery beyond the po wers of the learned masters all

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Two

Amobi had trotted all the way from School House to the assembly hall in high spirits. He saw the initiation ceremony for the new students as the college equivalent of his initiation into the spirit cult. He expected a full induction into the complexities of life at Government College.

Hopefully, he might even have the opportunity to raise the issue of leopards.

His first surprise was the absence of prefects and the other senior boys. Mainly the form one boys, for whom attendance was mandatory. And the form two boys, very much in evidence, bubbling over with inflated ideas of their seniority and importance. 'Probably the first scene of the play,' he initially thought. 'The senior boys will come in later ...'

The master of ceremonies, a slender form two boy, excessively tall for his tender age, stood in front of the microphone and beckoned condescendingly to Chuk to come forward and take the Fag's Pledge. Chuk could swear the boy had made a mistake. Many names preceded his in alphabetical order. From 'A' or from 'Z', whichever end you chose first. The MC did not care for any order, alphabetical or caltibeaphal! He wanted Chuk first. Period. And Chuk had to step forward as commanded, or face the serious consequences.

'Don't plant your mouth on the mike, whatever you call yourself!' the MC shouted. 'We don't want to be poisoned by CO2 from your stinking mouth.' over the place to unravel.

Chuk staggered back, visibly ruffled by the unanticipated assault-without-battery. He had not opened his mouth. How then could his assailant detect that it was stinking?

'Say after me,' the MC went on, 'and say it loud and clear, okay?'

Chuk nodded.

'Haven't you been here long enough to learn that you don't nod to a senior b oy?' chided the MC.

'Get it right, here and now. The same applies to all you other fags.' He swun g his fiery eyes from
one half of the hall to the other, to ram the message home to the di m form one boys who
occupied the front rows. 'You answer your seniors "Yes, please" or "No, ple ase" as the case may be.'

Back to Chuk: 'Now, repeat after me. My name is Professor ... and t hen give this august assembly your bush name.'

Chuk had no objection to being addressed a profes sor, if that made the bull y happy. Nor did he
seriously mind his African surname being considered bush: he himself coul d not pronounce the damned thing correctly.

'My name is Professor Nwachuku.'

'I come from the bush village of ...' went on the MC, elated
that he had at last cowed the swollen-
headed idiot who, because he had a white American mother and a Nigerian professor as father, often forgot that he was only a green fag.

'Come off it, man! Call Palo Alto a bush village?'

For a quick moment Chuk had forgotten where he was, and was about to give the MC a jovial pat at the back when the latter hastily withdrew as if from a leper about to hug him.

'Who the hell do you think you are?' scoffed the MC 'And whom are you trying to touch with that stinking, faggish hand of yours?'

'I ain't stinking!'

'Sharrap!' barked the MC, stamping his right foot on the floor. 'Who's there?' He turned towards the stage. 'Bring me solution A. We have to knock sense into this scallywag who cannot pronounce his father's name!'

It had begun to build up right from the day the new students arrived at the college. Envy. Chuk was strikingly handsome. Born and bred in the USA, he behaved like an American boy and spoke the American English which many of the boys often tried hard to emulate. And the college authorities appeared excessively eager to grant him special concessions because of his parentage and upbringing. The initiation ceremony for new students seemed to have presented the long awaited opportunity to put the bloated fag in his proper place.

'Drink this!' ordered the MC as he dispensed the concoction into an empty beer glass. You could not tell from the colour what it was, scotch whisky or sauterne, especially as it came in a corked orange squash bottle which gave nothing away.

Chuk's extra sensitive nostrils promptly picked up the smell of urine, and ur rrgh! ... He cupped
both palms to contain the stuff his stomach had instantly thrown up. Uncert ain where to go, he
staggered out of the assembly hall towards the corridor. Impelled by sym pathy, Amobi hurried after him to lend him a hand. They found their way to the toilet.

'My name is Professor Obi ...'

Another boy had been summoned to deliver his own pledge, after being dul y warned about the dire consequences of any further insubordination by any fag.

'I come from the bush village of Onitsha,' the intimidated fag went on, 'wher e people eat toads
for supper. I am a fag, a stinking fag. I am, like all fags, to be seen, not hear d. As from this day, I 8

promise to discard all my rustic and outlandish behaviour, and to bec ome a worthy student of this great college.

'With your very kind permission, I beg to entertain you with a song entitled "Swing low, sweet chariot"...' and he burst into an unrehearsed song.

The form two boys applauded, relieved that the ceremony had at last taken off successfully ...

Amobi emerged from the ceremony totally dejected and confused. Never in his life had he been
made to feel so out of place for coming from a rural village, without pipe-borne water,
electricity, cinemas, and such other manifestations of the white man's ways of life. His spoken

English was labelled 'Igbotic', and he was terribly piqued to see some of his classmates joining
the form two bullies to shout 'appropinquo' whenever they felt he had 'murdered' an English
word the way he pronounced it. And when the time came to announce to the audience that he came from 'the bush village of Ndikelionwu',
the MC had shou ted him down as a liar.

'Were you not the boy SMG described as the fat pig from bush Ujari where you sat on mud benches and your teachers used charcoal for chalk?'

Yes. SMG had described Amobi in those words. But before the week was over, Amobi had heard
him use the same words on two other new students. And had Tunji, Amobi's guardian, not told
Amobi that that was SMG's style, which had helped to make him one of the· most popular masters at the college? Why then should
the MC use those words to ridicule him publicly?

'Curious institution!' he grumbled as he wondered whether he could stick it.

A school where you could earn a sentence of two hours detention, with hard labour, for speaking
your own language. Your mother tongue: Igbo, Efik, Ibibio, Yoruba ... Even to your own 9

brother. No matter where. It must be English morning, afternoon, evening and night. Presumably
you must dream in English too! A school where dexterity with the fork was a visible determinant
of your success in discarding your 'rustic and outlandish' ways. You had to learn to manipulate
the fork with your left hand, while your right hand clung helplessly to the bl

untest knife you had ever come across in your life. All because the English held their cutlery that way.

It made little sense to Amobi using your left hand to convey grains of rice w ith a four-pronged
fork from your plate to your mouth, when a spoon lay idle in front of your n ose, itching to come
to your rescue. As foolhardy as fetching water in a basket, he though t, until he stared open
mouthed as the senior boys effortlessly performed wonders with their forks. Yes, those boys held
their forks the wrong side up. They heaped the rice on the humped back of the fork, and
successfully transported many such heaps from plate to mouth. Without letti ng go a single grain of rice, and without even looking at what they
were doing!

Curious institution, but undoubtedly the most prestigious in Eastern Nigeria and the Cameroons.

Reputed to provide the best available secondary education at the lowe st possible cost. And for
transforming young African youth into English gentlemen. Hence the jubila tion at Ndikelionwu when the news of Amobi's admission came through.

Amobi begged God to pull him through.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Three

'Amobi, sir! Principal say make I bring Amobi!'

Amobi felt momentarily empty inside him as something inexplicable, invisible, jumped out from his inside. Not his heart: he would have spotted it. Something originating from the stomach, and then forcing its way out, the way steam escapes from the spout of a kettle. Except that he could not say from which opening on his body it had escaped, neither had he seen it merge with the atmosphere. Something else, more readily identifiable, had also forced its way out at the same time. A small wet patch on the front of his white shorts showed that he had involuntarily let go one or more drops of urine.

Even the greenest fag at Government College knew the implication of being summoned by the Principal, more so when the Principal sent Joseph, the never smiling Messenger, to 'bring you'. It must have been one of the assignments Joseph cherished most, as he made it transparently obvious to the boys that he was an integral part of the disciplinary machinery of Government College. As he marched the quaking student to the Principal's office in the AD block, wearing the voluminous green khaki shorts popularized by World War II, you could see the muscles of his calves stretched to their elastic limit while his heavily studded boots crushed all the gravel on his way with double viciousness. The khaki shorts and the vicious boots were the only mementoes of his active involvement on the side of the British Empire in World War II.

Although Joseph stood facing Mr Meniru, the Geography Master (better known as 'Computer'),

he shouted the Principal's instructions to the whole class. Mr Meniru had seen him standing by the door, but had continued pouring out his geography lesson as if Joseph was an ant hill solidified there long before the school came into existence.

Amobi rose from his seat wondering what offence he had committed. His eyes went round the class, in search of a clue, soliciting support from his classmates. None of the boys held out any clues, or comfort. Each focused his attention on 'Computer'. For a brief moment, Chuk's pen moved from his note book to his lips, and he flashed a stern look at Amobi to warn him to keep sealed lips.

'Why does the Principal want me?' Amobi ventured to ask Joseph as both of them emerged on the beautiful green lawn in front of the gigantic two-storeyed classroom block. Out on the lawn, Joseph's boots ceased to exist.

'You wan' make I tell you, eh?' Joseph's tone sounded neither sympathetic nor cooperative.

'Please, I want to run to the toilet ...' Without waiting for a response, Amobi ran towards the block of toilets at the west end of the classroom block and bolted himself inside the first toilet on the ground floor. In his first week at the school, he had enjoyed lingering on in the well kept toilets because they were a welcome change from the pit and bucket latrines he had used elsewhere. It was fascinating to see the water rush out from nowhere, to wash everything away.

He soon found the toilet so relaxing, so completely private, that he often for got what took him there and sailed home to his family, or in quest of Nma, or visualized himself cruising away in SMG's Morris Minor car, or ...

'Why me alone?' he mumbled, now certain that he knew what it was all about, especially after the signal from Chuk. 'Why leave Chuk out of it? After all it was his idea. I followed him at his request, simply because he could not tell a banana from a plantain ...'

As Amobi took cover in the toilet, the details of their midnight adventure into the school orchard came back to him. He remembered the several occasions on which the Principal had threatened 12

instant dismissal for anybody caught in the orchard. But what boy ever took those threats seriously? The boys usually kept a straight face each time the Principal fired his warning shots, believing that he knew what they knew. The Almighty, Omniscient God had tried the Garden of Eden experiment with Adam and Eve, and failed. Failed so dismally that He had been compelled to install huge flaming swords at the entrance to the Garden, slashing away twenty- four hours a day, every day of every year! That was the only foolproof way to keep man away from the tantalizing pleasures of the Garden. How on earth could the Principal develop such a mouth-watering orchard and expect a dwarf wall, a man-made gate, and an unarmed elderly and arthritic watchman to keep vivacious, adventurous students away from its pleasures?

This same Principal always thrilled the boys with breathtaking stories of his own escapades in his student days at Eton. Yes. And he sent five boys annually to the rigorous Man O'War Bay citizenship course as part of his efforts to instill the spirit of adventu re in the boys. How then could he blow hot and cold at the same time? Impossible. The boys were convinced that his warnings and threats were veiled sparks secretly aimed at igniting the spirit of advent ure in them. With one snag though. Woe betide the boy who fell foul of the eleventh commandment!

Warnings or no warnings, 'making for the uppers' –
the code name for a foray into the orchard –

had become one of the crowning points of your career at Government Colle ge. From your first term you saw a successful raid of the 'uppers' as a task that must be accomplished before the School Certificate if you did not wish to be dismissed as a girl. Chu k had decided he would shatter all previous records by being the first boy to 'make for the uppers' in his first term, with a fag's tail dangling behind him, as it were. And he literally dragged Amobi al ong with him. The initiation ceremony had brought them together. The Maths Master had subsequently advised Chuk to cultivate Amobi if he wanted to keep pace with the class in the subject.

'What if we are caught?' Amobi had asked, forebo ding spelt in block capitals across his face.

'Oh boy! Who'll catch us?' Chuk chuckled.
'That janitor who dozes off before "lights out?"'

Chuk had a way of making everything sound like child's play. Except mathematics. The boys
marvelled at the ease with which he handled the English language, blissfully brushing aside any
uncooperative rules of grammar. They marvelled at his unique spellings, which the masters
appeared to have accepted just like that as if they lacked the guts to put him right. They were
stunned to hear the cheeky fag shout 'Hi, Bill!' as the Principal walked past one afternoon. The
Principal addressed by staff and students alike as PGC (Principal of Government College), or
simply as the Principal, never even as Mr WIlliams. To be hailed 'Hi, Bill!' by a student, a tail-dangling fag for that matter!

But then Chuk had no parallel at Government College. He was an Igbo-made white. His father
Dr Nwachukwu, had married a white American girl while reading for the Ph.D. degree of
Harvard University. An only child of her parents, Chuk's mother had no ambitions to settle in
Africa and she'd said so from the word go. Dr Nwachukwu settled for a teaching appointment at Stanford University and
Chuk consequently grew up in Palo Alto, California, feeling no different
from the American children he saw around him. He spoke through the nose as they did, and
sometimes you wondered if he had water in his mouth as well. His manners were extremely
casual. He did not know what 'bia' meant in Igbo, and referred to himself as Chuk (pronounced

'chuck'), having found Nwachukwu, his full surname,
downright unpronounceable!

Shortly after midnight, a week before the end of the first term, Chuk and Amobi tiptoed out of their dormitory. The school generator had been switched off two hours earlier, throwing the school into grave like quietness. Neither moon nor stars could be seen.

Chuk had chosen that time of night knowing that even 'Hammer' – the prefect whose heart was concealed behind his spine, granted he had any heart at all – would be asleep. The time to avoid 'Hammer' was usually around four o'clock in the morning, when he moved on cat's paws round the classrooms, dayroom and library to catch any of his 'yeoman' classmates 'cockroaching' for the school certificate examination with candles hidden inside wooden chop boxes.

At Amobi's insistence, the two boys had agreed to limit their offensive to bananas and oranges only, steering clear of fruits such as the pineapple whose redolence could betray them from a distance. Their main objective on this first trip was to demonstrate that fags could 'make for the uppers' without being caught. There would be ample opportunities in future for more ambitious trips. They followed the official foot path from School House to the playing fields used for football and hockey, depending on the time of the year. They ran into two or three glowworms, their intermittent brightness cutting through the surrounding darkness. Apart from an occasional shrill sound, everything was dead. Including the huge wooden senior

staff bungalows on concrete stilts, the white man's idea of tropical housing.

They crossed the playing fields, and past the site for a proposed swimming pool for the boys. As they made for the senior staff tennis courts which separated them from the orchard, Amobi suddenly grew restless. What if they were caught? What would he tell his parents? That his throat had grown so long that he could no longer control it? That he had never eaten bananas or oranges in his life? Was he wise to follow Chuk sheepishly? Chuk, who had spent so much money sending frantic cablegrams to his father to rescue him from the primitive conditions at the school and who would be only too glad to be expelled for any reason, if only to convince his father to abandon the old-fashioned idea that his first son must develop roots in his culture by going to school in Africa. From all accounts, schools outnumbered the grains of sand on the 15

beach in America, so there should be no difficulty in fixing Chuk up in another school. What would then become of Amobi? He would be stranded like the proverbial rat which foolishly accompanied the lizard on a swimming adventure without first weighing the consequences!

'Where are you going?' Amobi asked in a muffled voice, as Chuk turned left at the end of the tennis courts.

'To the spot where we can scale the wall nice and easy,' replied Chuk. He had done his reconnaissance very well during the day, and knew exactly where he had removed the protective broken bottles stuck to the top of the perimeter wall.

Chuk led the way, across a patch of shrubs. They had not gone far when something moved rapidly and noisily through the bush.

'Snake!' Amobi exclaimed, spontaneously beating a hasty retreat.

'What's the matter? Afraid of snakes?'

'You are not afraid of snakes?' Amobi wondered whether growing up in America also drove away the fear of snakes from a child.

'Oh boy! Snakes can't do you no harm!' 'Shut up! Amobi retorted.

'I mean it. We had a snake garden in Palo Alto, and we went there Saturdays to play with the snakes.'

The thought of playing with snakes sent a shiver through Amobi. Play with snakes! When he had
not completely recovered from his shocking experience on his second Satur day in the school. He
had been assigned to the Health Science laboratory, to get it spick an d span for the Saturday 16

morning inspection. After taking a good look at the fat headed huma n foet us preserved in
formaldehyde in a glass jar, he had settled down to his assignment, determin ed to ensure that the Master-on-
duty did not find any cobweb concealed anywhere within the laborato ry. He had
swept more than half of the floor when something landed on his bac k from the ceiling. He instantly straightened up, and whatever it was dropped on the cement floor.

'Chineke!' he screamed when he saw the long, green grass snake gliding aw ay towards the store.

A live snake on his back? Chei! His head swelled to bursting point. His skin began to walk away from him. He dropped the broom and fled, determined never to return to that laboratory unaccompanied. Even on the threat of expulsion!

When Amobi stoutly refused to take one step forward, Chuk gave in. But it meant a change of plan. If they could not scale the wall at the only point where it was safe to do so, the only alternative was to climb over the metal gate itself, with the night watchman close by. As Chuk led the way towards the gate, Amobi's empty body trudged behind him, his spirit having fled to his hometown to prepare his parents for the calamity about to befall their son.

'Making for the uppers' turned out to be smooth sailing, thanks to the night watchman who conveniently combined heavy sleeping with heavy snoring. Amobi's spirit rejoined his body as his razor sharp pen knife moved with increasing rapidity from one boy to the other where they positioned themselves under an orange tree. Delicious oranges which you plucked with your outstretched hand. Number 1. Number 2. Number 3 ... After consuming twenty oranges each in no time, they decided it was time to switch to bananas.

Chuk had spotted a ripe bunch earlier in the day. He led the way towards it. No luck. Either he could not locate the bunch, or the labourers had harvested it that afternoon. In the darkness, it 17

was difficult to tell a ripe bunch from a green one. Chuk wished they had captured some of the glowworms on their way: their light might have been of invaluable help. They did not have much

time to spare, and Amobi was anxious to leave while his spirit was still with him. They agreed to slash down a bunch – any bunch. If it turned out to be ripe, they would feed on it right away. If not, they would hide it at a safe place outside the orchard, to feed on it at a subsequent date.

Amobi tied his knife to a bamboo pole they had brought for the purpose. Chuk offered to catch the bunch as it crashed down, but Amobi warned him to keep clear or the juice from the banana stem would ruin his clothing permanently. The heavy bunch crashed to the ground with a loud thud.

The flash of a torchlight at the gate. Each boy spontaneously ducked, holding his breath. The snoring watchman had awoken to his responsibilities.

'Who?' the watchman shouted. .

'We're in for it, boy!' Chuk whispered, without rising from his crouching position. 'We gotta wait. And then choose between the snake and the watchman!' Amobi's spirit had already vamoosed.

'Who?' the watchman repeated, his torchlight swinging round the orchard like a light house.

As soon as the light went off, Chuk moved with precision. In a thrice, he was on the safe side of the orchard wall. Amobi followed impulsively, but with less success, landing heavily on his bottom.

'Who dat?' shouted the watchman, certain now that he had a thief on his hands.

Chuk put his best foot forward. Amobi staggered to his feet and followed suit, momentarily forgetting the snake lurking in the bush. The watchman flashed his light in the direction of the footsteps and blasted his whistle in desperation. The watchman by the Principal's house responded on his own whistle. Fortunately for the boys, no whistles came from the dormitory end of the school, from beyond the playgrounds.

* * * *

'Amobi! you dey born pikin dere?'

Amobi jumped up impulsively, jolted by the bang on the toilet door and Joseph's angry voice. He suddenly remembered that he had not yet eased himself. As soon as he emerged from the toilet, Joseph marched him to the AD block

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Four

The oldest building in the school, the AD block stood on concrete stilts. The ground floor housed nothing but two garages – for the Principal (PGC) and the Vice-Principal (VPGC). One half of the top floor was equipped for the teaching staff – a staff library, a staff common room, the Vice-Principal's office and, at the far end, the Principal's office. The other half housed the Bursar's office, the stores, the General office and the large Assembly Hall.

Joseph made first for the staff common room. Mr Eigbe shut the book in his hand as soon as he saw Joseph. He gave Amobi a twitch of the left eye and a half smile, and led the way to the Principal's office. He was the Chemistry Master as well as Amobi's House Master. The students deliberately mispronounced his name to sound like Egbe, and then proceeded to translate it to sub-machine gun (SMG) which thereafter became his nickname. A kind hearted man, humorous, carefree and completely unorganized. He rarely bothered his classes with notes, or tests. Rather he enriched their stock of memory aids, including Amobi's favourite piece: Here lies the body of poor old Joe

His face we'll see no more;

For what he thought

Was H2O was H2SO4

Amobi stepped timidly into the Principal's office. The largest office he had ever seen in his life.

A shelf of books on one side. Huge books, each bigger than the large, leather bound Bible in the Assembly Hall. Another shelf held silver cups, shields and other trop

hies. The Principal's
Cambridge University gown hung on the wall facing you as you ente red the office. The PGC

usually donned the black gown at Sunday morning service, and on sp ecial occasions when he
was joined by other members of staff similarly clad, some looking li ke clergymen, some like choristers.

The Principal was at his desk, a desk from which a semi-
circle had been carved out on the
Principal's side, to accommodate his distinguished pot belly which had earn ed him the nickname

'Dewar' after the similarly shaped Dewar flask.

'Amobi, Sir,' announced SMG. The Principal motioned SMG to a seat. Amo bi advanced towards the table, stopping at a respectable distance:

'Good morning, Sir,' he saluted, his heart pounding away.

'Morning,' the Principal replied, mopping the sweat off his shining head. It c ould be unbearably
hot around Ahia even before noon. He had had to keep the ceiling fan low b ecause of the papers
on his desk. 'I shouldn't call you out ... umph! umph! Excuse me!' T he Principal reached for a
glass of water. Amobi strained every nerve to restrain himself from la ughing, momentarily
forgetting his problems. The way the Principal's belly bobbed above the hug e desk each time he
coughed, you could not have imagined it was part of his body! It lo

oked so much like the artificial pregnancy boys improvise at school when acting the part of a pregnant woman.

'I shouldn't call you out from classes,' the Principal continued. 'A man brought a message from
your people asking you to come home right away. I'd turned down the request, but your House
Master thought we should let you go. I've agreed to do so this time, but you must tell your
parents not to send such messages again. Here's your exeat for one week. Is that okay, Mr Eigbe?'

'Yes, Sir.'

Amobi felt the way he used to feel after swirling around on one spot in the game of 'Fekulufe
n'ato ka nnu'. Was that all? Was that why he had urinated in his shorts? He waited outside the
staff common room to see if SMG could help him out, but SMG had little additional information
when he later emerged from the Principal's office. The bearer of the message had gone off in a
hurry, claiming that he had messages for two other towns that same day. He said Amobi must get home before dusk.

* * * *

Joseph rang the bell for mid-
day break as Amobi descended the stairs from the AD block. Soon
afterwards, the classrooms spewed forth the two hundred and seventyfive boys they had held in
temporary confinement, each boy wearing a white shirt tucked into a

pair of white shorts or
trousers, transforming the school terrace into a mass of whiteness. Chuk gra bbed Amobi, dying
to get the hot news. As soon as he discovered that the summons from the Pri ncipal had nothing to do with their record-
breaking escap ade, he lost interest in Amobi and merged with the mass flow towards the dining hall. Amobi drifted along too. He did not care for th e watery palm wine.

Nothing to compare with the 'no drop of water' palm wine tapped for his father at home. But
rules at Government College were meant to be obeyed, and even Chuk who had never tasted 'the
dirty white stuff' as he called it, had to learn to drink it. It was one of the Pri ncipal's measures to
arrest the increasing incidence of eye problems in the school. Too ma ny boys were requiring
prescription lenses. A regular dose of yeast from palm wine would make an excellent preventive.

So the 'palm wine parade' found its way into the school's statute books. Ever y school day, during the mid-
day break, all students lined up in front of the dining hall to receive a cup of palm wine 22

each. Two hours 'detention' –
that is, two hours of grass cutting on a Saturday morning – awaited any boy who dared stay away.

Tunji was on his way to the Prefects' Room when Amobi ran up to him:
'Excuse me, please.'

'Yes, Ugo.' Tunji's face was wrinkled with worry. 'Was it not you I s aw being taken to the Principal's office this morning?'

'Yes, please.'

'Don't tell me you've been up to some mischief, eh?'

'No, please.'

'Well, as your guardian, I didn't want to be let down, that's all. But I know you're a good boy.'

Tunji's handsome face glowed with a warm smile. He put his right arm roun d Amobi and gave
him one of those affectionate squeezes which made Amobi wonder w hether the rumour about Tunji had some truth.

'The Principal called me to tell me that my parents want me at home today, please.'

'Anything the matter?' Tunji let his arm fall from Amobi's shoulder.

'No, please. They just said I should come home, please. The Principal gave me one week's exeat!

'Hope there's nothing seriously wrong?' Then after a short pause, 'That mean s you won't be here on Saturday?'

'No, please.'

'Well, I'll manage. I'll find another fag to do my laundry.' Tunji pulle d out his wallet from his back pocket, counted out five shillings and handed the money to Amobi.

'Thank you, please.' Amobi's face was all smiles.

Tunji was always generous. His father was a senior civil servant in Lagos and his mother a wealthy textile merchant. They stuffed him with money even when he did not request it, and promised to send him to England for a degree. Amobi was one of the luckiest fags, to have such a generous senior boy, who was also a College Prefect, as his guardian.

One thing baffled Amobi, though: the rumour that Tunji was really a girl. He was of average height, with a remarkably handsome face, so handsome that it contributed to his effeminate appearance. When he walked past, you could see not only his robust nipples but also the surrounding mounds bobbing up and down like those of a girl approaching puberty. That was probably why he rarely walked fast.

Tunji lent weight to the rumours by always having his bath at a corner of the communal bathroom. He had never been seen having his bath anywhere else, and was usually the first boy to have his bath in School House, so as to escape prying eyes. On one occasion when some boys conspired to take possession of the corner in rotation, he decided to delay his bath until all the boys were in the dining hall for breakfast! Notwithstanding all this, Amobi could not fathom why a girl should pretend to be a boy. The more plausible version of the rumour was that Tunji was too diminutive in front for a boy of his age. Perhaps the Creator had intended to make him a girl, but the barrage of prayers from his influential parents had made Him change His mind shortly before Tunji left the production line!

* * * *

'Why would Papa send for me only three weeks before end of term?' pondered Amobi as he walked towards Ahia township. Although his school was called Government College, Ahia, it was in fact located some six kilometres away from Ahia, on the road to Calabar. That was where land was more than ample. More importantly, the isolated location would insulate the maturing boys from unwholesome urban influences.

' ... Couldn't be illness.
I've never known Papa or Mama to be seriously ill. Apart from occasional mild attacks of malaria. But even if they are ill, what can I do for them? ... I wonder who that message bearer was, who couldn't even wait to see me. Must be that fellow with the brain of a sheep – Okeke. It's only he who can behave that way. What I can't understand is why Papa would choose him for such an errand ...'

A smile of excitement illuminated Amobi's long face as the thought occurred to him that the message might have come from his mother rather than from his father, and that it might be Emeka's initiation ceremony into the spirit cult.

Amobi's father had flatly refused to let him be initiated into the cult until his last term in primary school, arguing that a boy needed some maturity before his initiation, if it was to be meaningful to him.

Details of the initiation ceremony flashed through Amobi's memory. At the centre of it all was the traditional 15-gallon earthenware pot which had been used to 'carry wine for spirits' in Obinikpa village for several decades, loaned out to whichever family required it for initiation

into the spirit cult. The neck of the pot was adorned with omu nkwu, woven into a garland. The 25

pot was filled to the brim with palm wine, covered with leaves and left in the middle of the compound shortly before the commencement of the ceremony.

Amobi had counted fourteen ancestral spirits at the ceremony, even though it was not mandatory
for any spirits to be present. The number of initiated members present was said to be
unprecedented, judging from the fact that not one drop of palm wine remained in the 15-gallon
pot. The drinking and feasting which began in the early afternoon had continued until well after
midnight. To ensure that nothing was left out, Amobi's father had presented the customary gift of
two water yams, to enable Amobi to be initiated into the secrets of the nocturnal 'lion of spirits'

as well.

The highlight of the ceremony had been Amobi's presentation to the members of the cult. A self-
conscious Amobi emerged from it all, a proud custodian of the secrets of the spirit cult. He could
now show his face in public when the spirits assembled, instead of scuttling into hiding with the
women and children at the sound of the ogene. He could even invoke his own ancestral spirit to
emerge from the bowels of the earth, through an ant hole, as his own spirit, and send it back
therein at his pleasure. He now understood the spirit language. Most importantly he knew the severe penalties for divulging any of the secrets.

This year's Ikeji festival would have been his first opportunity to enjoy his new, privileged status.

His first opportunity to mingle with innumerable ancestral spirits for a full four-day market cycle, trying out his stamina.

Unfortunately, it had fallen during term time –
the latter part of the first term – when he was still
at school. He had felt so badly about it during the holiday that his mother had undertaken to find out when next the spirits would assemble, probably
at Emeka's initiation.

'Amobi dume!' Amobi suddenly found himself being challenged at ukwu udala public square by
a spirit he could not readily recognize. For the first time in his life, he stood his ground and
shouted back 'ududo! When the spirit appeared not to have heard, he placed a finger between his
two rows of teeth. The spirit acknowledged the sign, but appeared bent on testing Amobi's
manliness. Two whistling strokes of the cane landed on Amobi's outstretched leg in rapid
succession. Amobi took them with a smile. Next he saw himself escorting Nma through the square. His blood warmed up as she clung
tightly to him for safety.

* * * *

The lorry stopped at Olie market. Amobi was surprised to see that he was already home. He

hopped down with his bag and made for the adjoining untarred road which led to his father's compound, barely a kilometre away.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Five

It must have been somewhere between three and four in the afternoo n when Amobi jumped
down from the lorry. He did not own a watch, but he was certain th at if he had remained at
school they would have been in the classroom at that time, having th eir afternoon prep.

Moreover, his shadow, which preceded him as he walked home, had not yet acquired what SMG

described in one of his off-the-cuff remarks as the characteristics of run-away inflation.

At that time of day, Olie market should be over flowing with vocifer ous buyers and sellers. It
was completely empty. He walked past the prayer house owned and r un by a onetime P & T

clerk. The man, his six well-
fed wives, and their innumerable children always appeared in white,
their hair brown and shaggy like the feathers of the abuke fowl. Amobi had often heard people
ask how the man made his money. His prayer house was never well patroni zed; he had no other
visible means of livelihood; yet he always handed you a bottle of Ar omatic Schnapps to rinse
your mouth with any morning you cared to pop in. And his kola nut s were usually the giant,
cream coloured, oji ugo variety. The compound, which was usually vibratin g with the hilarious laughter of men enjoying free booze, was
uncharacteristically dead on this occasion.

The mysterious silence quickened Amobi's pace. He had not met even a liza rd on the way. When
he arrived at ukwu udala square, it was completely empty. No spirit. No hu

man being. Only the
huge udala tree. It had given away all its succulent, delicious, yellow fruits. Amobi remembered
how he had to acquire the habit of waking up at the crack of dawn if he ever hoped to pick any
udala fruits from the square, for every udala tree was public property : its fruits dropped to the
ground as a gift from the gods, to whoever was the first to pick them. The st ory had been told of
the greedy man who thought he was the cleverest man in town. One moonlit night when he 28

reckoned everyone else had gone to sleep, he sneaked out to the square with a bamboo pole to pluck a basketful of the fruit
for the market. The first fruit he plucked landed on the middle of his head. He did not live to see the next Olie market day.

'Ugo has come home! Ugochukwu has come home! Ugo ...' shouted Adaobi, Amobi's younger sister, as she sped towards him.

'May a bullet blast your head, wild animal, if you can't ever keep th at your mouth shut!' Mazi
Ezeanya Amobi had shot up from his cloth reclining chair as if he was abou t to pounce on his
offending daughter and tear her into two. Adaobi buried her face bet ween Amobi's thighs, clasping both arms round him. Every child
in that compound had come to know that their father's
verbal bullets never blasted a butterfly, not to speak of a human head, so she would not let his latest outburst detract from her joy of seeing her
brother back home.

Mazi Eze brushed Adaobi aside to hug his son. 'Go and tell your mo ther that he is back,' he instructed the girl.

Amobi had never seen his father behave so emotionally before. The old man would normally
have issued his welcome from his cloth chair, and it would have been Amobi's filial duty to walk
up to him and shake his outstretched hand. A hug from his father was unprecedented. What was
brewing? What had he done to merit such fawning? And, believe it or not, his father was sweating in the shade!

Amobi's mother had heard Adaobi shout her welcome, and unconsciously muttered her grateful thanks to Holy Mary.

'He's here!' Mazi Eze proclaimed as she rushed out from the yam barn.

Mazi Eze led the way to the backyard, where they could talk with greater privacy.

'We must always continue to thank our ancestors and all who protect our interests up there,' Mazi
Eze began after he had sat down. 'After what happened yesterday, who knew we would all sit together again like this on this side of the world?'

'What happened yesterday?' Amobi could no longer cloak his curiosity.

'You mean it didn't happen at Ahia?'

'What thing?'

'The sudden darkness in the middle of the day! Didn't it happen in your college?'

'Oh!' grunted Amobi, racing after his heart which had jumped out. 'Di dn't you receive my last letter?'

'We have not received any recent letter from you,' his mother replied.

'I don't know what you are talking about writing a letter or not writing a lett er. What I know is
that what happened here yesterday has never happened in my life, ne ither did my father ever mention such a thing to me. It is even
difficult to recount the whole thing accurately ...'

Amobi had never seen his father get so worked up telling a story. Although Mazi Eze punctuated
his narrative with the remark that his wife would fill in any important detail s he left out, he did not appear to have left out one single detail.

Mazi Eze was in his farm when the whole thing began. He and the four Nar a men he had hired to
make mounds for his seed yams had had their lunch of roast yam, and were back to work. They
were excellent workmen, and the rate at which they worked, it was e vident that they would 30

cultivate the entire portion of land belonging to him at Ofia Mgbom. He had therefore whispered
to his wife to go to Nkwo Ikeata market and buy one large well smoked gra ss-cutter to prepare a
fitting dinner for them, and also to buy two gallons of fresh palm wine. The y were the kind of workmen any farmer would do anything to retain.

Sometime later Mazi Eze noticed a sharp drop in the intensity of the sun. H e was initially happy,
as that would make the workmen even more productive. But when the situat ion lingered on he

began to fear a downpour, which would ruin the rest of the day and wash a way his hopes. One of the workmen ruled out the possibility of rain. Rain without a cloud?

'Look!' shouted one of the workmen. 'What is happening to the sun?'

Mazi Eze and the other workmen followed the direction of the pointing fing er, using their hands
to shield their eyes from the rays of the sun. A dark patch had appeared at o ne corner of the sun!

And, as you stared at it, it appeared to be growing! Something eating up the sun? Was the world
coming to an end? The workmen fled in their rags, leaving behind their hoe s and their after-work
clothes. Their primary concern was to reach their houses before the total bla ckout, to join their
families in facing whatever lay ahead. Mazi Eze forgot his snuff box and his walking stick. The
yam mounds lost their significance. His thoughts were with his famil y, and his son at college.

How could he bring all of them together?

The church bells were ringing incessantly as Mazi Eze ran home. His arthrit ic knee, which had
compelled him to use a walking stick, seemed to have healed mysteriously; he ran without any
feeling of pain. The whole town was agog with movement as he ran home. Women ran helter-
skelter, hailing their children. Several families had hastily put on their Sunday clothes and
headed for the church. Nobody stopped to exchange greetings, or eve n to ask questions.

Impending doom was printed on each face, more so as the ever growing bla ck patch swallowed more and more of the sun!

Mama Ugo was just entering the house from the market when Mazi Eze ca me in. She burst into
tears at the sight of her husband. Was that how it would all end? Ho w could she go without
Ugochukwu? As soon as the black spot on the sun was spotted in the market , bedlam had taken
over. The women abandoned their wares and fled in all directions. Should s he run to the farm for
her husband or rush to the house for her children? What of Ugochukwu? Ho w could she get to him, to make sure he was safe and bring him home immediately?

'One does not have the mouth to tell the story!' Mazi Eze went on. We decid ed that it would be
better to die together inside the church, so we went there. But by the time we got there, it was
difficult to see where to stand. You could hear one voice trying to shout lou der than the others in
the attempt to direct activities inside, but who had the heart to listen ? Some sat, some stood,
some were on their knees. Some sang 'Jerusalem on High'. Some 'Nearer m y God to thee'. Others
sang other songs. Some shouted their prayers. Some wailed. All at the same time. When one man
standing outside the church exclaimed that the entire sun had been s wallowed up by the
mysterious object and had completely turned black, the wailing drowned ev erything else. I have
pleaded with my ancestors never to allow such a thing to happen aga in in my lifetime. God forbid! ...

'Whether the spirits above had heard their prayers and weeping,' Mazi Eze continued, 'or

whatever else might have been responsible for it, the mysterious object soo
n began to disgorge
the sun it had earlier swallowed. When the sun finally regained its splendou
r, it was not easy to 32

say whether or not a new day had dawned. Were the men to return to their f
arms and the women to the market?

'I just said I wasn't going anywhere except to my house!' Amobi's mother pu
t in. 'But I couldn't
believe it when the women who went back to the market to retrieve their wares came back in
tears, shouting that all the things they left behind had been stolen. If anybody told you that
itinerant Agbenu traders would have the courage to steal at a time when the world was coming to an end, would you believe him? Tufia!'

'I sent for you for two reasons,' Mazi Eze took over again. 'To make sure that what happened
here, did not reach your college and that you are still alive. Secondly, I want you to take part in a
ceremony which the whole town has organized for tomorrow. When someth
ing is discovered in
the pubic area of a young goat which did not exist in its mother's, somethin
g must be wrong. We
may not be able to find out why darkness suddenly descended on us in broa
d daylight, and why
the sun turned black like charcoal. But we want to make sure that it does no
t happen again. The
ceremony will take place tomorrow. The day after you can return to y
our college, without any fears.

'Papa,' Amobi began when it was clear that the floor was his, 'there's no need for any ceremony.'

'What do you mean?' Mazi Eze shouted, hardly believing his ears. 'Is it beca use you did not see what happened here?'

'I did,' Amobi replied.

'Did it happen there too?' both parents asked simultaneously.

'It is the same sun that shines at Ahia,' Amobi proclaimed self-consciously. 'What you saw yesterday is known in English as a total eclipse of the sun. It occurs very rarely in fact many people never see it in their lifetime ...'

Amobi's parents were dumbfounded as they listened to their son unravel the phenomenon of the previous day. Their Principal had given them advance notice of the e clipse, and Amobi had at once rushed off a letter home to warn his parents even though he doubted whether it would get to them in time. The boys had never seen 'Computer' so excited. He ordered th e students to acquire pieces of glass, to smoke them carefully over burning candles, for use in ob serving the sun. His exciting step by step commentary on the eclipse in the football field dispelle d all fear from the minds of the students. The appearance of two night watchmen, ambli ng to their beats thinking they were already late because of the impending darkness, added to the fun.

'I will talk to the chief,' Mazi Eze said, after listening to his son's exposition. 'The igba ndu ritual is always welcome anyway, but I'll explain everything to him and leave him

to decide whether or not to proceed with it.' 'Welcome, my son!' Mama Ugo breathed down.

'Welcome,' chorused Mazi Eze.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Six

Chi cha-ra-ra ... mgba!

Chi cha-ra-ra ... mgba!

Kuya mgba,

Kuya mgba, Anam ata aku nkpi nkpi?

Anam ata ukwa nkpi nkpi?

Abum Ume Oguejiofo!

Ume na ata aku nkpi nkpi,

Ume na ata ukwa nkpi nkpi, Otakata ofanye n'uko, Mgbe oji guya oje ****!

Adaobi and Uche formed the centre of a circle of excited children as they played the exciting and mentally exacting game, 'chicharamgba'. The two competitors left the singing to the other children, to concentrate on the intricate movement of both hands to synchro nize with the song.

Each competitor began by dovetailing both palms into the opponent's gently withdrawing them, and clapping them loudly to coincide with 'mgba!' at the end of that movem ent. They repeated the movement, again clapping the palms loudly at the end of it. Then began the intricate touching and clapping sequence. The back of the right hand touches the back of the o pponent's right hand, followed by each competitor clapping both palms loudly. They repeat the movement. Then the left palm touches the opponent's left palm, the right palm touches the oppon ent's right palm, each

competitor claps both palms loudly, the back of the right hand touches the b ack of the opponent's right hand, and each competitor claps both palms loudly to mark the end of that movement ...

Ode – re,

Nne na enye mgbe ona agu nwa ya, Ode – re, Nna na enye ma ogubucha ...

Adaobi faulted. She held out the right hand instead of the left, and could not switch hands fast enough to regain the rhythm. Uche had won.

'It's my turn to play,' shouted Nene, pushing her way into the centre of the c ircle. Like Adaobi and Uche, she was in the five-seven years age group. Nene, Uche, and their younger brothers and sisters who were also standing by – Uzoma, Ugonne, Ken, Obinna, Tochukwu – were Adaobi's cousins.

'You think you can do better than I?' countered Adaobi, who was ang ry with Uche for not moving straight on into their second round. 'Look at your big stomach, as if you are pregnant.'

'What about yours?' Nene fired back, not only standing aggressively i n front of Adaobi but actually touching Adaobi's belly with her pointed finger. 'Doesn't it lo ok like that of a snake which has swallowed a cow?'

'Senseless person. Do snakes swallow cows in your house?' Adaobi s hut her eyes derisively, simultaneously producing a clucking sound with her tongue.

'Whom are you shutting your eyes at like that?' Nene's eyes bulged as she stared at her opponent.

'You! If you don't like it, discharge a mosquito and let us see!'

'Run away, you children!' shouted Mama Ugo bursting into the compound with fresh palm fronds for the goats.

The voice scared the children away, also disentangli ng Nene and Ad aobi, each of whom had
been determined to scrape the other's mouth on the ground. The child ren ran outside the compound, to regroup and continue with the fun.

Mama Ugo made for the pen, to feed the hungry goats, before movi ng on to the kitchen to
prepare special pepper soup for Amobi. She unfastened the basket hanging f rom the rafter over the fireplace, to take out some dried fish, utazi ...

'He says he would like to have a bath ... 'Mazi Eze's voice startled his wife who had not heard his footsteps, completely engrossed as she was in her prayers on her son's behalf.

'You mean he can now talk?' she asked, half expecting to receive a negative reply.

'The whole thing hasn't yet given me the mouth to talk,' Mazi Eze replied so lemnly. 'Let us keep our eyes open meanwhile ...

'Mama, is there any water for my bath?'

Father and mother turned instantly in the direct ion of Amobi's voice. It sou nded almost like the
voice of a dead person suddenly returning to life. Particularly to Ma ma Ugo whose heart had
almost given up beating in the small hour of the morning at the sight of her son in that pathetic state of unconsciousness.

Mazi Eze had been awakened by a piercing cry of agony. Not long after the first cock crow. He had quickly jumped up, fastened his cloth round his waist and reached for his dane gun. Soon after, he heard 'Help! Papa, help! The thread is squeezing me to death! Help!' By then, Mazi Eze was certain it was his son's voice. With nervous hands, he lit the lantern in his room, placed it where it could show him the way, tiptoed towards his son's room, holding the gun at the ready.

The door into Amobi's room was not bolted, so he flung it open to see what had attacked his son.

There, on the bare floor, lay Amobi in his pyjamas. Groaning in pain.

Mazi Eze's eyes raced from floor to roof, from roof to floor, and from one wall to the other.

Nothing. He brought the lantern inside, raised the flame, cautiously searched around the bed, and under the bed, expecting to see a deadly snake, or a scorpion, or a thief. Nothing. He searched the entire room much more thoroughly. Still nothing. Meanwhile, Amobi continued to groan in pain. He searched the corridor. The only door leading out into the compound was securely bolted. Meaning that whatever it was could not have entered or escaped through the door. He opened the door, and searched right round the house.

Nothing. He went round the compound. Nothing. No unusual footprints or marks on the sandy ground.

Much as he tried, he could not wake Amobi up.

The groaning stopped, but Amobi's eyes remained shut and the expression o n his face was one of
extreme fatigue. He poured with sweat, and his skin was a mass of lumps. It was when Mazi Eze
went to fetch some water from behind the kitchen that Mama Ugo had chall enged him, fearing
he was a thief. She had promptly joined him, to keep vigil and dab Amobi's forehead with cold water, after giving her word to keep her emotion
under control.

'Yesterday, it was the sun being swallowed in the day time,' began Amobi's mother after Amobi
had gone to have a warm bath. 'Today it is Ugochukwu fighting unseen pow ers. We must look for the source of this whole thing!'

'Ugochukwu has provided an explanation for yesterday.'

'But what of today?' Mama Ugo interrupted her husband. 'If the people in th e college knew about
the sun, did they also know about what happened last night? This ki nd of thing has never
happened in this house since I came here seventeen years ago. That's why I say we must find its source.'

'I agree with you Mazi Eze concurred. 'That's why I am happy the chief and the elders decided to go ahead with the igba ndu ritual this afternoon.'

'You think that is enough?' Mama Ugo asked.

'You don't think so?'

'I know I'm only a woman she replied, 'otherwise I would have said that igb a ndu for the whole
town should not stop us from pursuing this one by our selves. After all, this one touches us alone!'

'Yes you have begun to talk like a woman. You forget that it is only somebo dy who knows you
well who can make medicine against you. If every man and woman of Ndik elionwu pledges this
afternoon on his or her life never to attempt to take the life of any other member of this town, who else need we fear?'

'What about Ugochukwu's school mates?'

'You think they were after him last night?'

'How do we know? Had this kind of thing ever happened to him before he went there?'

'We'll start with igba ndu first,' Mazi Eze ruled. 'If after that the trouble cont inues, then we shall know how to deal with it.'

'Mama,' Amobi called as he emerged from the enclosure where he had his b ath. 'It is difficult to
believe! Look, most of the lumps are gone. And my energy, which h ad gone completely, has returned.'

Both parents looked over Amobi's outstretched arms with amazement and relief.

'Is Mazi in?' .

'Who is it?' Mazi Eze asked, in a tone that left the caller in no doubt that he had called at a most unw elcome hour.

'It is Emebo.'

'Didn't I tell you that there is no work today because ...'

'Mazi, it is not work that brings me here. It is something that has completely eaten my mouth!'

Mazi Eze made straight for his obi. Emebo, the leader of the team of Nara men who made yam mounds for him, was not a man to raise an unnecessary alarm.

'Mazi,' Emebo began, refusing the seat offered him. 'You remember how we ran the day before
yesterday, leaving our hoes behind? I sent one of our men early this mornin g to collect the hoes,
and he came back to me shivering. I went back with him and I could not bel ieve my eyes. About
twenty of the yam mounds we made that day had been completely le velled during a life and death battle between a huge python and a wild animal ...'

'What?'

'Mazi, you should come and see it yourself. Whatever animal it was succeeded in killing the
snake. We followed the trail to that raffia palm plantation bordering your la nd and found it dead, without its head!'

'Was the wild animal not a leopard?'

'The marks left behind looked like those of a leopard,' Emebo replied.

'Then it must be Mazi Nwafo. He's the only man in this town whose leopard goes about
disturbing people. It must be that he is not satisfied with carrying aw ay my two goats. He's
already afraid that my yam barn will again be much bigger than his, so he s ent his leopard to my farm to frighten away the men helping me ...'

'Do you mean the leopard went there to attack us?' a frightened Emebo asked

'Nothing is beyond that coward,' Mazi Eze replied. 'But it is not every day t hat the squirrel lands
on ripe palm fruit. The powers which drive away the flies from a tailless co w sent the python to deal with him. I'm sure he will not go near my
farm next time ...'

* * * *

A heated argument followed Emebo's departure. Mama Ugo was adamant th at her son would not step out of Ndikelionwu until they had sounded a good dibia.

'But I had told you my decision on that matter,' Mazi Eze retorted.

'That was your decision, not mine!'

'Since when did you take over the headship of this compound?'

'If I ever uttered any word to suggest such a thing, here are my knees,' Mama Ugo apologized,
dropping on both knees. 'But when you call him your son, remember that I carried him in my
womb for nine months. And remember, too, that at the time you took your decision, Emebo had
not come with this last story. Too many mysterious things have befallen us in one quick breath.

You cannot easily disentangle one from the other. If the opinion of a woman is ever to count, I
would say that the best thing is to present everything to a good dibia. Let him consult his deities and tell us where we stand. That is all I wish to say.'

Mazi Eze had been more upset by Emebo's story than his wife. The link with Ugochukwu's
nightmare revealed how desperate Mazi Nwafo had become. Hence Mazi Eze's anxiety to get the
boy out of the way with the minimum delay, before the coward Nwafo tried more experiments
with his witchcraft. With Ugochukwu out of harm's way, his father would feel free to map out his strategy for the final resolution of his
lifelong tussle with his arch-rival. A tussle bound to end in Mazi Eze's favour. No need wasting time and money consulting a dibia over that.

The time had not, however, come to admit his wife into the thoughts going on in his mind. He,
therefore, based his decision that their son should return to Government College that day on two
things. His faith in the igba ndu ceremony taking place later in the day and his confidence that
the men at the college who could accurately foresee the mysterious disappearance of the sun
could also provide adequate protection for his son. They would go to a dibia only if they failed in both directions.

Amobi had been too frightened to think. It had been a terrible experience. Throughout the period

he had been completely blank and could not remember anything happening to him. He had been
surprised to learn from his father that he had shouted for help; he could not recollect ever 42

opening his mouth. However, when he came back to himself,
he had seen the mysterious mounds
on his body. And had been unable to lift an arm or a leg, being totally worn out. Later, while
having a wash, he had felt his energy rushing back, and seen the mounds disappear as mysteriously as they came.

Probably another terrible nightmare, and therefore nothing to worry about. But why two terrible
nightmares in less than six months. Then the complication introduced by Emebo's story.

According to his father, he had shouted that the thread was squeezing him to death. And now
Emebo had come with an account of a battle between a snake and a leopard. Could there be any
link between his nightmare and Emebo's story? He had listened passively to the argument
between his parents, and wondered whether he should not have spoken out in support of his
mother. A good A good dibia should see beyond mortal eyes, and the sooner they consulted him
the better to save him another such ordeal. But what if the news filtered through to Government
College? That would be the end of his career there. It would be seen as primitive conduct
incompatible with the status of a student of Government College. Since there was no way he
could ensure that the news did not get through to his school, it might be best

to leave everything
in the hands of the highly qualified medical personnel at the school, as his father had ruled. If they failed, then the dibia.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Seven

"Iambuc' is coming!' Ekeneme shouted excitedly. The rest of the class jumped to their feet, thrilled to see the approaching figure, Mr Sands, nicknamed 'Iambuc' from his efforts to teach the
Iambus and other rhythmic measures in poetry. In his ever constant blue shi rt, white shorts, and brown hose.

Blue, poplin, long sleeve shirt, with the sleeves hurriedly rolled up. T he boys swore he owned
dozens of those blue shirts and white shorts, to be able to wear them every day, including
Saturdays and Sundays. Until one day a boy spotted a hole in the sh irt. On the left hand side, some distance below the pocket. A small hole which could have been made by a cricket when the
shirt was spread out to dry. He drew the attention of his classmates t o the hole. And they
immediately mounted 'operation search for the hole!' The first day, th ey found a hole in Mr
Sand's blue shirt. A small hole, which could have been made by a cricket. O n the left hand side, some distance below
the pocket. The day after, they found a hole. A small hole which could have been made by a cricket. On the left hand side, some distance below the pocket. The day after, they found a hole ...

No. A white man could not be so poor, or so Nnewish, to wear only one blu e shirt, one pair of
white shorts, and one pair of brown hose every day of every week. Impossib le! The small hole
must be there for a purpose. A special vent, to beat the African heat, and added to each of his
dozens of blue shirts. Part of Mr Sands' uniqueness! The boys were t hrilled to see 'Iambuc'

walking towards them in his unique style: short, quick, steps, with the right shoulder and elbow

tilted up, and head held high, a style which many boys had faithfully copied, to use whenever they wanted to feel good, or to attract attention.

He had been away from the school the whole of the previous week. To prepare the ground for the 1948 annual cricket contest with a rival Government College on the other side of the Niger, the contest usually referred to as 'the ashes'. Cricket was the one game which drew the line between the elite schools and the rest, the Government Colleges and the poorer grammar schools. During his absence, another master had covered his Monday morning Religious Instruction period.

'Morning, boys.' 'Good morning, sir!'

'Iambuc' laid out his precious books on the table: the Latin Vulgate, the New Testament in Greek, the Authorized (St James') Version of the Bible, and the Old Testament in Hebrew. They were an indispensable feature of his Religious Instruction classes and one of the reasons for his high popularity rating. The boys always exchanged glances in their amazement as he moved with ease from Greek to English to Hebrew to Latin and back to English before attempting to answer any question from the Bible. As if he was born a native speaker of each of those languages. He could not trust the translations of the Bible in the market, so he had no alternative, he said, but to return to the source documents.

'Before we begin, let's make sure we remember our ground rules. The first one, Chidi?'

Chidi sprang to his feet: 'Don't all speak at once!'

'Good! And the next, Ekong?'

'Questions on the Bible fall into three categories: (a) questions the master an d the Archbishop of
Canterbury can answer; (b) questions which the master cannot answer but the Archbishop of
Canterbury can answer; (c) questions which neither the master nor the Arch bishop of Cantebury can answer.'

'We're in business!' 'Iambuc' was visibly pleased with the brilliant answers.

Amobi listened with one ear, at the same time working out the details of the question he must get
in at the earliest opportunity. The expatriate medical doctor he had consulte d on his return from
home had given him a clean bill of health. What happened to him at Ndikeli onwu, according to
the doctor, was nothing but a terrible nightmare. His early childhood encounter with a leopard
had been so traumatic that it could give rise to such nightmares from time to time, until he
outgrew his pathological fear of leopards. As for the lumps on his bo dy, those were clear
manifestations of allergy. He must unwittingly have eaten something o r exposed himself to
somethi ng to which he was allergic. Any other time the skin trouble erupte d, he should report at once to the clinic to enable the cause of the allergy to be identified.

Amobi had felt so relieved by the doctor's explanation that he had rushed off a letter to his parents assuring them that all was well. And he had promptly forgotten all about leopards. Until the Sunday service the previous day. The New Testament lesson, St. Mark's Gospel chapter 5, verses one to thirteen, told the story of a man possessed by a demon, and how Jesus Christ transferred the evil spirits from him into swine. That lesson had sparked off Amobi's inquisitive mind. He had re-read the passage twice immediately after the end of the service, as soon as he returned to his dormitory. And each time he had seen a relationship between the story and the claims at home about men possessing leopards.

'I have a question about the New Testament lesson read in the service yesterday, sir,' he announced rising without first waiting to be recognized.

'Have you forgotten the rule on question time?'

'I am sorry, sir, but this is an important question, sir.' Amobi could not afford to lose the opportunity.

'All right. Spit it out.'

'Is it possible, Sir ...'

'Just a minute,' interrupted 'Iambuc'. 'Could I have the passage again? I'd like to see how it's recorded in Greek...'

'Is it possible, sir,' Amobi resumed, after the master had lifted his eyes from the book held in front of him, 'for a man's spirit to go into an animal temporarily and control the behaviour of that animal?'

'Is this a roundabout way of asking whether the account in Mark 5 is a true record of what actually happened?' 'Iambuc' asked, smiling.

'No, sir. My question is whether it is possible for a man to send his spirit into an animal, like a leopard, to control that animal for some time, and then ...'

'Sir,' cut in Karibo, 'he is asking about wizards and witches.'

'I am not asking about wizards and witches!' Amobi countered.

'After the service, too,' Karibo pressed on, 'some of the boys began talking about wizards and witches. One of the boys said the witches in his town have eyes on their heels. The eyes don't show when you look at their heels, but if you want to know who is a witch, just throw a handful of sand at their heels and the witches will be very furious with you.

'Another boy said that his sister said that in her school each girl wears two scarves to bed every night. One scarf covers the head. The second is fastened round the chest and then secured to the head scarf. Any girl who forgets to do so may lose her head to witches before morning. This is because every night, when the rest of the school is asleep, the witches among the girls sneak out

to play a queer netball game in which they use the head of a human being as a ball. They cannot play the game unless they can chop off the head of one of their school mates ...

'Through with your mumbo-jumbo?' cut in the master, provoking spontaneous laughter from the class.

'My question is different from what Karibo was talking about ...'

'We must proceed to our subject matter for today, before some of you come up with more grotesque stories! Every culture has its own stock of cock-and-bull stories but I can bet my cricket bat that by the time you are in form 3, Karibo will laugh his fat head off to hear a new student tell stories about people having eyes on their heels ...'

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Eight

Mmiri na ezo,

Anwu na eti,

Oko Nnuona No na mpio!

Mmiri na ezo,

Anwu na eti, Oko Nnuona

No na mpio!

Amobi sang the words as he ran round his dormitory, enjoying the exhilarating effect of the raindrops on his body. It had been a bright and sunny Sunday morning, between the end of chapel service at quarter to eleven and lunch time at one o'clock. Amobi was still in his all-white chapel outfit – white short-sleeved shirt, with the college badge pinned on to the left pocket, white trousers, white socks, and white canvas shoes. Sunday was the one day in the week when he wore trousers. That pair of white trousers, more than anything else, symbolized his elevation from a primary school pupil to a college student, as he had never owned nor worn a pair of trousers before his entry into Government College. He was, therefore, never in a hurry to join the other boys in changing into everyday khaki shorts immediately after the chapel service.

Quite startling, the way the unexpected rain descended. As if someone had suddenly sprayed rubber bullets on the corrugated iron roofing sheets.

'Rain!' .

Amobi looked up from his bed, first in the direction of the voice, th en through the burglar-proofed window to the outside. Yes. The pellets on the roof were indeed drops of rain.

'Rain!' he echoed, spontaneously discarding every item of clothing on him e xcept his blue pants
and flinging them on his bed. No time to fold away even his precious pair o f trousers. In a thrice
he had dashed out of the dormitory into the rain, shouting as he ran: 'Ototo Mmiri agu! Ototo Mmiri agu! Ototo ...'

His muscles, anticipating a barrage of hail-
stones, flexed involuntarily as he ran into the rain. No hail-
stones. Mere rain-
drops. Rather disappointing, for nothing could be greater fun than running around with your playmates on the few occasions when the Supreme Being fired hail on the
earth. You could never tell the direction from which to expect the next froze n ball of water, nor
whether it would strike your forehead or your shin bone. To add to the fun, you competed with
your play mates to see who would harvest the largest number of hail -stones. Throwing a hailstone into your mouth and feeling it disappear on your tongue was something else!

The disappointment was short-
lived however. Rain- drops were raindrops, frozen or not, and
they always gave Amobi a tingling sensation when they landed on his bare body. Leaving him thereafter clean and refreshed.

Sunshine. And rain. Sent to the earth simultaneously. An unusual event, whi ch the children of an earlier generation at Ndikelionwu had recorded for posterity in the song: Mmiri na ezo,

Anwu na eti,

Oko Nnuona No na mpio!

50

No child had ever bothered to find out from his parents who Oko Nnuona w as, why he should be
found at the drainage hole at a corner of the com pound wall, just because t he rain chose to fall while the sun shone, nor what he was doing there!

Amobi ran round the dormitory, occasionally using his right hand to drain the water from his
face, to en sure unimpaired vision. He also scrubbed his trunk with both han ds as he ran, in an
effort to combine fun with body cleanliness. What had become of Chiedu, h e wondered. He was
not the boy to miss such fun. Or was he asleep? Or gone on an errand for hi s aunt? Terrible aunt.

Always had errands all over the place, and no child of her own to shunt up a nd down running her errands. And where was Eloka? Probably ...

'Amobi! What the hell are you doing?'

The voice entered through one ear and promptly disappeared through the other, as Amobi switched to another 'rain' song:

Okuko be-kee, Chiri umu ya pu-ta ...

'Amobi!' The voice again.

Amobi stopped dead. He stared towards the voice, panting, wiping his face. Chuk. Yes, that was
Chuk. What was happening, Amobi wondered, his head empty. What

was Chuk doing at
Ndikelionwu? Not just Chuk. Also Gboyega, Jim Jim, Okechukwu, K aribo ... He was not at Ndikelionwu but at Government College.

'So it's true you've been doing a ritual dance round the dormitory, eh ?' Karibo asked. 'Your guardian wants you in the Prefects' Room, so you'd better get out fast.'

51

* * * *

'Good afternoon, please.' Amobi stood respectfully at the entrance to
the Prefects' Room.

Recognizing the voice, Olatunji dropped the book he was reading and turne d his face to the door.

'And how are you today, my young man?'

'I'm fine, please.' Amobi replied. 'I'm told you sent for me.'

'I gather you've been naughty lately, eh?' 'No, please,' Amobi's
heart beat became audible.

'I hope not!' Tunji sounded relieved. 'I have received one serious repo rt against you. The
punishment ... Give me a minute ...' Tunji changed course suddenly when an other prefect walked
into the room, a large common room at one end of the school library set asi de for the exclusive use of the college prefects.

'Now ...' Tunji resumed as he walked slowly with Amobi towards the colourful flame-of-the-forest tree which dominated the lawn between the library and School House.

'... Daramola reported to one of the College Prefects that you were rude to him.'

'No, please,' Amobi disagreed, a frown registering on his face.

'What do you mean?' asked Tunji, leaning against the flowering tree.

'When I went to my dormitory yesterday morning, please, to tidy up my box and my locker for the Saturday morning inspection, I found my comb in pieces on my bed. On e boy told me that he saw Daramola throw the broken pieces on my bed, please.'

'You know the name of the boy?'

'Yes, please. Although he begged me not to ment ion his name, or Daramola may ambush him at night.'

'Go on.'

'After the Saturday morning parade, I went to my dormitory, collected the pieces of my comb from my locker and took them to Daramola. I showed them to him and asked him what I had done to him that he should break my comb like that. At first he pretended not to know what I was talking about, and ordered me to clear out. But when I told him that two boy s saw him when he removed the comb and three boys saw him when he brought back the broke n pieces, he saw he could not tell lies anymore.'

Amobi went on: 'Instead of begging me for forgiveness, please, he put his h ands on his hips like
this, and asked me whether I knew he was a senior boy. He said that I should be happy that a senior boy broke my comb, and ordered me to make myself scarce or he would shatter my jaw!'

'Did you tell him anything after that?'

'No, please.' Amobi paused momentarily. 'Except that I said a senior boy sh ould respect himself by buying his own comb!'

'You shouldn't have said that to a senior boy,' Tunji cut in.

'But should a senior boy break my comb like that without even asking for fo rgiveness? Will he buy another one for me?'

'Don't be a baby!' chided Tunji, giving Amobi a quick affectionate hug, whil e Amobi mopped up the tears that had formed around his eyes.

'You are lucky the prefect to whom Daramola reported you decided to tell m e about it first. The
way Daramola presented the case, there's no doubt that you would ha ve earned two hours for
insubordination. We have many strong traditions in this college, and o ne of them is to show
respect to your seniors and superiors, even if they are only one year ahead of you. Anyway, nothing will happen to you this time.'

'Thank you, please.'

'But make sure that in future you don't show disrespect to your seniors in an y way. Okay?' 'Yes, please,' Amobi replied.

'If they annoy you, just go your way. One day you will become a senior boy yourself. If they trample upon your rights, report to a prefect. But watch how you report, o! Or you may land into trouble unexpectedly. The Principal doesn't like tale bearers. Here's money to buy a new comb!'

Amobi expressed appreciation and pocketed the two shillings. He was learning fast!

'Now, did I hear you were running about naked, like a madman, when I sent for you just now?'

'Oh!' gasped Amobi. 'I was merely running about in the rain, please. I was not naked, please. I was wearing my pants.'

'Look here, my friend,' Tunji began in a relaxed, palliative tone. 'You are no longer in your village. You are in your second term as a student of Govern ment College. It is unbecoming of a boy of this College to be seen running around in the rain scantily clad. Did you see any other boy doing likewise?'

'I'm sorry, please. I will not do so again.' As soon as Amobi was clear of the Prefects' Room, he gave himself two cracks on the head for ever forgetting his status.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Nine

Initially Chuk had felt overwhelmed by the unsolicited courtesies occasionally extended to him by 'Hammer'. He had not imagined that a prefect whose heart was hewn out of granite could ever wear a smile. The occasions had, however, been few and far between. Presumably, 'Hammer' did not want to formalize any relationship that could portray him as soft hearted. Then one day in the second half of September, well into the third term, 'Hammer' suddenly materialized from nowhere and accosted Chuk.

'Come here, you! Didn't you see this bag in my hand?'

'No, please,' lied Chuk. He had just changed from white at the end of the Saturday morning inspection into his rough and ready brown khaki uniform, and was debating with himself whether to go straight to the library to tackle the assignment given to his class by that kill-joy,

'Computer', or first to freshen up for the day with a quick game of table tennis in the lobby. His inclination was to the latter, but he would leave the decision to the first classmate he ran into.

The last person he expected to meet as he stepped out of the dormitory was 'Hammer'. He spontaneously changed direction, like a millipede hitting an obstacle, with no immediate destination in mind. Too late.

'Take it to my cubicle, will you?'

'Yes, please.'

Chuk waited respectfully by the door of the prefect's room, to enable 'Hammer' to open the door

before handing the near empty bag to him and scramming before the man d eveloped any more 55

ideas. 'Hammer' walked past him, unlocked the door, and went in, leaving hi m standing by the entrance.

'Come in,' he invited Chuk a few minutes later, his voice uncharacteri stically mellow, as if he was addressing a classmate. No, not just a classmate. A fellow prefect.

Chuk walked in through the open door. Had he been inside a prefect's room before this? No ...

Yes. Once. In the first term. His House Captain's room. Sheer curiosity. It h ad been like peering
into the lion's den when the lion was out hunting. That was before a prefect lost money inside his room and the Principal authorized the installation of locks on the doors.

'Sit down.'

'No, please. I'm in a hurry.' Chuk observed that the prefect had already changed into his wrapper.

'In a what?' 'Hammer' asked, wearing a mischievous grin.

'I'm sorry, please.' Chuk got the message and promptly apologized.

'Hammer' threw an arm round Chuk's shoulder and began to stroke Chuk's r ather hairy arm. 'You must miss America very much?'

'I sure do.'

'I've often wondered why you should leave such a civilized country t o come and study in this bush place.'

'It's the old man's idea. You know how daddies are. When they develop a pet idea ...'

'Aren't your fingers nice looking?' 'Hammer' cut in, caressing Chuk's fingers. 'I've always admired your legs. Not straight, and not like a bow; just in between. Fleshy, and so fair, like a pretty girl's ...'

'Oh no, please!' Chuk protested as his embarrass ment mounted. Ignoring the protest, 'Hammer'

drew Chuk closer, and held him tight, breathing loudly.

'No, please!' Chuk was choking, and the sweat ran down the back of his neck. He had lost interest in the prefect's room and in everything around him. All he wanted was to regain his freedom. He struggled and wrenched himself free from the panting prefect. 'Brute!' he was about to pronounce when he remembered that he stood before a college prefect who could punish him ruthlessly anytime, anywhere. But 'Hammer' cut a pathetic figure now. Chuk looked spitefully at him and made for the door.

'Promise me that you won't mention this to anybody, and nobody will punish you in this school, from now on,' pleaded 'Hammer'.

Chuk took one quick look at him, and ran full speed to his dormitory.

57

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Ten

'Hammer' swung the hand bell twice. With an air of authority. As the College Prefect on duty, he
was the visible symbol of authority, the lord of all he surveyed. Until he said the grace, the meal
could not start. And until he declared the meal over, you dared not leave your seat. If he declared
you late, that meant no meal for you, no matter how hungry you might be. Unless you were a
College Prefect. Or you carried a written exeat duly signed by a master. He had used his own class – the School Certificate class – to demonstrate that the law was no respecter of persons.

(Except College Prefects!) And earned himself 'The Hammer of the Monks' as nickname.

The School Certificate class had arrived at the dining hall a minute or so after the bell fag had
sounded the last bell for lunch. The Physics master had exceeded the time allotted for his class,
and the entire class had rushed from the Physics laboratory straight to the dining hall. 'Hammer',
who arrived shortly after them, having branched off to the Principal's office to collect the mail,
promptly ordered 'all boys who came late without exeat' (referring of course to his classmates,
minus the College Prefects) to troop out. And they did. Notwithstanding their growling insides.

And that was the end of the matter!

'Hammer' swung the hand bell twice, signalling that he was through with his lunch of fried yams
and beef stew. He rose to his full height, adjusted his flaming red blazer, and swung his eyes
round to ensure that no boy (except a College Prefect) had the temerity to to

uch his cutlery after
hearing the bell. Absolute silence. He picked up the slim bundle of letters fo r the day, which he
had earlier collected from the Principal's office. He held up the first letter, hi s eyes narrowing as he looked more critically at the blue envelope.

'Amobi!' he grunted.

Amobi leapt from his seat and advanced towards 'Hammer'. It was always a privilege and a joy
to hear your name read out whenever the prefect on duty handed out the mail. If 'Hammer'

needed any further evidence that the blue envelope came from an infatua te d girl, the back of the
envelope provided it. In place of the sender's name and address, he s aw a rectangle of crosses
surrounding the word 'GUESS' in block capitals. He looked disdainfully at Amobi, from toe to head, pouted his mouth derisively, and flung the letter at him. A spontaneous shuffling of the feet
under the tables indicated solidarity with Amobi. 'Hammer' grabbed the han d bell and once again returned the hall to absolute silence.

Amobi's feet hardly touched the ground as he returned to his seat. The press ure of so many pairs
of envious eyes; the anxiety to race through the contents of the enchanting b lue envelope which
had attracted the attention of even the heartless 'Hammer', the soaring feelin g of warmth for Nma

... He could hardly contain his sense of relief when 'Hammer' finally said the grace and pronounced lunch over.

Instead of the usual leisurely walk on the fringes of the lovely green, terrace d quadrangle, Amobi
took a few swift strides to the far side of the library. Once out of view, he ra n as fast as his thin
legs could carry him towards the disused huts which had housed the bucket latrines before the introduction of water closets. Insulated
from prying eyes and poking noses, he lifted the envelope with trembling fingers and ran his tongue along its gummed edge to facilitate a clean opening.

'Nkem xxx' the letter began. A tingling sensation darted down Amobi's spin e. He pressed the sky
blue writing sheets to his heart to regain his equilibrium. What a beginning. Nkem. My own. My
beloved. My darling. My sweetheart. My everything endearing. So po ssessive. And then those
three crosses after the word, said by the more knowledgeable boys to person ify love! Three 59

crosses, meaning triple love! Nma had never addressed him so amoro usly before. Each of the
two letters she had so far written to him had begun simply with 'De ar Ugo.' Something was happening!

Your missive arrived last Wednesday ... the letter went on. 'I was so transported to the high
heavens with joy that I could not sleep the whole night. Each time I shut my eyes to sleep, you
started playing with me, trying to tickle my arm pits, and I would w ake up again. We are not
allowed to write letters except on Sundays after morning service, otherwise I would have written back at once.

One kind-
hearted worker here has promised to post this letter privately for me. That is why I am
wielding my pen so freely. Please when you reply make sure of what you write and how you
write it because our Principal opens all our letters before giving them to us. ' Nkem', I am happy
you like that blue handkerc hief I made for you. I have made another one ex actly like your own
which I use here. There's something else I want to make for you, bu t I will wait first until ...

(guess!)

There is one famous book here called 'Aweful Disclosures of Maria Monk'. The Principal has
warned us that we must not touch it. She says she will expel any girl seen e ven holding it. The
girls who have read it say every girl must read it. They have change d the cover so that the
teachers won't easily recognize it if they see it. If I am lucky and it gets to m y turn before I come home next holiday, I shall cram the whole book and vomit it for you. (Laugh!) ...

Ewo! One of our girls was possessed by mammy water last week...

The first warning bell for siesta rang out. Five clear strokes. In anoth er three minutes, two
strokes would follow. And two minutes later, one lone stroke. If you were not tucked in under 60

your red blanket at that lone stroke, your name was on its way to th e detention book. Amobi

folded his unfinished letter rapidly, put it neatly back into the envelope, sho ved it into his pocket and dashed to his dormitory.

* * * *

'Still hugging that letter, huh?' Chuk teased Amobi when he observed the bl ue envelope sticking out of the pocket of Amobi's games shirt. 'Tell me, were you reading it while playing hockey?'

'Mind your bu!' Amobi snapped.

'No offence! ...' As he spoke, Chuk suddenly plucked the letter from Amobi's pocket and slid
away. Amobi raced after him, but was unable to stop him from openi ng and rapidly browsing through the letter as he ran.

'What's all the fuss?' Chuk asked, applying the brakes. 'Thought it had some juicy stuff, but it's all voodoo and such shit!' He flung the letter at Amobi.

'Who permitted you to read my letter?' Amobi fumed, his eyes bulging aggressively.

'Come off it, boy!' Chuk tried to dismiss the matter with a wave of the hand.

'Off what? Didn't they teach you over there that it is bad manners to read an other person's letter without his permission?'

'You're making a mountain out of a molehill. Come over to the dorm and I'll show you photos of girls I've dated.' 'You?' Amobi could not believe his ears.

'What's strange about that?'

'At your age?'

'You sound funny, man. How old must you grow to date a girl?'

'Your ways are different from our ways!' 'I tell you,' Chuk digressed, 'that girl writes well.

Couldn't decipher her name. Give me the name and address, and I'll teach you how to date a girl!'

'If you put your hand in that direction, I'll show you that I am a leopard!' A mobi was surprised to
hear his voice. Did he liken himself to a leopard? How come? Had Nma sud denly assumed such new significance in his life that she could make his tongue run riot?

It had been painful, but he had resisted the urge to read the letter du ring the period for siesta,
afraid that 'Hammer' might set a trap to catch him. As soon as siesta wa s over, he had quickly
changed into his games outfit and raced off to the hockey pitch. Well before the final bell went for the commencement of games, he had run through the six paged letter, panting heavily.

What an epistle! The lead story was about a girl in form two who h ad been behaving
mysteriously. Whenever she left her pocket money in her bedside locker bef ore retiring for the night,
the entire amount always disappeared before dawn. No matter how thoroug h the search, no
part of it was ever recorded. Strangely enough, her money never went astra y except when left in
her own locker overnight. It soon came to light that the girl herself occasionally disappeared
from her dormitory in Yellow House at night, always reappearing before da wn. At first, the few
girls who discovered her nocturnal movements kept the secret to themselves , hoping they could trail her on one occasion and catch her red-handed.

No matter how careful their vigilance, no girl ever saw her as she left the dormitory, nor when she sneaked back. She simply disappeared, and later reappeared. Her destination also remained a 62

mystery. Discreet attempts to elicit the truth from her proved no help. She flatly denied ever leaving her bed on any occasion during the night, and challenged the girls who accosted her to establish her guilt if they dared.

The matter blew into the open two nights before Nma wrote her letter. An unprecedented storm shook the dormitories to their foundations. The girls were awakened from sleep by the noise of the raging wind, louder (as Nma put it) than the menacing warning of the mysterious Odo river at Ndikelionwu to villages on its route to evacuate their precious possessions before it unleashed its tumbling waters on them. The wooden windows, with their vents, could not keep out the sheets of rain battering the walls outside. The girls were shuffling their lockers and bed away from the rain splashes when one girl suddenly shouted: 'where's Erinma!' Erinma. Where was she? The name rang down the dormitory. No sign of her.

The girls could no longer keep the secret to themselves. The handshake had gone beyond the elbow, if she could remain wherever she went in spite of the frightening storm. Suppose they kept quiet and something happened to her? Would their conscience ever acquit them?

The House Prefect agreed that a search must be mounted for Erinma without waiting for the storm to subside. Armed with two torchlights, the girls made for the Matron's house to alert her.

The two night watchmen were instructed to accompany the girls. After an extensive combing of
the entire school compound, Erinma could not be found. The search went beyond the compound,
the girls' courage soaring with their apprehensions. At long last, by the bank of the sacred stream
which gave its name to the village in which the school was located, a girl spotted Erinma,
stripped to her pants, crouching on the sand. Her clothes lay in a heap beside her. The torrential
rain descending on her, the anxious questions from the relieved yet frightened girls ... nothing 63

could rouse her from her trance. The girls carried her back to the dormitory, in her state of unconsciousness.

Hours of interrogation the following day by the girls, the prefects, the Matron, the House
Mistress achieved nothing. Erinma felt puzzled by their questions. She lay on her bed all
through the night, she claimed, and so could not understand what they were talking about. The
matter had to go to the Principal. At first Erinma would not talk to the Principal either. She sat
before the Principal, a blank, distant look on her face, saying nothing, and looking unruffled. The
Principal consequently invited a medical doctor to examine her. The doctor proclaimed her in
excellent health, and the Principal summoned her to give her the good news and to warn her
sternly to be of good conduct thereafter or face expulsion. At the word 'expulsion,' Erinma suddenly burst into tears and slumped down on the floor.

In between sobs, she narrated her pathetic story to the Principal, in the prese nce of the Matron.

Her nocturnal movements were completely beyond her control. She did not know when she left
the dormitory. She did not determine her destination, and she did not know when she returned to
her bed. On each such occasion, she was possessed by Mammy Wate r, who directed her
movements and took total control of her body. Mammy Water also removed any pocket money
she left overnight in her locker. The flabber gasted Principal had immediatel y sent her driver to
Erinma's hometown near Owerri to bring her father. The grey-
haired man struggled hard to hold
back the tears. His first daughter, two years older than Erinma, had s uffered a similar fate.

Possessed by Mammy Water. At times Mammy Water would take her away up to three nights in
one week. Her nocturnal disappearances had mystified all of them until a di bia later claimed it was the work of Mammy Water, and outlined the
rituals for freeing her.

Erinma's father had debunked the prescription. As a professed Christian, he would not be party to
any heathen rituals. To his horror, the girl had died later that year, pr esumably taken away by
Mammy Water. Now Mammy Water had come again. This time for Erinma. What should he do in the circumstances, the old man asked the Principal.

Nma's descriptive power had been fantastic. Chuk was right there. There were moments Amobi felt himself participating in the search for Erinma! But Nma had always excelled in English, all through primary school. He was not surprised her writing flowed so effortlessly, like a river.

What permeated the deepest recesses of Amobi's heart, apart from the affectionate opening, was Nma's review of the events of the preceding Christmas at Ndikelionwu.

Before those events, Nma had been no more than a brilliant classmate and an established academic rival. They had gone through every class of the primary school together. Nma had usually beaten him to second place in English Language and Scripture, but conceded first place to him on the aggregate, often with a slim margin. The rest of the class generally trailed way behind them.

Nma had come into the world with a very pretty face, hence her pet name, Nma, which soon overshadowed her real name, Adanna. The face grew prettier as she grew older, prompting their Arithmetic teacher in Primary 4 to upgrade the pet name to Nma squared. Her beauty meant nothing to Amobi, who saw her strictly as an academic rival. It meant nothing to Nma either: she attached much greater significance to her physical prowess, which enabled her to challenge any boy in her age group to a wrestling contest!

The entrance examinations to secondary schools had brought an end to their years of academic rivalry. As their teachers expected, they won admission to the leading secondary schools in 65

Eastern Nigeria, one for boys and the other for girls. None of their classmates had such luck. The award of one of the five open Government scholarships to Amobi made Nma so proud of her arch-rival that she spontaneously embroidered a handkerchief for him as a parting gift. It was made of navy blue poplin material, edged with gold embroidery. At one corner she embroidered Ugo; at the opposite corner Nma. A proud Amobi had displayed the handkerchief at the carol service on Christmas eve, unwittingly igniting the fuse.

The boys in their age group could no longer restrain their envy. First they peddled the rumour that he and Nma had been caught sharing a mat one dark night on the church grounds. When nobody believed them they decided to lay an ambush for Nma in which four of them would attack her jointly. Only a joint attack could overpower the tomboy.

As soon as Nma got wind of their plans, she decided to take the fight to them. Brushing Amobi's objections aside, she belted her scarf round her waist and stormed out to meet them halfway between the church premises and her father's compound, determined to take on the four boys one after the other. She started off with Anthony, the toughest of the group, and when the other boys saw their leader eating sand on the ground involuntarily, they ran as fast as their legs could carry them. From that day, Nma had assumed a special significance to Amobi. And the blue handkerchief?

He swore to make it a keepsake for life.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Eleven

As usual, 'Computer' wasted no time on an exchange of pleasantries. He made straight for the
blackboard and, without even taking a look round the room to ensure that everybody was
present, began writing the subject for the day on the board. A new t opic: Agencies of
Denudation. The boys exchanged glances and nods as he pronounced the word 'denudation.'

Musical. Impressive. Bound to enhance your status if in your next let ter to one of those boys
attending the less privileged grammar schools you mentioned that you had already covered

'agencies of denudation' in Geography!

Amobi absorbed very little of the trailer load of facts which 'Comput er' disgorged from his
inexhaustible warehouse of knowledge. Nma's letter, which had initiall y brought him so much
excitement and elation, had suddenly begun to stir up discomfort in t he pit of his stomach. It
made no sense, that Erinma's story should upset him. He did not know Erin ma from Eve, and so
had no reason to suffer vicariously on her behalf. Sense or no sense, Amobi found himself losing
sleep over the story. Nma wrote as though the allegation that Mamm y Water took periodic
possession of Erinma was an established fact. How could it be? How could a spirit move by
command from a human being to an animal and vice-
versa, to direct the behaviour of the temporary recipient?

He had been mad with Karibo for confusing issues at the Religious Instructi on class the previous

term. If the issue of wizards and witches had been eating up his entrails, why could he not have chosen another occasion to raise it in class? 'Iambuc' was a first-class brain, and Amobi had seen the related biblical story of the man possessed by demons as an excellent take-off point for seeking a clue to the wider issue of men possessing leopards. 'lambuc' could have examined it 67

from the classical as well as the modern points of view. Karibo had spoilt everything with his stories about wizards and witches, and Amobi did not see how he could resuscitate the issue at a future Religious Instruction class.

His hand shot up involuntarily, in the middle of the lesson, when it suddenly dawned upon him that 'Computer' would have all the answers at his finger tips. 'Computer' took one disinterested look at him and continued with his illustration of the various ways in which the weather could over a period of time modify the major land forms.

'Yes, Amobi,' 'Computer' said, when he felt he had come to a convenient point to interrupt the lesson.

Amobi scrambled to his feet, his courage deserting him. 'It's something we've been arguing about in the dormitory, sir.'

'Yes.'

'A boy received a letter recently saying that a student in a secondary school near Owerri was possessed by Mammy Water. Is such a thing possible, sir?' 'Computer' was not sure he had tuned to the correct frequency. 'What has that to do with my Geography class?'

'We all agreed, after considering the matter, to seek your help as the most kn owledgeable master in this college, sir.'

The boys rated 'Computer' very highly, and Amobi thought he could cash in on that. Generation after generation of boys had established beyond doubt that all you re quired to score at least a credit in School Certificate Geography was to digest and faithfully re produce the material 68

contained in the notes he dished out to you in class. His full set of notes had come to be regarded as the most valuable asset a final year student could bequeath to his fag.

'Is that all?' 'Computer' shook his head incredu lously. 'Is that why y ou should interrupt my lesson? I've warned you boys. You seem to think you're too small, or too yo ung. Your mates in USA, they own and manage their own farms. I can bet that many of you her e don't know even the locations of your father's farms, not to talk of owning your own farms. You waste valuable time asking irrelevant questions .. .'

That was the only comma about 'Computer'. He took life too seriousl y for words. No time for jokes. Quite often no time to acknowledge 'good morning, sir' from t he class before plunging straight into his lesson for the day. Amobi was still standing when he switch ed back to agencies of denudation. This time the boys had great difficulty taking down the notes ; he had accelerated his rate of delivery to make up for the time lost listening to Amobi.

'Amobi, please take these books to the staff room, will you?'

Amobi was taken unawares. It was an honour to be asked by 'Computer' to carry his books, and he gladly jumped at it. It was the break period, so no fear of being late for the next class.

'Computer' made for the staff car park instead of the staff room. On the far s ide of the AD block.

He walked in a spritely manner, his chest and head shooting forward as wou ld a good sprinter's.

Amobi trotted behind him, attempting to keep pace from a respectabl e distance behind the master.

'Computer' took a furtive glance around the open space used as car p ark. No possible
eavesdroppers. He received the books from Amobi, dumped them into the r ear seat of his Morris, and turned sharply towards Amobi.

'I called you out to have a word with you,' he began. 'You strike me as an int elligent boy, serious
minded, and all that. Other masters think the same of you. Recently, howev er, stories have been
circulating about your rather unusual interests. One thing about our E nglish colleagues is that
they like spreading stories about us. Did you see the Medical Officer last ter m about something that happened to you in your village?'

'Yes, sir.'

'You see. Everybody knows what you told him about the pagan ritual your p eople were planning for you. And, some time later, you talked
about wizards and witches in Mr Sand's class?'

'No, sir. It was another boy who talked about wizards and witches. My question was in connection with a passage in the Bible about the man possessed by demons.'

'The story has gone round about your undue interest in superstitious beliefs. And then, today,
you've just interrupted my lesson to ask about Mammy Water possessing a g irl. If you had asked
that question elsewhere, the story would have gone the rounds and co nfirmed earlier stories
about your inability to pull yourself away from the primitive beliefs of your people. What is all this about, if I may ask? What is your concern about Mammy Water and so on?'

'Nothing, sir, except that when I think of some of our beliefs at hom e, I wonder how many of them can be proved scientifically. May I
tell you the Mammy Water story, sir?'

'If you wish. But make it brief.'

Amobi told the story, without any reference to Nma. 'I used to believe such stories, sir, before
coming to Government College. Because of what we are taught here, sir, I d o not think I should
believe them again. But the way that Mammy Water story was told suggests , sir, that it actually
happened. The whole thing confuses me, sir, and that's why I forgot myself and raised it in class just now, sir.'

'Computer' took another furtive glance round. 'I have a little piece of advice for you, young man,'

he began, almost in a whisper even though nobody was around. 'During my studies in England,
the British Council arranged for me to spend a weekend with an English fa mily, to introduce me
to the ways of the English. The children were excited when I arrived. They could hardly wait for
me to settle down before telling me of another black man very much like me who had spent a
weekend with them the previous year. They narrated their bewilderment wh en they entered the
bathroom one morning and saw the black man eating wood! I quickly took t he hint. I would lock
my bedroom door and use my chewing stick. Then I would brandish a tooth brush and tooth paste
in the bathroom to make my hosts believe that I used them regularly on my teeth, so that the children would not add me to their list of
queer black men who ate wood!'

Amobi could not suppress a giggle.

'The European missionaries and traders who came to this country lumped to gether everything in
our culture which was strange to them and branded it paganism. As a result, some of the things
you ask about have remained mysteries, which should not be so. Afte r all the theory that the
spirit can leave the human body temporarily, leaving the body empty, and either enter another 71

body or roam about for some time before re-
entering the original body is not peculiar to Africa

...'

'So it means that a man's spirit can inhabit or possess a leopard?' Amobi spontaneously cut in.

'I'm a geographer, young man, not a student of the occult! Moreover I shouldn't be seen discussing such a subject with you, and you must never breathe a word of this discussion to anybody. Clear?'

'Yes, sir.'

'My advice to you is to chew your stick thoroughly in the privacy of your bedroom and use your toothbrush in the public places. Stop raising those questions in class. You will not receive any useful answers, and yet you'll continue tarnishing your public image. Whenever you go home, find out the people who know what you are looking for. Listen to them. You may find that some of them may lead you on to the answers you seek. Who knows, some time after we have become an independent country, such matters may assume enough respectability for open discussion in class.'

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Twelve

'Congrats, K.K. Lux!' Amobi hailed Kalu, one of his classmates.

'How did you hear about it?' Kalu asked. 'I received the letter just this afternoon.'

'What are you talking about?' Amobi looked lost.

'What are you congratulating me on then?'

'Your farm harvest, of course.'

'Farm harvest, my boots!' Kalu used his left hand to brush aside the unwanted compliment. 'Who wants to be a farmer after passing through Government College?' 'Whether or not you want to be a farmer ...' 'I've proclaimed to you all what I'm going to be. Government chemist. Government chemist for the whole of Nigeria. When I leave here with my Grade One School Certificate in my pocket, and exemption from London Matric, I'll go straight to Cambridge or Oxford University and do my honours tripos in Chemistry. Then I rush back to Nigeria to take over from the white man as government chemist.'

'We know all that off by heart!'

'I'm happy to hear that.' Kalu wore a broad grin. 'That means that you all agree to leave the arena of chemistry free for me in class. Nobody must humbug me in any chemistry test we are given from now on. Agreed?'

'When did I become the whole class?' Amobi asked.

'You tortoise!'

OceanofPDF.com

'Approprinquo!' shouted Amobi. 'The Government chemist does not know how to pronounce such a common word?'

'What's wrong with my pronunciation?'

'Have you forgotten that the English Master said we should pronounce tortoise as if we were pronouncing the two words "taught us"?'

'Just as he asked us to pronounce "pomade" as if it was "p'mard". And when we went to the
township to ask for "p'mard", everybody thought we had gone mental. Even the traders who had
jars of it said they had never sold such a thing! I'm sure the same would happen if I went to the township to ask about the "taught us"!'

'You are the one going to Cambridge and Oxford!' teased Amobi.

'When I go there, of course, l'll learn to twist my mouth and speak like them. But until then, tortoise is tortoise not "taught us"!'

'How much did your yams weigh?' Amobi asked, shifting back on course. 'I hear they were almost as good as Akpan's.'

'I don't know, and I don't care to know. I've told you I'm Government Chemist-to-be, not a yam
farmer. If the Principal didn't make farming compulsory for our class, you wouldn't see my back
anywhere near the farm. God forbid! Anyway, as you know, what I did was take a plot near to
Akpan's. Leave him to farm his plot and mine, and to take the proceeds provided he allows me to mazoo the corn.'

'You and Chuk are the same, except that he doesn't even want the corn!'

'I've heard him say he doesn't enjoy eating corn,' Kalu observed. 'Can that be true?'

'Oh yes. Says the corn we plant in Nigeria is the type they feed to cattle in America. It's not sweet enough ...'

'This our corn not sweet enough? Including the amiacha variety?'

Amobi shook his head.

'Has he tried eating them with any catalyst?' Kalu asked.

'He will not touch any ube. Poor boy, was it not that cunning Chikwe who d eliberately used the

'courtma' ube to start him off? He has never forgot ten the terrific slaps he re ceived as soon as he
threw the ube into his mouth! And nothing you tell him will convince him t hat every ube is not
like that. Even when I offered him the ejigh ato variety, he would not touch it! As for coconuts, says they are too hard for his teeth.'

'White man!'

'His mother is white so he can claim whiteness. Better than some of you wh o did not talk to any white man before you came here, and yet you make so so fari.'

That's a lie!' Kalu protested. 'My uncle lives in European quarters at Enugu, and several white
people come to the house every day to see us. Don't think all of us come fro m bush villages like you!'

'All right o!' Amobi replied placatingly. 'I come from a bush village, but I'm happy I understand what our masters tell us in class.'

'Who doesn't?' Kalu's tone was no longer confident. He always felt deflated when anybody said
or did anything to bring out the fact that he had remained in the bottom half of his class during their first two terms, shining only in science.

'Come over to my dormitory. Kalu went on. 'Let me show you somet hing I thought you knew about when you congratulated me.'

At the dormitory, Kalu unlocked his bedside locker. Amobi promptly grabb ed the pair of Clark's sandals which dominated the top shelf and ran off threatening to wear them. Kalu followed in hot
pursuit. They had done the length of the dormitory twice before Amo bi gave up. Kalu
immediately regai ned possession of his precious sandals with lovely cream crepe soles which he meticulously washed after each use to maintain their lovely appearance.

'I am now a full member of the League of Ovaltine Drinkers,' Kalu proudly announced. 'Here's my membership certificate.' He produced a foolscap size parchment and displayed it proudly.

Amobi had never seen such an attractive certificate. It had a faint brown flo ral design round the
borders. The main text of the certificate was printed in those ancient characters which Amobi
often found difficult to read yet most fascinating in appearance. Kalu Ogbo nnaya was beautifully inscribed on it in flawless cursive.

'What do you do to qualify for it?' Amobi enquired, wishing the certificate were his.

'I'm planning to set up a branch here,' Kalu replied proudly. 'Would you like to enrol?'

'Answer my question, my friend. What do you do to qualify for this certificate?'

'Well, you have to drink twelve tins of ovaltine.'

'You don't look like someone who has drunk half a tin!' Amobi ran his eyes down Kalu's lean, fragile frame. Kalu was the leanest boy in their class. While most of the boys had been gaining weight by the end of each term, he appeared to have been losing, in spite of the mouth-watering stock of biscuits, beverages, and other goodies he usually brought back at the beginning of each term. It was on account of these goodies and his distinguished pair of sandals that he had assumed the nickname of K.K. Luxury, abbreviated to K.K. Lux. His class mates were convinced that a hookworm, was strategically located inside his bowels, to snatch up all the goodies he devoured before they stood any chance of making him plump.

'It doesn't matter whether you actually drink all the ovaltine or not,' Kalu added. 'The League cannot verify it, anyway. The important thing is to show that you have opened twelve tins of ovaltine by sending them the protective tin foil cover from the top of each tin. Twelve of them will qualify you for this certificate. I've forgotten how many more qualify you for a beautiful medal.'

'Seems to be a society for the rich,' Amobi grumbled. 'Where will I find the money to buy twelve tins of ovaltine?'

'What of your scholarship? And your farm harvest?

Didn't I hear that you had a good harvest?'

'Everything was weighed this morning, all the yams from the farm, and taken into the school
store. But I understand the school will deduct the cost of the seed yams supplied to each boy
before paying the balance to him. It's only boys like Akpan who had the energy to farm more than two plots who hope to make big money.'

'Bo, I feel sorry for Akpan, O! The way he has to work like a slave all the time to get some pocket money.'

'Some of us are not much better, O!' Amobi stressed. 'That's why I took over Otuk's plot after the Principal exempted him from farming to take charge of the generator.'

'You know you can't compare yourself with Akpan. Apart from your scholarship, you go home on holidays. He has to stay back to work in order
to find money. Even during term time he has to do many boy-
boy jobs to earn money. And yet he has an uncle who is a successful trader. The man must be 'Hammer's' senior brother!'

'Your Ovaltine League will wait until I can earn the money to buy twelve tins! For now, I'm on
my way to the kitchen. I left four giant corncobs from my farm there. Maybe if you will buy me one tin of ovaltine, I'll let you have some after roasting them!'

* * * *

No matter how hard he searched, Amobi could not locate the corncobs. Not even one single cob.

Every person he asked remembered seeing him keep the cobs, but nobody a dmitted seeing who
took them. An elderly cook who took pity on him swore him to secrecy befo re disclosing to him the name of the student who had eaten all four cobs of maize.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Thirteen

Everything was dead quite inside the assembly hall, which had swallowed the entire student body of two hundred and seventy-five students without belching. The College Prefect on duty had signalled silence. Dead quiet, too, outside the hall and the AD block, for even the crickets and toads in the surrounding gardens and terrace knew that orders were meant to be obeyed at once at Government College. The boys were all there, seated according to their years. The first row of pews on each half of the hall was occupied by the fags, followed by the second year students, and so on up the academic ladder, with the College Prefects taking the rear, immediately behind the fifth formers. Three rows of chairs were, as usual, reserved behind the College Prefects on either side, for the masters.

Amobi ran his eyes through the framed photographs and the large inscribed wooden boards which took up much of the space on the high walls. Photographs of past principals, all British, each showing off his learnedness with his academic regalia. The first principal was said to be a mini-sized sprightly man. It was not easy, though, to see this from his photograph. His bust showed him off as tall and majestic as any other principal. His hood was the most attractive of the lot: rich looking, fluffy, white.

The boards carried the names of the College Prefects, year by year, from the earliest days of the college. An asterisk identified the School Captains among them. On this occasion, Amobi could not decipher any of the names on the boards, nor did he indulge in his usual pastime of conjecturing how his name would read on the board, as a college prefect. He knew that

something terrible was about to descend upon him, but could not tell what it was, nor how 79

terrible. Tunji had been the first to alert him of the impending danger, after s upper the previous night.

'What is this I hear about you stealing at night and worse still, attempting to strangle the night watchman who caught you?' Tunji had asked him.

'Me?' stammered Amobi.

'You and your friend, Chuk, I hear. Thought I had warned you to be on your guard with that boy?'

'Excuse me, please! ...' Amobi began, and then stalled. The reference to the attempt to strangle a
night watchman, and the association with Chuk provided clues. 'Sorry, pleas e. Chuk and I made for the uppers, please. Could that be what you are referring to, please?'

'Everybody in this school makes for the uppers,' Tunji had reassured him. 'O ne day or the other.

Not usually in their first year, but sooner or later. But you don't have to stra ngle a watchman in the process!'

'We did not strangle anybody, please. It was ...' Amobi went on to give the d etails. On their way
back to the dormitory, they had seen a night watchman moving towards the orchard, probably in
response to the alarm sounded by the watchman who had apprehended them . Amobi and Chuk
immediately took cover. The night watchman came close enough to have sn iffed them out if he

had had a more sensitive nose. He did not, and the two boys could have sneaked back to the dormitory without any incident. But Chuk wanted additional fun. Only heaven knew what put the idea into his head: the fresh, enervating air, the alluring vastness of the near by playing fields, the sheer love of adventure.

'All I heard him whisper was "come along for more fun", as he tiptoed towards the watchman.'

Amobi had followed involuntarily. In a trice, Chuk had jumped on the watchman from behind.

The elderly man lost his balance and crashed to the ground.

'We've caught the thief!' shouted Chuk, snatching the man's unlit torch, whistle, and stick from him. 'Give me my matchete!'

The word machete injected the vitality and speed of an athlete into the watchman. He broke free and fled for dear life, pleading that he was a poor night watchman with a wife and eight young children, and not a thief. He had never stolen in his life, he shouted. Chuk and Amobi had chased him around the football field, enjoying the fun and confident that nobody was around to spoil it for them. Suddenly the fleeing watchman tripped and fell, and was unable to get up. Chuk went on his knees beside him and felt his pulse. The man was breathing, thank goodness. At that point the two boys agreed the fun was over. They abandoned his torchlight, stick and whistle beside him and took the shortest route to their dormitory, hoping he would not rega

in enough breath to use the whistle before they found their way to their beds.

'You should have known that that was an expensive and silly joke,' Tunji had said at the end of the story. 'That could lead to expulsion if you were caught.' Amobi's heart had missed a beat at the word

'expulsion'.

The second indication of impending trouble had come from SMG who had looked uncharacteristically gloomy when he summoned Amobi and Chuk to his office that afternoon.

'The Principal has received a very serious report about both of you which he has asked me to investigate and report back to him.' Amobi's heart skipped three beats. First Tunji.

Now SMG.

'... You are alleged to have broken the rules against pilfering fruits from the school orchard.

When apprehended by the watchman on duty you beat him up until he became unconscious and then abandoned him. These are about the most grievous charges that can be brought against any boy in this college, as you ought to know, and I'm terribly upset that the two of you come from my house. I hope the allegation is false. You boys don't look like cri

minals. Anyway, the Principal wants to know your own side of the story ...'

Chuk had quickly regained his composure and taken control of the situation, afraid to leave his fate in Amobi's hands. Their spirit of adventure had been fired by the various adventure stories they had read in the college library. When, therefore, they listened to the senior boys recount the various escapades of past students 'making for the uppers', they saw the orchard as an excellent avenue for satiating their adventurous spirits.

They had had no intention of touching any of the forbidden fruits, he insisted! All they had wanted was to breathe the exhilarating air of the orchard at night undetected, and return to their beds satisfied that their mission had been accomplished. They were certain that, even if they were caught in the act, the honesty of their intentions would save them from any serious punishment. Was it not widely believed, after all, that the orchard was deliberately built by the first principal of the college to fire the spirit of adventure among the boys?

Everything had gone as planned, Chuk had further narrated. They had set foot in the orchard, inhaled the unique 'fruity' air without seeing or attempting to touch any fruit, and promptly set 82

off to return to their beds gratified. Then on their way, they ran into a man they believed was a thief. Should they catch him and thereby expose themselves for being out at night without permission? Or should they avoid him and quietly return to their dor

mitories undetected? The choice was obvious. As true Government College boys, they were obliged to catch the thief, even at the risk of exposing themselves to severe punishment. So, they gave him the chase of their lives, and apprehended him. It was only at that point that they discovered he was a night watchman. They had immediately apologized to him and both parties had agreed to bury the matter there and then.

Amobi had found himself so carried away by Chuk's ingenuity that he had begun to nod involuntarily like a lizard, to signal concurrence. He could not have improvised such a plausible and coherent story on the spur of the moment, particularly in front of his House Master, and with the heavy cloud hanging precariously over his head. He wished he had been born and bred in America like Chuk, to be able to tell such lies with a straight face and a sweet tongue!

Chuk wanted SMG to know that what they had done would have passed away unnoticed had he acquiesced to Prefect 'Hammer's' homosexual demands.

'What?' SMG had shouted.

Although Amobi had also heard that 'Hammer' had bragged that he would get some boys who had offended him expelled, he did not consider it discreet to drag 'Hammer' into this. What convincing evidence could they produce against a College Prefect? Would they not merely be jumping from the frying pan into the fire? He stepped on Chuk's toe and also cautioned with a frantic shake of the head. Chuk ignored both signals and pressed on with his accusations.

'Yes, sir!' Chuk replied. 'He wanted to have an affair with me, sir. In his cubicle. He promised me heaven and earth. No more punishments for me, from any quarter. And so on. And when I wouldn't let him use me for such a depraved act, he swore he would get me expelled from this college.'

'Hope you know the seriousness of your allegation?' SMG cautioned Chuk.

'I do, sir.'

'Would you like this to reach the Principal?'

'Sure, sir.' Chuk gave Amobi a stern warning with his eyes. The pinching of his toe had been vicious this time, and it hurt badly. 'I am prepared to repeat what I've just said before the Principal and to the prefect's face. He – I mean the prefect – has never forgiven me since that day I fled from his room. Amobi may not like my saying it, but this same prefect has also never forgiven Amobi since he ate Amobi's corncobs recently without having the decency to own up.'

Amobi found himself reluctantly giving details of the corn story to his House Master. How he wished Chuk had kept his mouth shut. He had forgotten all about the corn – except each time he came across 'Hammer'. On each such occasion he had secretly wished that otolo would deal appropriately with the big-eyed thief!'

* * * *

The staff processed into the assembly hall, in ascending order of seniority. Masters Grade III.

Then Grade II. Followed by Grade I. Education Officers, Senior Education Officers, and the Vice Principal. Finally, the PGC, a

respectable distance separating him from all the others.

'There are sad, but perhaps inevitable, moments in the life of any Principal. This, for me, is one of such moments..'

The principal's moon shaped head had ceased to reflect light. His pot-belly stood out in front of his black academic gown, like a seven-month pregnancy, bobbing up and down as he spoke.

Drops of perspiration materialized on his forehead.

'... I have said it time without number that a school without disciplin e is not a school. My
colleagues on the staff and I are determined to make Government Co llege the best secondary
school in this country, a school that will stand its grounds against an y top public school
anywhere in the civilized world. We are determined to turn you boys and the generations that
follow you into responsible leaders of this country. But we can only do it if we can instill
discipline into you. We can only do it if we can ensure that rules are obe yed, and that all who
refuse to obey such rules of civilized conduct are punished. Sometime s severely, to make the punishment fit the crime ...'

Amobi's heart jumped out of his mouth at the mention of his name. The dre aded moment had at
last arrived. Expulsion? Oh God! The shame of it. Worse than the de ath of a cockroach. All

because he wanted to eat oranges and bananas. Oranges and bananas which were yours for the asking at Ndikelionwu, where nobody ever planted them for money.

The Principal recounted how, notwithstanding the stringent rules made known to every student of the college, Amobi and Chuk had sneaked out of their dormitory long after lights out to steal the fruits. Fruits which would be harvested when ripe and served to all the students at table. Free of charge. They wanted to have the fruits all to themselves. Naked greed, which must be curbed right away. When a vigilant night watchman legitimately apprehended them, Chuk fell back on 85

the cowboy gangsterism he had acquired in America. The offence became more serious when it was considered that the two boys were in their first term.

'... The punishment for an offence of this magnitude is outright expulsion ...'

Hot drops of urine fell into Amobi's pant.

'However, after considering representations about their academic potential, their general conduct, and the extenuating fact that both boys had already suffered unfair punishment from an irresponsible College Prefect, I have agreed to take a more lenient view of their offence ...'

Amobi and Chuk were suspended from the school for a two-week period, and ordered to leave the college premises the following day. An entry had been made in their records that any similar

reports against them within a year would result in outright expulsion. 'Hammer' became a

'yeoman' once again, stripped of his prefectship for the remainder of his career at the college, for
indecency. The punishment could have been much more severe, the Principal announced, but for
the fact that he had in other respects been a very effective college prefect. Hammer earned
something else. This time from the boys. The new nickname of 'Volcano', which the boys could now use freely, even in his presence, knowing that he had been rendered impotent!

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Fourteen

Amobi stirred in his sleep. Had he been dreaming, or had he heard his name ? Opening his eyes was not much help: he saw as much of his whereabouts as he did with his eyes shut.

'Ugochukwu!'

'Sir,' Amobi grunted as he discerned his father's voice.

He scrambled to his feet, surprised to discover that he had been sleeping on the bare floor. He
and Chuk had agreed to share the one metre wide wooden bed his father ha d purchased for him
during his first term holidays. A wooden bed, with wooden floor boards and a straw mattress on
top of it, acquired with pride by his father at Onitsha market, to demonstrate his joy at his son's
academic achievement. The graduation from a bamboo to a wooden b ed was symbolic of
Amobi's onward march to the good things of life attendant upon Wes tern education. The next would be an iron bed complete with spring.
And then ...

The two boys had squeezed into the bed, lying back to back, with Chuk nex t to the wall. In their sleep Chuk had unconsciously taken over
the whole bed.

'Sit down,' Mazi Eze motioned his son to the long bench in his obi. 'Nma m ust have told you that she was coming home two days ago?' Mazi
Eze probed after Amobi had sat down.

'Is she at home?' asked Amobi excitedly before remembering that he must m ask his true feelings for Nma whenever in his father's presence.

'Let the wind blow that aside,' Mazi Eze replied evasively. His son's spontaneous reaction had

cleared his suspicion. There could have been no conspiracy between Amobi and Nma to run away from school at the same time so as to have some time together at home.

'Tell me again. What do you say brings you home at this time, witho ut letting us know beforehand, and with that white boy?'

'We're here so that he can live an Igbo life and learn our ways.'

'Is that why you should abandon your studies for two whole church weeks?'

'Papa, we did not abandon our studies. The school asked me to take him ho me to teach him how ndi Igbo live.'

'Ha!' Mazi Eze was quick to spot a loophole. 'But didn't you tell me and your mother on your arrival that you were on a special mid-term holiday?'

Amobi thought rapidly. Tell the whole truth? It would serve no useful purpo se. On the contrary,
it would merely upset everyone unnecessarily and earn his parents public ri dicule. They had not
been expelled. In two weeks' time they would be back at school and everything would be forgotten.

'All right, Papa.' Amobi began, hoping that the story he had made up would be plausible. 'I said
we were on a special holiday because I did not want to embarrass C huk, our guest. You see,
because he has a white American mother and has lived all his life in A merica, he finds it very
difficult to do things our own way. He keeps breaking rules in the school no

t because he is a bad boy but because he does dot know our ways of life. There was one particular thing he did ...'

'What was it?'

'Nothing to worry about, Papa. It's something we call 'making for the uppers' which I'll find
impossible to translate into Igbo. The school wrote to his father in America and it was agreed the best thing would be to send him to an Igbo village for a short period ...'

'And the school chose you?' Mazi Eze asked.

'Everybody knows that I am the only friend he has in the whole school in fact I was with him when he did one of the things the school didn't like ...'

'Let's not drag the matter so that you can go back to sleep. What you are telling me is that all is
well and that you are returning to the school to carry on with your studies at the end of the two weeks?'

'We are going back to school at the end of two weeks to continue with our studies, Amobi replied, choosing his words carefully and hoping he had convinced his father.

'Tell your mullato friend that we shall do our best to help him, but that he must take us as we are.

Go back to sleep, my child.'

* * * *

Nma squared at home! What a coincidence, Amobi thought as he returned t o his room. He could not blame his father if he thought there had been a conspiracy: such coincid ences were extremely rare, except in fiction. What could have brought her home at this tim e? Had she also been suspended for two weeks? No. Not even the most imaginative novelist woul d attempt to stretch coincidences that far.

How Amobi wished the pre-dawn chat had been with his mother rather than his father. He would have sought more details about Nma. It was easier to raise such matters wit h her than with his father.

Nma squared. Amobi wished he could fly on the wings of a bird to her fathe r's compound, and then on the wings of a mosquito to her ears, to let her know that he was in t own. He prayed she 89

would not leave that night. First thing in the morning he must establish cont act with her. A short note, sent through Adaobi, would do it.

'Chuk's eyes will glow with jealousy when he sees Nma tomorrow! When the news gets to Government College in two weeks' time, I'll be the envy of the whole school!'

Amobi remembered he had been standing since his father had left. No sign of daylight yet, so he must return to sleep. Lie on the cold floor again? And catch pneumonia befo re morning? And, in addition, expose himself to the wicked black agbisi ants? He perched on the wooden bed.

Surprisingly, Chuk shifted without being prompted. Was Chuk awake? If so, what could be going on in his mind?

The idea of Amobi taking Chuk home for the two- week suspension period had originated from
Tunji, and had been rejected outright by Amobi. How could Amobi contem plate taking a white
boy to Ndikelionwu? There would have been no problem with any other cla ssmate. Ndikelionwu
was years ahead of many other towns, in terms of development, including t he towns surrounding
Government College. With Chuk it was a different matter. Take him home to eat cassava fufu
morning and night? To sleep in a house lacking electricity and pipe- borne water? To speak English to his parents and relations? And
to crown it all by making a laughing stock of him when
they returned to the college at the end of the two weeks, with the 'primitive' ways of his people?

Oh, no. No one in his right mind would voluntarily bare his back si de in public. Tunji had,
however, been marvellous. He had summoned the two boys to his cubicle s hortly after lights out
and reassured them that they had not come to the end of the road. Suspensio n was a very serious
punishment, make no mistake about that. But a boy who had on one occasio n been suspended for
a whole term later rose to become the School Captain. Evidence of t he Principal's ability to 90

forgive and forget, once you turned a new leaf. The decision to suspend the m, Tunji had learnt,
had been a difficult one. Amobi had made a favourable impression as a brill iant, obedient, quiet

and cheerful boy, albeit slow in shedding some of his native ways. Chuk had been more controversial because of his peculiar circumstances, but he was considered generally likeable.

To make it easier for Amobi to accept the suggestion to take Chuk home, Tunji gave him money (for bread and other necessities) as well as a packet of sugar, a tin of ovaltine, and three tins of milk from his own stock of provisions. As if Tunji and SMG had acted in concert, SMG had also urged Amobi to take Chuk home. He had come over to School House first thing in the morning, hoping to catch the boys before they left the premises. He reckoned that their stay together in Amobi's village would be a great educational experience for both of them, and left some money with Amobi to assist him in playing host.

SMG wanted Amobi to know how much he, Mr Meniru, and most other senior staff members had tried to avert the punishment. Everyone thought of him as an admirable boy with a very bright potential. He also wanted Chuk to know that the school authorities believed he had something positive to contribute to the evolution of the college atmosphere and values, steeped as he was in Western civilization from birth. Specific actions taken against him from time to time, for instance sewing up the side pockets of all his shorts and trousers for putting his hands in his pockets while standing in front of a master were aimed at pulling him down from the clouds and assisting him to develop firm roots in his culture. The Principal believed that any success achieved with Chuk would encourage other Nigerians living abroad to send their sons to Government College.

SMG hoped that the punishment extended to the college prefect who reported them to the Principal two terms after the event would convince the boys not only of the sympathy they enjoyed but also of the impartiality of the school authorities.

Chuk had, to Amobi's amazement, immediately lapped up the idea of accompanying him home.

He saw it as a chance in a lifetime to penetrate the Igbo heartland, to gain first-hand knowledge of the life habits of his daddy's folk. His two terms at the school had already debunked most of the horrible tales of Africa which they had swallowed back home. Moreover, as Amobi later extracted from him, going with Amobi would save Chuk the embarrassment of announcing to his guardians in Port Harcourt that he had been suspended. The shattering news was bound to throw Mrs Blue-Jack into an epileptic fit, as she and her husband would see it as a failure in the discharge of their role as his guardians. Nobody would be able restrain her thereafter from clamping further restrictions on his already severely limited movements and activities.

The first night at home had not been as disastrous as Amobi had feared. Probably because they had arrived at dusk, when Chuk could not see much. Amobi had deliberately killed time at Onitsha, where they had stopped to buy provisions, believing that it would be less traumatic for Chuk to arrive at Ndikelionwu at night. Chuk had been intrigued by the special burner used by Amobi's mother in the kitchen made from the palm nut husk. No matter how hard everyone tried, he just found it impossible to pronounce mgbivuadu. the local name of the l

amp. Before Amobi could shut his eyes, his thoughts had bridged the distance separating him from Nma.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Fifteen

Amobi had been so thrilled when his emissary brought back the glad tidings that Nma was still in town that his immediate reaction had been to steal out to her house straight away. He knew, however, that no excuse he marshalled could persuade his mother to let him leave the house without taking his friend Chuk along. Who would speak English to Chuk in his absence, and minister to his other peculiar needs?

'Mothers are wonderful!' Amobi had reflected as he went on an early morning inspection tour of the compound before waking up Chuk. The floor of the pit latrine had been scrubbed clean; so also the wooden seat his father had placed over the pit. Despite Papa Ugo's warnings, some of the children had found it more convenient to squat rather than sit on top of the box, often messing it up. To avoid any embarrassment while Chuk was around, the children had been barred from using the pit latrine during his two- week stay. There were many uncultivated farm lands around, awaiting their turn under the system of shifting cultivation and consequently hungry for manure.

The bathroom enclosure had also been swept clean, and Mama Amobi had further sanitized it with izal. 'No pipeborne water, so no showers and no w.c.,' thought Amobi; 'but what we have is at least clean!'

* * * *

'Ewo! Ugochukwu!' Nma's mother exclaimed. 'My heart jumped out when I saw you.' She clutched her chest with both palms as though she was holding tight to the athletic heart. 'I didn't expect to see you at this time. You are not on holiday?'

'Pattern.' Amobi saluted her. 'We are not yet on holiday, ma.'

'Hope everything is well?' she asked anxiously. 'Mama Amobi enquired abo ut Nma yesterday at the market, but she did not tell me you were at home.'

'I returned only last night, after dark, and there was no time to tell Papa and Mama that I was coming. This boy who is here with me is my classmate. He was born and br ed in America where his parents live and his mother is white. But his father, who is Igbo, sent him to our school so that he can grow up with us ...'

'Ewo, nwannem!' Nma's mother exclaimed, look ing sympathetically at Chuk.

'Our school asked me to take him home for two weeks, to show him what lif e is like in an Igbo village. That's why we are here.'

'So of all the boys in the school, they chose you for this important task?'

'Yes, ma.' Amobi hoped the truth would never be known at Ndikelionwu.

'My son. To tell a child to hold fast to what he has is a mark of ap proval, that he is going the right way. Hold on to what you have. Who knows, before long the people w ho asked you to take your friend home may ask him to take you to America! Did you know that Nma is at home?' 'Is that so?' Amobi feigned ignorance.

'The wicked ones wanted to snatch her from us, all because God gav e her a male brain. But fortunately her chi has bluntly refused to give her away. Let me call her to tell you the story.

Please sit down.'

The door opened gently, and Amobi's heart leapt out as Nma emerged. The two boys scrambled to their feet. Nma appeared to have seen only Amobi, for she ran straight to him and threw herself at him as she had never done before. Amobi clasped both arms round her self-consciously. Feeling on top of the world, he turned towards Chuk to introduce him.

'Nma, this is my classmate and friend, Nwachukwu, alias Chuk.' Then to Chuk: 'Chuk, meet my baby, Adanna, who is popularly known as Nma squared because of her outstanding beauty!' Nma pinched his hand in protest, turning her face away shyly.

Chuk demanded more than the slim fingers Nma extended to him for a hand shake, but his efforts to kiss her cheeks met with much stiffer resistance than he had anticipated.

Nma disappeared, and soon reappeared with two bowls of fruit salad which she placed on a low table before Amobi. Then she whispered shyly to him in Igbo: 'They are for both of you. That's the only thing I can offer to your white friend at short notice.'

'Opposed!' shouted Chuk.

'What are you opposing?' Amobi asked as if he did not know the answer.

'No whispering in any barbaric language!'

'Is that how you describe your language?' Amobi asked teasingly.

'It's not my language!'

'But it's your father's language,' insisted Amobi.

'Daddy's language or not, this is one occasion when I shan't let you use any l anguage as a barrier against me.

Anywhere else I may not mind, but now, never!' 'Why
the distinction?' Amobi asked.

'Because I too am charmed by Nma!' Chuk pronounced Nma as if it was spelt Nima.

'When I told you about her at College, you thought I was bragging for nothi ng. Now you have
seen with your own eyes, eh? And, don't forget that what you are seeing no w is a sick Nma, not the normal Nma squared.' 'Stop it!' Nma protested bashfully.

'You fellows must find me my own Nma pretty quick...'

'Not when you call our language barbaric,' Nma cut in, in
a soft, musical voice.

'I was referring to Amobi's language, not yours,' Chuk replied.

'But we speak the same language.'

'Okay, I withdraw that word, provided you find me my own baby, as sweet a nd pretty and well behaved as you. Otherwise ...'

'No threats, man!' Amobi intervened, riding the clouds as he took a mouthfu l of the fruit salad.

Delicious fruit salad – a combination of oranges, reddish pawpaw, yellow pineapples, and Eastern bananas. Every fruit ripe and sweet. The thought that Nma could improvise such a delicious 'kola' between the receipt of his message to her and their arrival at her house heightened Amobi's admiration.

Nma had blossomed a great deal since the second term holidays. Her hair, which she began plaiting earlier in the year, had grown much longer, richer, and blacker.

Her body curves had become more accentuated and eyecatching. Even her legs seemed to have straightened up somewhat, indicating that their not so attractive k-shape would completely disappear in another year or so.

Chuk enjoyed the fruit salad so much that he threatened to lick the plate with his tongue unless Nma invited him for a repeat performance. She readily accepted to do something about it before returning to school the following day.

'Must you go back tomorrow?' Chuk objected. 'We're condemned to be here for two full weeks, so you can't chicken out on us so soon.'

'My exeat expires tomorrow.'

'Have it extended!' ordered Chuk. 'Easy.' Nma whispered something to Amobi in Igbo.

'She says ...

'I don't want to hear what she says through you,' Chuk. cut Amobi short. 'I'm sure she can say it herself.'

'We have an important test next Monday, so I must go back,' Nma said.

'Why were you home, anyway?'

'I was indisposed.'

'Don't you have a clinic in your school?' Chuk went on.

'No.'

* * * *

Amobi retired to the pit latrine as soon as he and Chuk returned to the house. That was the only place where he could enjoy some privacy from Chuk, to devour the letter Nma had smuggled into his pocket when Chuk could not observe her. It was a bulky envelope. Nma had had the leisure to write the letter, aimed at giving Amobi a detailed account of what she had experienced in the preceding fortnight. She had hoped to post it on her way back to school. As Amobi devoured the letter, he was glad Nma had not divulged the details of her sickness in Chuk's presence. It would simply have added to his examples of the primitive ways of the African!

Nma had for some time experienced occasional headaches, none of which had been serious enough to cause her concern. For no identifiable reason, soon after the stir caused by Erinma and her Mammy Water connections, the headaches had become more mysteriou

s and vicious. They knew whenever she had a test. Each time she tried to concentrate on any of the questions in front of her, an unseen hammer would split her head into pieces, and no headache tablets on the market could rescue her. As soon as the bell went for the end of the test, the headache would vanish as if by the touch of a magic wand.

One of the teachers who was particularly fond of her had warned her that she was wasting time trying modern Western medicine. Hers was not an ordinary headache, the type for which aspirin and other such tablets were invented. She gave her the address of one Hausa man at Ibagwa, near Nsukka, who could arrest the situation. She also assisted Nma to obtain an exeat permitting her to be away for up to three weeks.

Nma's parents had been perturbed when she showed up at home unexpectedly and narrated her story. Her mother had peen especially disturbed when Nma reported how every item of clothing 98

she had on had been thoroughly soaked in sweat within a minute of the onset of her last attack. It was as if she had been immersed in a pool of water and brought out. Suddenly the sweat had become colder than stream water on a cold harmattan morning, and she had begun to shiver vigorously.

Nma and her mother had set off by the first lorry the following morning, on their journey to Ibagwa. The man they went to see was, happily, in on their arrival. He asked them to drop seven one shilling coins into a basin of clean water. He peered into the wat

er, brought out the coins,
and asked Nma to drop them in again after wiping them dry. He peered into the water a second
time. Then he looked at Nma's mother, shook his head, and recommended another man they could consult if they wished. This time at Orji, near Owerri.

Nma and her mother spent that night at Enugu. Early the following morning, they set off for Orji
on the Okigwe/Owerri road. There wonders happened. As soon as they appeared before the
dibia, he asked Nma how she was finding life in her school. Before she could answer, he asked
her whether all her classmates were happy about her brilliant performance in class. Was there
any particular girl who resented her? How did he know all that about Nma's background? How
did he know about her brilliant school record? The one thing which did not fit in was the
reference to a classmate resenting Nma. None of Nma's classmates resented her. They were all so friendly.

The dibia had then gone on to ask her whether she had any classmate in primary school who had been epileptic. Nma could not think of
any, until her mother stepped in. Yes, Nma was only a kid then, in the junior primary. The girl had been very intelligent.

'What became of her?' the dibia had enquired.

She had died a year or so after becoming epileptic.

It had been a very cold harmattan morning. The maid who looked after her laid her on a mat beside the fire to nip into the barn for yams to cook. The child developed an epileptic fit and rolled into the fire before her maid could emerge from the barn. Nothing could be done to save her life.

Huge drops of sweat rolled down Nma's mother's face by the time the dibia asked her if she knew the cause of the child's epileptic fits. She, her husband, and their family had firmly resisted any attempts to blame the child's epileptic fits on Nma, simply because she and Nma had had a brawl one afternoon at the burial ground beside the church and Nma had accidentally flung her beside the grave of a woman believed to have been a witch in her lifetime. The epileptic fits had developed several months later, but a diviner had traced its origin to that graveyard incident.

The dibia had no doubt in his mind that the dead child was responsible for Nma's mysterious headache, her ultimate aim being to transfer her epilepsy to Nma. Nma's intense shivering was the first sign of worse things to follow. Nma and her mother had gone back to Orji seven days later with most of the dibia's prescriptions for a special ritual: two white cocks, two white hens, one female dog, the prescribed length of twine, two small earthenware pots, two yards of white cloth, four measures of salt, four dried fish of a specific variety, and ten kola nuts. They provided the cash equivalent of one toad, one mouse (the type that stinks), and four lizards which they feared would die on the way. In addition, they paid a fee of five pounds. They remained in the man's vast compound for two nights, during which period Nma underwent a course of treatment.

Thereafter the dibia pronounced her free from all danger.

100

Nma concluded the letter by saying what an experience it had been for her. Everything had been so mysterious, but from all indications her problems seemed to be over.

She was anxious to return to her school to test the efficacy of the medicine with the tests scheduled for the ensuing Monday. The dibia had, however, assured them that he would refund everything they had paid him if his medicine failed to work.

Amobi lingered on in the latrine, grappling with the intractable problem of reconciling the claims in Nma's letter with the uncompromising attitude at Government College to African traditional medicine. He had known Nma over the years as a very intelligent girl, baptized as an infant and brought up as a Christian. She was in her third term in the best secondary school for girls in Eastern Nigeria. Unless her illness had upset her mental equilibrium, her views about the dibia she had consulted should not be brushed aside just like that. Maybe he should hold on for a while. Until she had taken the impending examination. After that, he might have more tangible evidence.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Sixteen

'Oh, my goodness!' Chuk gasped, rushing up to Mr Okonkwo as the latter stepped into Mazi Eze's compound. 'So glad to see somebody I can talk to.'

'What's the matter? Adaobi has just brought a message which sounded so urgent that I had to take permission from the Headmaster to rush down at once. Where's your friend?'

'I'm glad someone sent for you. I'm so frightened! ...'

'The teacher is here,' Mama Ugo announced when she saw Mr Okonkwo. She has heard the voices from the kitchen and had come out hoping it was Mr Okonkwo. 'Good morning, sir,' she saluted him. 'Welcome. Let me inform my master that you are here.'

When Mama Ugo re-emerged, it was to invite Mr Okonkwo to the backyard, where Mazi Eze was waiting for him, making a futile effort to wear a cheerful countenance.

'Morny, teacher,' Mazi Eze greeted, offering his right hand. 'I sent for you because of the little boil I have in a delicate location, and I'm very happy you hurried to answer my call at once. I shall never forget it.

'Your friend, Ugochukwu, has suddenly fallen ill. We want to take him to hospital, but before doing so we must do something about his friend, the white boy whom I hear you already know.

Ugochukwu is the only person in this house who can understand what the young man says. With him in hospital, what can we do with his white friend? Where can we find a

n interpreter to stand between us and him? That's why I sent for you. Please, teacher, what do you advise me to do?'

Mr Okonkwo shut his eyes tight and stroked his forehead with his left hand. He knew what
Amobi's parents wanted of him, but how did they expect him to cope with such an assignment?

'Where's Ugochukwu?' he asked.

'He's resting in my room,' Mazi Eze replied. 'I moved him out of 'his own room so as not to
disturb his friend. As soon as we've worked out what to do with his friend, we'll take him to hospital.'

'Which hospital?' Mr Okonkwo parried for time.

'Do I have any choice in these matters?' Mazi Eze replied evasively. 'The most important thing
for me now is to find where this white boy can live until they go back to their college. I sent for
you because he has spent some time up there with you people in the past few days. So at least you know how to converse with him.'

'Are you asking us to take him to the Central School?'

'If you can keep him there until things clear up here, you will remove a heavy stone from my neck.'

'Let me go and talk to the Headmaster first, because it looks like a load that will require more than one head to carry. I'll let you know before school is over what we decide.'

Chuk insisted on accompanying Mr Okonkwo right away, even if only for a n hour. He needed a breath of fresh air, after what he had gone through.

It had been about half past four in the small hours of the morning when a pi ercing cry woke him
up from sleep. To his surprise it came from Amobi, although the lan guage was totally 103

incomprehensible. As he turned to find out what the matter
was, he heard Amobi drop to the bare floor.

It was totally dark, but thank goodness they had bought a torch two days ear lier from a shop on
the way to the central school. On flashing the torch, he was horrified to see Amobi in a vicious
struggle with nothing. You could see his muscles bulging, his fists clenched, his facial muscles
tense, and sweat all over him as he rolled from side to side on the f loor, lifted his trunk and
lowered it, all the time breathing noisily and uttering incomprehensible sou nds. Unable to restore him to his senses, Chuk had edged his way out of the room, to knock on Amobi's father's door.

Mazi Eze's prompt response suggested that he had already been woken u p by the noise. 'Mazi.

Amobi!' Those two words from Chuk said all there was to say. Mazi Eze lit his lantern and
dashed to his son's room. One glimpse at his son, and he retracted h is head, struggling to
suppress a groan. He knocked up his wife, and they moved Amobi o ver to his room to allow
Chuk to resume his sleep. Chuk preferred to sit in Mazi Eze's obi u ntil daybreak. The sight of

Amobi locked in such deadly combat with an invisible opponent, and unable to respond to his name, had chilled him to the bones.

Chuk's decision to accompany Mr Okonkwo to the school left the teachers with no option but to
put him up for the rest of his stay at Ndikelionwu. His earlier visits to the school in Amobi's
company had so endeared him to teachers and pupils alike that the H eadmaster had already
issued a standing invitation to him to deliver two lectures to the school on life in America. To avoid inflicting him on one teacher for the six-day period, a room was vacated for him in the long building housing unmarried male teachers.

The Headmaster's wife, Mr Okonkwo's wife, and the Headmistress wo uld take turns preparing his meals.

When Chuk returned with Mr Okonkwo to collect his
belongings, they learnt to Chuk's relief that
Amobi had been rushed off to a hospital at Onitsha. He hoped it would be p ossible to obtain full
details of the hospital later, to enable Mr Okonkwo or any other teacher to t ake him there at the earliest opportunity.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Seventeen

'When I talk this time will you accuse me again of speaking like a wo man?' Mama Ugo asked sedately, as soon as Chuk went off with Mr Okonkwo.

'Missus,' Mazi Eze replied dejectedly, 'this is not the time to trade accusatio ns. Who knows what he does not know? After all, you cannot compare what happened when he c ame home after the sun incident with what has just happened.'

The presence of a tuft of hair between Amobi's teeth had convinced Mazi E ze of the necessity to consult a dibia. Hair. Black and white hair. Too long and straight to be human hair. Different texture too. More like the hair of an animal – a goat or a sheep. It could not have come from Chuk or Amobi. Nor from anything in their room. How then did it get into h is mouth? Between his teeth? The mysterious body lumps had materialized again. And, in additi on, minor bruises on both knees and on his forehead.

'It is now as clear as daylight that Nwafo has put his hand into witc hcraft too,' Mazi Eze muttered. 'He must have forgotten that the igba ndu ceremony is still less th an one year old. Let us wait and see.'

'You mean before we see a dibia?' Mama Amobi asked, her eyes popping out.

'Have I said so?'

* * * *

Dibia Ofia was in his backyard, clearing out his sturdy, Awka-made pistol, when Mazi Eze and

Amobi knocked on his front door. Because of his bruised knee, and to mini mize the chances of 106

easy recognition by passers-
by, Amobi had put on one of his mother's print wrappers and wore a khaki shirt over it.

'Walk in,' Dibia Ofia shouted from the back. 'My front door is never locked.'

Amobi took a quick view of the house before stepping in. He had never bee n to a dibia before,
and would have paid anything to be nowhere near where he now found him self. Fortunately, he
had regained his full consciousness. He would keep his eyes wide open. No magician, black or white, would dupe him and get away with it.

Externally, the house looked rather attractive, more attractive than anything in Amobi's father's
compound. Built of cement blocks and corrugated iron sheets, it had a small veranda in front,
dominated by two pairs of concrete round pillars, one pair on each side of th e entrance into the
veranda. It could have belonged to a civil servant or a trader. The only indic ators that it belonged
to a dibia were a termite ridden signboard and long strips of white cloth and red cloth. The large
cashew tree in front of the house had a greenish brown, shrivelled, palm fro nd fastened round its trunk.

The sitting room resembled any ordinary sitting room, to Amobi's surprise. Four wooden folding chairs lined each of the two long sides of the sitting room. And various family portraits decorated
the walls, including a portrait of a soldier in the uniform of the Roy

al West African Frontier
Force. Yes there they were: the same strips of white cloth and red cloth, but with a battered two
pronged ogene (which had lost substantial bits of its metal) hanging next to them, and a short
stick to which a coral bead was fastened. Also a small, doll-
like human figure in either ceramic
or wood, Amobi could not tell which, bearing a spear and standing on a larg e table at the far end 107

of the sitting room. Amobi was intrigued to find standing beside the figure a full plate colour portrait of the Virgin Mary with her son Jesus Christ!

The greatest surprise of all was the dibia himself
as he stepped into the sitting room from the rear
door. In his fifties, looking very fit, robust, and handsome, unlike the traditi onal image usually
portrayed of the dibia as a tottering old man, white with age, carryin g a walking stick and
instilling fear. Luxuriant growth covered his whole face below the no se, except for his small
mouth. There was much less hair on his head, suggesting the advent of bald ness. He was bare-
bodied from waist up, because he had been working in the rear courtyard, cl eaning out his gun,
drying some gun powder, and so on. No chalk marks anywhere on hi s body. Nothing to distinguish him from any other middle-
aged, handsome, bearded, hairy chested man. No sign of grey hair anywhere.

As soon as he beheld Amobi, something clicked. He immediately app lied the brakes, took

another look at him, and walked gently up to him, his hands clasped in front of his chest:

'Nnanyelugo!' he addressed Amobi, his head slightly bowed respectfully.

'Mazi,' the dibia thereafter turned to Mazi Eze. 'You should have war ned me that you were bringing an important visitor to my house.'

'Ofia', Mazi Eze replied. 'I'm not sure you know that he is my boy, Ugochukwu; the one who entered Government College in January.'

'Who told you I don't know the person I saluted?' 'The manner in which you saluted him made me wonder. Or is it because he is now a college student?'

'I don't know about college and student. I know the person I saluted. Please take seats.'

'There was a time I went past your house some months age,' Mazi E ze observed, 'and saw so
many ripe cashew fruits all over the ground, and I wondered where a ll the boys in this village had gone!'

Ofia cleared his throat. 'You know,' he began slowly, a plate of kola nut and alligator pepper in
one hand, 'because everybody knows that I am an itinerant dibia who spend s more time outside
than inside Ndikelionwu, some people thought that my cashew tree, my bitter leaf in the
backyard, and my other property had become free for all. They would not e ven allow the cashew
fruits to ripen before plucking them off. So one day I remembered the pr

overb: picking one or
two palm nuts is picking one or two palm nuts, but when you go wi th a basket it becomes
outright theft. Not so? It was then I put that thing round the trunk of the cas hew tree.' He pointed
towards the tree. 'And I stopped locking my front door even when I was not in town and there
was nobody in the whole house. Ask any of my neighbours, since th en the cashew fruits have
been ripening and dropping on the ground if I am not around to har vest them, and not one broomstick has been taken from this house!' 'Take my hand!' cheered Mazi Eze.

'It's not me. It's the ancestors whose akpa agwu I carry. Anyway, we must n ot talk when kola nut is in our hands. Here is kola.'

The kola nut preliminaries over, Mazi Eze informed Ofia that he cam e with a problem. At the
dibia's instance, he produced the traditional gifts for 'knocking at the door' – ten shillings, six
large kola nuts, and two pods of alligator pepper. The dibia immediately dis appeared into one of
the four rooms whose doors led into the sitting room. The sound of ekwe fr om the room showed
that he had gone in to confer with his ancestors and the deities they served. Amobi wondered
why he should choose to do so behind closed doors. Probably afraid that he would be caught 109

redhanded? Amobi decided to keep his ears wide open, to pick up every sound if he could not see everything that transpired.

The dibia's voice came through from the room, invoking his deities with all their attributes and

titles. Then the sound of the ide, the musical instrument which Amobi had previously associated only with the ankles of dancers. This was followed by the jingling of a hand bell. From the loud rinsing of the dibia's mouth, Amobi concluded that he must have offered himself one ngalasi of gin or other hot drink kept inside the room. After the dibia had downed the hot drink, he poured libation to his deities and ancestors. He also presented a lobe of the broken kola nut to them.

Thereafter he announced to them that Mazi Eze had brought an important visitor to their house, and had offered them the customary gifts of ten shillings, kola nuts and alligator pepper. He expressed confidence that they would provide the right answers to whatever problem brought Mazi Eze to them, and invited them to accept the gifts. The ide sounded again. Then the two-pronged ogene. And the dibia emerged from the secret room, looking happy with himself.

'Enyidie!' Dibia Ofia called his wife. 'Take this kettle and pour us some wine from that half-empty jar. Wash three tumblers and bring them along.'

As the woman entered the sitting room carrying a round tray with both hands, Amobi marvelled at her appearance. She could have been the wife of the Headmaster of Ndikelionwu Central School. A portly woman, with a sharp, pretty face and a small head. Her hair was plaited into long strands joined together to form a dome over her head and she was wearing a clean, smart blouse over a bluish print wrapper.

After Mazi Eze and his host had each had two glasses of palm wine, Mazi Eze received the green light to present his problem. He spared no detail in his account of the two incidents involving 110

Amobi, the first in May and the second only the night before. He laid special emphasis on the tuft of hair found between Amobi's teeth on the second occasion. In conclusion, he sought the dibia's good offices to get to the root of the problem, so that Amobi could be left to go on with his studies in peace. They were thankful to God that the two incidents had taken place while Amobi was at home. What if they had happened while he was in college? The college would, surely, have expelled him.

'You seem to have left out one incident,' the dibia observed, looking grimly at the ground in front of him.

'No ...' Mazi Eze racked his brain. 'No. There has been no other incident.'

'Think clearly,' the dibia persisted. 'Or didn't he tell you about it?'

'I can't remember another one,' Amobi replied. A wasp flew into the room, buzzed around Amobi and flew out.

'I knew you would come, he who never forgets a friend, to greet our important visitor yourself!'

Ofia addressed the departed wasp, smiling gratefully at the positive sign that he was on the right path. Then turning to Amobi, he said: 'What about the incident in the college?'

Amobi felt uncomfortable. Yes, there had been an incident, but he had deliberately hidden it from his parents so as not to heighten their anxiety over him.

But how did Ofia know about it? Or was he simply being clever? And what was the rubbish about the wasp?

'I still can't remember,' Amobi persisted, determined not to assist the dibia in his tricks.

'Mazi,' the dibia turned to Mazi Eze. 'I suggest you come back another time, to allow your son to search through his brain properly. I too will talk to the ancestors again, in case what they showed me pertains to another person, which I doubt.'

Amobi gave up. 'Oh, I remember! It was not exactly like the two incidents at home, that is why I didn't think of it earlier. There were no lumps on my body, for instance ...'

'You don't get lumps when you visit somebody's compound, do you?' the dibia cut in.

'I don't understand,' Amobi pleaded, genuinely confused.

'By the time we are through you will,' the dibia replied.

With those words, Dibia Ofia nipped back into the secret room, and sounded the ogene.

Followed by the rattling of the ide. The invocation of his deities. That was about all Amobi could make out, as the dibia spoke in a confidential tone meant to keep Amobi and his father out of the monologue. At the end of the monologue came the sound of the ide followed by the ekwe. Dibia Ofia emerged from the secret room exuding confidence.

'They told me as soon as you set out from your house that you were coming to me. That's why I stayed in the house. I was to have travelled to Ufuma this morning. When y

ou arrived, I took one look at our father-cum-
son, and I knew what brought you. I went back to them simply to avoid any doubt. Perhaps it will help you to understand what has been happeni ng to our father-cum-
son if I tell you what I went through before I took over my family's akpa ag wu. Mazi, I'm sure you know the story already, but I will tell it for the benefit of our father-cum-son.

'There was a time many mysterious things happened to me. First, I d eveloped mental illness,
which nobody else in my family had ever had. When it was cured, I decided to go into the timber 112

trade. There something mysterious began to happen. I would pay for a tree t runk to be sawn into
timber for me, for sale in the timber market. As soon as I invited pr os pective buyers to show
them what I had, each piece of timber would suddenly warp and twist befor e our very eyes, until
it became totally useless. When this went on repeatedly, I was compelled to give up the timber trade.

'I then took up employment in a private company. Soon after doing so I wen t totally blind. My
eyes would be wide open, and yet I could not tell a cow from a needle. It wa s when things got to
this point that my family consulted a dibia from Akpoto who revealed that it was all the work of
Agwu Ngene. The family akpa agwu had been abandoned since the d eath of my father. Mazi,
you know he was the most powerful dibia of his time in this town, i n fact throughout Ndieni
Clan. Agwu Ngene wanted me to abandon everything else I was doing to ca rry the family's akpa agwu and become a dibia like my father.

'Because I was a Christian, I refused to answer the call. So my battle with Agwu Ngene
continued until I received a strong warning from a friend that if I continued that way I would die
and be buried in an alien land. I heeded the advice. A branch of the ogilisi tree was cut and stuck
into the ground, and a cock offered as sacrifice to Agwu. All at once, I regained my full sight.

That same day I came home to carry our akpa agwu. And of course, Agwu Ngene revealed to me
the secrets of herbs as well as divination. Other things followed, which I cannot divulge to you without their permission ...'

Amobi could hear the thumping of his heart. In what direction was this mysterious man heading?

Dibia Ofia reminded Mazi Eze of his consistent reference to Amobi as a great visitor, or as father-cum-son.

'I was not referring to the little boy, Ugochukwu, who entered college last January. I was
referring to the great man who reincarnated in him. Any person of my age or older looking at
your son will know that he is the spitting image of your late brother, Nnanyelugo, the greatest and last leopard-man in your family.'

Amobi's heart thumped harder and faster, as the dibia delved further into his findings.

'Nnanyelugo and my father were like this,' the dibia linked his two forefingers into a strong hook.

'Each respected the other as a powerful but fair-
minded man, whose leopard never went wild nor
acted irresponsibly. Unfortunately, while I inherited some of my father's leo
pard powers at birth,
none of Nnanyelugo's children had such luck. That was why Nnanyelugo de
cided to reincarnate in your son. 'Your son here was therefore born with
the powers of a leopard-man.

'What?' screamed Amobi, jumping up.

Mazi Eze was too engrossed in the unfolding account to take notice.

'Nothing has happened before this year simply because your son was still a
child. With his entry
into adolescence, the situation is changing. The three incidents are manifest
ations that he is now in a position to exercise those powers.'

'Are you saying that Ugochukwu was seriously exercising the powers on th
ose occasions?' Mazi Eze asked, eyes and mouth wide open as he awaited
the reply.

'I have not said so! With the first incident it is possible that the unfe
ttered leopard wandered
about on its own. With the last two incidents, it is more likely that t
he spirit of Nnanyelugo
guided the leopard. It is only a friendly power which would have sent the le
opard to your farm at that time ...'

'No!' objected Mazi Eze. 'It was Nwafo's leopard! It was part of Nwafo's sch
eme to eliminate me from this world!'

'I don't think so. That python wanted to kill your workmen, and if possible you, to drive you out of its territory. The leopard was sent there to destroy it. It was a tough job, but the leopard succeeded.' Mazi Eze snapped his fingers.

'You know, no doubt, that the last incident was a retaliation for your goat which Mazi Nwafo's leopard killed some time ago.'

'Was it?' exclaimed Mazi Eze, on his toes.

'The black and white hairs are the hairs of Mazi Nwafo's goat. Nwafo sent to me this morning to ask me for his black and white goat, assuming that my leopard was responsible.'

'I'm happy that I have at least had the chance to retaliate!' Mazi Eze shouted, hugging his son.

'I don't want to be a leopard-man!' screamed Amobi, breaking free. 'I don't want any such power!'

Mazi Eze was jolted back to his senses. He certainly did not want his brilliant son to be a leopard-man, and he put it in no uncertain language to the dibia.

'Neither you nor I have the power to be or not to be a leopard-man,' the dibia proclaimed. 'The decision comes from them.'

'I don't want to be a leopard-man,' sobbed Amobi, tears dimming his vision.

'Our father-cum-son, you don't gain anything by crying or shouting. If you and Mazi are prepared to do what they require of you, there is something we do about it!'

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Eighteen

Two days after Mazi Eze and his son, Amobi, had sought his services, Dibia Ofia arrived at the oda agu owuru shrine belonging to the Amobi extended family to per form the essential ritual.

The shrine was located about hundred metres off one of the foot paths linki ng Ndikelionwu with the neighbouring town of Ndiowu. Since the death of Amobi's uncle, Nnany elugo, fifteen years earlier, no dibia had been appointed to minister regularly at the shrin e. Every member of the family had become a Christian, and so could not identify openly with the shrine for fear of reprisals.

The grove thickened as you drew nearer it. The wild pineapples whic h grew in abundance on both sides of the access path had grown as high as bananas, in the struggle to catch some sunlight through the competing foliage. A huge akpu tree towered above everything else as you arrived at the shrine. A strip of cloth, originally white but gone dirtybrown with age, h ung round its trunk, as if to underscore its mystical significance. It was at the foot of this thorny tree, in by-gone days, that every leopard associated with the Amobi family usually ret urned at the end of each operation, to recuperate before disappearing into the other world to await its next summons.

The shrine was in good shape, as if someone had secretly ensured that it wa s kept clean and in good repair. The little hut roofed with corrugated iron sheets, provide d shelter for the akpati agwu, a medium sized wooden box, on top of which were a short br oom (for sweeping the shrine), a piece of white nzu for divination, a machete (for clearing t he grounds), and one double-

pronged ogene used during any sacrifice. The box rested on a wooden stool, the stool on
which the dibia sat during sacrifices and on which no other human b eing was permitted to sit.

One earthen water pot stood beside the stool, to provide water for th e dibia to wash his hands 116

before offering a sacrifice, and for the deities to wash theirs before receivin g kola nuts, chicken or other offertories.

Mazi Eze had agreed with Dibia Ofia that it would be best to stay a way from the ritual at the
shrine. The Catechist in charge of the CMS church would gladly discard his sandals in his haste
to file excommunication charges against Mazi Eze at the parsonage o nce he got wind of Mazi
Eze's presence at the shrine. Amobi initially had some difficulty decid ing whether or not to
accompany the dibia to the shrine. The desire to outsmart a smart magician had petered off. Ofia
was no magician. The weight of evidence in support of his mystical powers was too heavy to be
ignored. The facts of the recent incident, particularly the part played by Nw afo's goat, had more
than convinced Amobi that he was lined up against powers which he could neither understand nor control.

It had been confirmed that Mazi Nwafo's goat had been snatched aw ay that same night by a
leopard. To gain access to the goat (with black and white spots) the leopard had had to break
through a pen recently fortified with the thorny branches of the lime tree. The goat's hair had

been found identical with the hair stuck mysteriously between Amobi's teeth that night. The leopard had dragged the dead goat a long distance, through farm land and bush, to the foot of the udala tree, Amobi's favourite haunt. What further evidence did he require?

None. The desire to catch a magician off his guard had been superseded by an impulsiveness to find out as much as he could about his new, and unwanted, powers. His painstaking search through the school library, after his brief conversation with 'Computer', had yielded little fruit.

The only book which initially appeared relevant turned out to be completely silent on leopard-men. This was his golden opportunity, to learn from an authority who was both a confirmed 117

practitioner and a powerful dibia. But then, he asked himself, how much did he really want to know? Would further knowledge not tempt him to wield his newfound powers? He did not want anything to do with leopards. He knew that for certain. Not even at Ndikelionwu, where it conferred a status. His admission to the prestigious Government College had mapped out for him his future direction in life. Was there any point in toying with fire, simply to assuage his curiosity? Provided Ofia could do as he promised, namely seal off his powers, thereby eliminating the remotest possibility of a recurrence of his recent excruciating experience, why bother to see how he did it?

Amobi's parents took the decision for him. Mazi Eze could swear by Okoli I joma that if Amobi
set foot at the shrine, Mazi Nwafo would promptly report the boy to the authorities of Government College for practising paganism.

* * * *

'How did it go?' Mazi Eze could not camouflage his anxiety'. Father and son had called at Dibia Ofia's house later that evening, as previously agreed, to find out how the ritual went.

'No problem at all,' Ofia replied confidently rising from his cloth chair
to receive his guests.

'No chance of anything going wrong?'

'Mazi. Take a seat. Son-of-Mazi, here's your own seat.'

Mazi Eze and his son took the seats offered them.

Dibia Ofia and Mazi Eze split a lobe which had remained from the kola nut offered to an earlier
visitor. Ofia called his wife to bring them some palm wine, before a ddressing himself to Mazi Eze's question.

'Sorry the church tells you not to enter shrines, I
would have asked you to follow me right now to
my own oda agu owuru which is nearer here than yours. You would have seen the four pots covering our own animals –
the animals belonging to the different branches of our family. I have
kept them sealed for the past ten years, and not one of our animals

has emerged from there
except of course at our command. They will stay sealed up for as long as we want, so long as we offer the annual igwa aka sacrifice.

'It's a straightforward job, hence I said there was no problem. You know where your shrine is.

Sneak in there when there are no prying eyes, and you will see what I have done with the oku
agburacha you bought. The two of them have been installed face down, one covering
Nnanyelugo's animal, and the other yours.' He pointed at Amobi. 'You can see that they differ
from other pots, being as smooth surfaced as plates. They will hold your animals in check.

Neither animal will go anywhere except on your instructions. The pot installed face up is to serve as the receptacle for your regular offertory to the oda agu.'

'How do we arrange for this regular offertory?' enquired Mazi Eze.

'That should be no problem. One white cock, six large kola nuts. Once every year. That's all. No
wine. We keep wine out of sacrifices involving these animals, just as we keep pepper away from
medicines aimed at maintaining peace! If you have another dibia qualified to do it, go to him.

But if you choose to come to me, I will do it for you. After all, you have seen that my fees can be paid even by an old widow!'

'Can any passer-by go and open the covered pot, thereby releasing the leopard?' Amobi asked, worried about that possible loophole.

'Your father who is here knows that nobody goes to oda agu awuru to tamper with things in the shrine,' the dibia replied. 'If you go to my own oda agu, you will see where some people scraped off part of the bark of our own akpu tree, believing that they could, thereby, neutralize the powers of the deity. Foolish people! They knew nothing about the mystical powers of the akpu tree.

'The young man may not know, but I'm sure Mazi knows what that tree can do. Mazi knows that whenever my leopard receives a gunshot wound, the first thing I try to do is to drag myself immediately to that tree, no matter how badly I may be injured. As soon as I recline on its trunk and invoke its deity to come to my rescue, I will cough out from my mouth bad blood mixed with the bullets fired into my leopard. At the same time my leopard will walk away from where it had been writhing in pain, completely cured. That was the tree the foolish people thought they could neutralize simply by scraping off part of its bark! The tree upon which our fathers conferred the title akpu onwo ogbu anu ukwu because of its rejuvenating power on "the killer of big animals" is not easily neutralized! Of course the people quickly realized their folly and left our akpu tree severely alone thereafter!

'To answer your question fully, young man, only a dibia can open and seal those holes before anything can happen. And it has to be a proper dibia, not every man who slings a bag across his shoulder. Although, as someone who has been in this business for many harmattans, I can release

my leopard by merely biting at my forefingers and exclaiming 'Nnan agu!', it would be
impossible for you to do the same with your own leopard. You will require t he service of a dibia 120

to open the pot whenever you want your leopard released. Moreover, it wou ld be necessary for
you to give clear instructions to your leopard prior to its release, if i t is to accomplish your
wishes. You require another ceremony at the shrine to accomplish this. So y ou can see why I say
there is no problem. I have securely sealed both your pot and Nnanyelugo's. You can return to
your college any day and forget all about your leopard. I will make sure it st ays where you want it to stay. But any time you want it to show

what it can do ...'

'God forbid!' father and son exclaimed simultaneously.

'Ah! Don't say so, O!' Ofia remarked with a meaningful smile. 'Reme mber that tomorrow is pregnant!' 'Not me!' affirmed Amobi.

'If you ever do, I am at your service. Remember that you still have to learn many things if you
want to live long, you and your leopard. Such as how to remain in your house and free your animal whenever it may get trapped ...'

* * * *

Amobi fell on his knees as soon as he retired to his room for the night. He a nd his parents had
each lost several stones in weight since that fateful night. Dibia Ofia had brought them

tremendous relief. The confirmation that he was a 'leopard-man' had been so shattering, because it had been totally unexpected. How he wished his illustrious uncle had chosen a more receptive and appreciative nephew for the rare honour! He appealed to God to come to his aid through Ofia, thereby saving him from any further embarrassment and danger. And if at all it was 121

possible for God to dispossess him of those powers right away, how eternally grateful he would be.

He suddenly remembered one thing he had forgotten and went on his knees again. Chuk and Government College. He implored God to keep the whole thing a secret from Government College. May Chuk never know beyond the fact that he had had a night mare and been taken to a hospital in Onitsha for treatment. As he rose from the floor, he could feel a heavy load sliding off his shoulders. He dried the tears which had soaked his eyes, confident that he would work out a satisfactory strategy for handling Chuk before they left for Government College. So much depended on it.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Nineteen

Government College,

Ahia,

Eastern Nigeria,

West Africa,

October 15, 1947.

Hi, Dad and Mom,

I have just spent two full weeks in a small city in the Igbo heart land, and I can hardly wait to write down my experiences! Daddy may know the name of the city. It 's called Ndikelionwu, meaning 'the people of Ikelionwu', the king who founded the city. It's not too far from the market city of Onitsha.

'Was I scared stiff when we first arrived? No electricity. In its place, all sort s of bush lamps I've never seen before, some of them too messy to touch. No running water, so no proper toilet.

Chuk had, however, gone on to inform his parents about the surprisin gly high standard of hygiene in evidence all around him. Every room in each house was swept cl ean every morning, and so was the entire compound, including the grounds on which the buildings stood. Every child had to wash his hands, teeth, and face first thing in the morning, befor e he was permitted to touch food. The city square and the market were swept regularly.

The society was governed by innumerable rules handed down by their ancestors, Ohuk had gone on. Rules, roles, rule! Your behaviour, the words you uttered at given times, everything was governed by rules. It was not until an old man had snatched a glass of palm wine from his hand 123

that Chuk learnt that it was the height of rudeness for a boy of his age to receive the cup of wine extended to him with his left hand!

It had been quite an experience finding himself among people who spoke a totally incomprehensible language. Happily, before the two weeks ended, he had learnt some of the common greetings to the delight of his hosts. He had also learnt that Daddy's people were Igbo, not Ibo. Above all, he had learnt the meaning and correct pronunciation of his surname, Nwachukwu. Every person's name had a meaning, he had been told. How proud he felt to learn that his name meant 'son of the Supreme Being!'

He devoted a short paragraph to his unrepeated attempt to blow the fire in the kitchen the way he had seen others do it in the absence of a fan – with his mouth. That lone attempt had sprayed white ash all over his face, and made his two eyes flaming red, without making any impression on the smouldering firewood.

His unrehearsed, unanticipated, face-to-face encounter with African 'voodoo' had very nearly ruined the entire trip. The initial shock had been so unbearable that he had had to change residence. He could never have imagined that his host and classmate at Government College, and a very nice, quiet, harmless, almost docile boy for that matter, could under the influence of his

home environment, transfer his spirit to a leopard and thereby control the leopard's actions. He could never have believed that such a thing was possible had he not seen it with his own eyes and had the opportunity to ask several questions about it from the teachers in the grade school who knew all about it. The teachers had allayed his fears by assuring him that appropriate rituals had been performed to neutralize the boy's voodoo powers. He hoped they were correct, or it 124

would be difficult to figure out how to relate with such a classmate now that they were back at Government College.

The harrowing experience could have taken up the whole letter, but Chuk deliberately limited it to two paragraphs. Conscious of his mummy's reservations about his being parcelled off alone to Africa, he did not want to stir up a hornet's nest. Moreover, on balance, he was happy he had spent the two weeks at Ndikelionwu. Everyone had been exceptionally kind to him. As he had mentioned in the letter, everywhere he went, he was treated almost like a king, and he had learnt a tremendous lot about the ways of life of his daddy's people. Above all (although he omitted any reference to this in the letter), he had landed a chick without straining himself, and he did not want any precipitate action by his mummy to pull him away from Government College before he had had the opportunity to explore the new relationship fully.

Yes, the day after his last talk to the senior classes and the staff about life in America, a boy he

could not identify had secretly handed him a note and promptly vanished. A note that came in a
blue, unaddressed envelope. The note itself bore neither address nor date. It had no formal
beginning nor a formal ending. The writer did not disclose her name. More of a poem than a letter:

The cocks are crowing

The birds are singing

The sun is shining

The farmer is farming

The children are schooling

Everybody is happy Except me.

Why?

Because Chuk is going.

Even though Uzo must have written the note with her left hand to avoid detection, Mr Okonkwo
had little difficulty in naming her as the writer. No other pupil in the school could write so
flawlessly. Uzo's initiative had, however, puzzled Mr Okonkwo. Although she had, as if by
magic, suddenly blossomed into a most attractive girl during the past year, combining brains

with beauty, her natural shyness and transparent innocence had conveyed th e impression that she was five or more years away from the development of amorous feelings.

The same childlike innocence had struck Chuk when he later received Uzo i n his bed-sitter at the
teachers' quarters. Her timid handshake was devoid of any emotion, and she bluntly refused to sit
beside Chuk on his bed. Although her eyes carefully avoided Chuk's, he wa s convinced that he read something deep in them intended to spur him on – the way they kind led with excitement
despite her bashfulness. What remained was for him to adjust to the slow te mpo of the African
girl. She agreed to correspond with him and he promised to write to her as s oon as he returned to
the college. How hungrily he anticipated the first full length letter from a gi rl who could convey her feelings so poetically!

The re-
entry ritual mounted for Chuk and Amobi on their return to the colle ge, to mark the
formal end of their suspension, was to have been the last news item for Chuk's letter to his
parents. It was one of the traditions of the school, allegedly borrowed from one of the great
English public schools. Two empty drums, each open at both ends, were de posited at the parade
ground in front of the AD block, each lined inside with a red colleg e blanket. Amobi climbed
into one drum, head first, face down, crouching on all fours. Chuk cli mbed into the second. A
prefect walked briskly round each drum, nodded with satisfaction, and gave the go-ahead signal to the boys who had taken position behind the drums.

In a trice both drums were tumbling down the parade ground, watched and applauded by the whole school. Amobi and Chuk emerged from the drums at the finishing line, sweating and fuzzy headed, their smiles of confidence completely evaporated. The Health Prefect ran his expert eyes round each boy and quickly pronounced him fit. He then loudly pronounced them purged of their misdemeanour, and formally welcomed them back to the high ideals of Government College. Finally, he hipped vigorously, while the line-up of students hurrahed. Then followed the first stanza of the school song.

Chuck decided to skip the account. He could not describe the post-suspension ritual without saying something about the suspension itself. Why must he volunteer such unfavourable information to his parents?

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Twenty

Nma's father could not bear the harassment any longer. The option was clear: destroy the wild pig without further delay or forget about any harvest from the farm. The wild pig – yes, it was a wild pig, from the footprints – operated only at night, and appeared to be protected by a mysterious sensor which steered it away from all traps set to catch it. Only a leopard could eliminate the menace. And what better choice than Amobi's leopard. Amobi gave his consent in no time. How could he say 'no' to a request for help from Nma's father? Dibia Ofia was invited to perform the appropriate rituals, to ensure that the first programmed outing of Amobi's leopard went without a hitch.

Everything began well. Nma's father brought two tender yellow palm fronds (omu nkwu) to oda agu owuru. The dibia knotted each omu nkwu in the prescribed manner. He tapped Amobi's leopard's covered bowl four times with both omu nkwu, before lifting the bowl and depositing it face up beside the uncovered hole. Nma's father then proceeded to his farm, armed with the mystical omu nkwu. After pacing the perimeter of the farm as directed, he stood with his back to the farm and flung both omu nkwu backwards into the farm.

It's hole having been ritually opened, Amobi's leopard materialized shortly after midnight.

Teleguided by the omu nkwu, it made straight for Nma's father's farm to carry out its programmed operation. The wild pig was already there, creating havoc as usual. Its sensors promptly picked up the leopard's appearance. Fight it out, or take to its heels? The leopard made

quick work of its assignment. In the twinkling of an eye, the destructive boa r lay dead, its blood
sucked to the last drop by the leopard. The blood was all a disciplined leopa rd took for its pains.

The carcass belonged to the person who sought the leopard's services, and the leopard usually deposited it where the person could find
it without difficulty.

The wild pig was as big as a cow. Too big to carry in the mouth, as a cat wo uld carry a mouse.

The leopard fastened its tail to that of the dead animal and dragged the carc ass towards the iroko
tree which dominated all other vegetation at the far end of the farm, its eyes flashing from side to
side in search of any intruder bursting forth from the darkness. It ha d covered more than two-thirds of the distance when ...

'My hand! My left hand!' Amobi screamed. 'It's shattered!'

Mazi Eze heard the sudden scream from his room and rushed towards his so n's voice. 'What is it?' he shouted anxiously as he grabbed the door knob.

'It's my hand, O! It's shattered!' Amobi used his right hand to support
the broken hand.

'All will be well. I'm coming.'

Mazi Eze dashed back to his room, struck a match, and lit his hurricane lam p. He knew precisely
where under his bed he had hidden the trap. The huge, steel trap, the type us ed to trap leopards,

antelopes, boars and other big game. The trap which he had acquired on the advice of the dibia,
and which Ofia had consecrated at the family shrine. With a special sacrific e. Mazi Eze mustered all his energy to snap the trap open. 'Put the
hand inside,' he instructed his son, breathing loudly.

Amobi took his eyes off the serrated mouth of the vicious looking trap as he obeyed his father's instructions.

The trap snapped tight, firmly trapping Amobi's hand.

'Pull it out,' Mazi Eze instructed. Amobi obeyed.

The huge trap opened its blood chilling mouth sufficiently to let the hand through. Without a
scratch. With all the aches and pains gone. As if nothing had ever h appened to the hand.

Simultaneously, Amobi's leopard which had been groaning in pain where i t stumbled in Nma's
father's farm, stepped out of the giant trap into which its left foreleg had accidentally landed.

Instantly healed. All aches and pains gone. It resumed its journey, dragging the carcass. At the foot of the iroko tree, it deposited the carcass,
disengaged its tail, and made for oda agu owuru.

* * * *

Effiong, a Form Two boy, turned from his left side to his right, mo mentarily interrupting his

sleep. As he headed back towards dreamland, his ears picked up a so und. He opened his eyes
reluctantly, but could make nothing out from the darkness. His ears picked up the sound again.

Something brushing against metal. He opened his eyes wider. They b egan to adjust to the
darkness. What was that? Something long ... A pole, it seemed, sticki ng into the dormitory through one of the burglary-proof windows?

As some light from the stars outside
began to filter in through the open window, he observed that
the pole was operated from outside the dormitory, and appeared to be aimed at something inside.

What it was, he could not tell. In his fright, he reached for his torch inside his locker, and beamed it at the pole.

'Thief!' he shouted without the courage to leave his bed. The torchlight reve aled that the pole had a hook at its tip, and its target was a pile of clothing on the top of a bedside locker.

'It's the leopard!' shouted another boy.

The torch dropped from Effiong's hand. By the time another torch co uld take over, pole and leopard had disappeared.

The word 'leopard' flashed round the dormitory, waking up every body. The prefect jumped up
from his bed when he was awakened by the knocks on his door. 'What's the matter?' he shouted, taken aback.

'The leopard, please!'

'The what?' He opened his door, quickly lit a candle, and emerged from his cubicle.

'It's the leopard, please,' Okafor affirmed. 'I saw it with my own eyes. Standi ng on two legs only.

The two hind legs.'

'I suddenly heard some noise in my sleep, please,' Effiong took over. 'When I checked what was happening, I saw a pole with a hook pointing into the dormitory from that window ...'

'Did any other person see the leopard?' the prefect, asked, panting.

'Yes, please,' three boys replied simultaneously. 'Where is it?' The pre fect snatched the torch
from Effiong and beamed it in different directions through one window afte r another. No sign of
any leopard. When he moved towards the main door, the boys appealed to h im not to attempt to
go outside as the leopard might be lurking in the shadows, anticipatin g that somebody would rush out in pursuit.

'Go back to sleep,' the Prefect instructed the boys. 'I'll make a full re port to the House Master
tomorrow morning. Something must be done to this leopard!' The prefect w as visibly shaken, in 131

spite of his efforts to camouflage his feelings. On the three occasions when t he leopard had been
sighted at the college, it had limited its haunts to Niger House locate d on the periphery of the
college compound. Rather than being scared off by the various measures so far taken to curb its

activities, it appeared to be waxing stronger, otherwise who would have thought that it could storm School House right in the heart of the compound? An interesting discovery had also emerged from that night's incident. Although the incidence of pilfering had grown since the leopard began to visit the school, nobody in his right mind could have postulated any relationship between the two. A leopard which could organize to steal with a pole was a much more dangerous leopard than any one could imagine.

* * * *

Amobi joined the drift back to bed. Mystified. Unable to explain the relationship between his dream and the leopard's visit.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Twenty one

'Amobi, U.'

'Yes, please.' Amobi's misgivings soared. Why the frigid formality? He had been 'Amobi, U' to Tunji only at the beginning of his first term at the college, before their special relationship sprouted. Since then his official name had given way to 'Ugo' or 'Obi'.

'Why couldn't you take me into your confidence?' Tunji went on, perched on a hard back chair and resting his elbows on the long table in front of him, while Amobi stood a respectable distance on the opposite side of the table.

'I don't understand, please,' replied Amobi, a thin film of sweat beginning to show on his face.

'Young man,' Tunji's voice revealed his irritation; 'I know you well enough to know that you are neither deaf nor daft. What I'm asking you is this: after all I have done for you since you entered this college, making you my fag and all that, don't you think you should have warned me about this ... this ... leopard business?' The last two words fell from Tunji's mouth, as it were.

Amobi swallowed hard, bit his lips and shut his eyes firmly to hold back the tears. With little success.

'Now don't show me you're a baby,' Tunji admonished him as the sight of the tears dripping down both cheeks stirred something inside him. 'If I meant anything to you, or at least if you appreciated my kindness to you, didn't you consider it fair to warn me that ... that ... er ... er ...

you're a ... a ... leopard?'

'I'm not a leopard,' shouted Amobi, his pent-up feelings exploding. The tears rushed down his face.

'Keep your voice down, my friend. And remember you are addressing a College Prefect.'

'I'm sorry, please. But I'm not a leopard, please!'

'I have never before now called you a leopard. Even with the wildest imagination ever, I would not have associated you with a leopard or I would have kept my distance.' 'It's not true, please,'

Amobi persisted.

'That you have links with leopards?'

'I am not a leopard!' Amobi stamped his foot on the ground emphatically, now sobbing loudly.

Tunji thought there was no point going further.

'Let's not drag the matter,' he said in a palliative tone. 'But don't forget that Chuk went home with you and spent two whole weeks there with you and your people. From what I have heard, it is difficult to think that Chuk, with his American background, could cook up such a story. And, one important thing before you go. You obviously know that a leopard has been harassing the entire college in the past few weeks?'

'Yes, please.' Amobi replied.

'If you don't know it, I want to tell you bluntly that the college authorities ar e determined to hunt it down and kill it before it does more havoc. A word is sufficient for the wise. You may go.'

Amobi wiped his face and eyes dry, and turned to go.

'Until this whole mess as to whether you are a student or a leopard is sorted out, you should keep your distance from me. Understand?'

'Yes, please,' replied Amobi, without hearing his words.

Tunji shrugged his head after Amobi had shut the door behind him. Impossi ble. How could such
a lamb, such an angel, be associated with leopards? What energy did he hav e to act as a leopard?

And what benefit could he derive from it? In any case, can there be any scie ntific basis for the claim to inhabit and control
leopards? He had never heard of such a thing at Ijebu-Igbo, his home town, although he did not grow up there and so could hardly claim to know Ijebu-Igbo tradition.

If the story had not come from Chuk, he would have dismissed it with a wa ve of the hand. To be
sure of his facts, he had invited Chuk to his cubicle, and put the matter to hi m point-blank. Chuk
had been unequivocal. Or could Chuk be playing mischief? A boy jus t back from suspension
ought to know the consequences of cracking such an expensive joke. The su dden emergence of a
leopard at Government College, almost coinciding with the end of A mobi's suspension, had

complicated matters. It did not exactly coincide with the end of the suspension. Started a bit earlier, but had someone not argued that it was Amobi trying to avenge his suspension at a time when nobody would associate him with the act because he was so far away?

As far as Tunji could make out, the school authorities had no plan to take any hasty action on the allegation. The Principal had refused to attach any seriousness to the matter. Such primitive superstitions, as far as he was concerned, had no place at Government College. There was no way in which anybody could persuade him that the boy in his school and a boy he had come to know fairly well, was at the same time a leopard. Mumbo jumbo!

The Principal was, however, determined to do everything possible to rid the college of the leopard. Instructions had therefore gone down the line to intensify and co-ordinate the leopard hunting exercise. If any student of Government College had chosen, by whatever occult powers,

to operate at night as a leopard, let him stew in his own juice! Could Tunji wish Amobi that? No.

He was too fond of the boy to wish him dead for any reason. Hence he had called him to leak the secret to him. To give him a chance to mend his ways, if indeed the rumour were true. Amobi had categorically denied it. All there was left was to hope for the best. He would keep his fingers crossed.

* * * *

Amobi emerged from the prefects' common room totally depressed and confused. Tunji had confirmed what he (Amobi) had all along suspected – that Chuk was the source of the information about his association with leopards. By the time he could re-establish contact with Chuk at home, it was clear that the harm had already been done. Chuk's blunt refusal to return to their compound even for one night prior to their departure revealed how much he must already have picked up from the school teachers. In the circumstances, Amobi had decided to take him into his confidence – halfway. He had sworn to Chuk that all his links with leopards had been severed forever, and pleaded with him not to breathe any word of the incident at the college.

Chuk had given his word. See how he had kept it? And yet white people were said to be more trustworthy than Africans!

No matter what came out of the present rumpus, Amobi was sure he would deal appropriately with Chuk. At the appropriate time. The major cause of his depression was the presence of a leopard at their college. Could it be that the assurances from Ofia were empty boasts, and that the dibia had no control over his leopard? But if it was his leopard, why had he not undergone those unpleasant experiences? There was no possibility of obtaining an exeat to go home, especially with the cloud hanging over him. The best he could do he had already done – to rush a letter to 136

his father giving him every detail of the strange leopard and asking him to see the dibia without delay, as his life was in grave danger.

'Hi, Amobi.'

Amobi was startled back into the world of reality, as he found himself stand ing on the steps of
the day room. 'Hi, Chuk,' he replied, forcing a smile. He did not ima gine that the Lord would
send Chuk to him so soon. 'What's happening, with you alone here? Ho pe you are not running away from something?'

'Oh! No. Just saturated with swotting, or trying to swot, and thought I could find someone to have a game or two with. How about you? I promise not to give you too much of a beating.'

'Not me and you! Haven't you heard what they say 'Computer' does with bo ys he catches wasting time on frivolities such as table tennis when exams are around the corner?'

'I don't care a damn what he does. He can't force me to read when my brain is saturated. Period.

If he wants to help me ...'

'I want to tell you something.' Amobi was anxious to accomplish his plan wi thout undue delay.

'Go ahead.'

'Not here. Let's move out.'

'I might lose the opportunity of catching someone to play with me,' Chuk edged.

'Okay, if you come with me I'll play with you when we get back,' Amobi offered.

'Sure?' Chuk seemed to have dropped his earlier fears.

Amobi's offer to come back with him sounded genuine. 'I promise you.'

'You bet!' Chuk shouted happily. 'Off we go. But make it snappy bef ore other boys grab the table!'

Chuk did all the talking as the two boys walked rapidly towards the school clinic. He was angry
with the college authorities for keeping the junior classes out of the social a ctivities with the girls
from Ogbanelu aimed at teaching the final year students how to behave in f emale company, to
save them from the humiliation suffered by the first crop of old boys of the college to gain
admission to the Higher College at Yaba. What is good for the senior s is also good for the
juniors, he had argued. After all, it was not only the senior
boys who suffered from the loneliness characteristic of life at the college. Why then the discrimination. Why ...?

Amobi stopped abruptly. They were standing on the disused foothpath betw een the clinic and the building which had previously
housed the bucket latrines.

His left hand firmly planted on his hip, Amobi beamed his eyes on Chuk's f ace. 'Chuk!' he called belligerently. 'Do your worst, or I do my worst!'

Chuk staggered back two steps, shock and fright inscribed all over him. He had never seen such
a murderous look on Amobi's face before. Twang! Amobi's flattened out pal m landed on Chuk's right cheek, despatching sparks from Chuk's eyes.

'What the hell ...?'

Twang! followed the left palm, cutting Chuk short. Before a stunned Chuk could make out what was going on, Amobi had charged at him like an infuriated ram.

With no experience of Igbo wrestling, Chuk was no match for Amobi. Using his hip as pivot, he lifted Chuk and threw him to the ground, expertly immobilizing him by laying him face down on the sandy road, clasping his two hands behind him in a vicious grip, and planting each knee on either side of his waist.

'When the college authorities suspended us for two weeks, I took you home without notice, housed you and fed you. When I had trouble at home, I took you into my confidence as a close friend, and you promised not to say anything to anybody about it. Now you have gone round to tell everybody that I am a leopard!'

'But you broke your word first,' Chuk muttered, spitting out sand.

'In what way?'

'You promised there would be no more leopard activity. Yet you have been prowling around the school every night, intimidating everyone.'

'Who told you it's my leopard?' shouted Amobi, pumping sand into Chuk's mouth.

Amobi observed someone moving towards them. Had they been spotted?

'If you breathe a word of what has just happened here to anybody,' he threatened Chuk, 'you'll

know that a leopard is capable of tearing a human being to pieces and devo uring him flesh, bone and blood!'

With that Amobi suddenly let go and fled.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter Twenty two

Tufuenu nwa ruru aru! Echi ozo

Amuta ozo!

Tufuenu nwa ruru aru! Echi ozo Amuta ozo!

The four night watchmen, bearing a heavy bundle, temporarily dumped it o n the grass in front of
Nile House, to join their two chanting colleagues in singing and danc ing their victory song.

Joseph, the leader of the operation, banged his way into the first dormi tory, to proclaim the good
news. Prefect, senior boys, junior boys, fags, everybody stormed out of the dor mitory, mindless
of what they had on, to see with their own eyes. The second dormitory did t he same. In no time, an impressive procession –
Joseph, the six night watchmen with their heavy bundle, and all the members of Nile House –
headed for Niger House, chanting another tune introduced by the captain of Nile House:

Be prepared! Zonga Zonga Bom! Bom!

Be prepared! Zonga Zonga Bom! Bom!

The two dormitories of Niger House emptied their entire student bod y as soon as Joseph
proclaimed the good news. And so did School House. News of the demise o f the leopard brought
instant jubilation to all. Prefects and 'yeomen', senior boys and fags spontan eously jumped out of
their beds to join the victory march to the Principal's house. Joseph, the messenger, was the
happiest, most elated man on earth as he marched at the head of the triumph

ant procession. You would have thought he was leading the march-past on Empire Day. His boots – the weather-

beaten pair, strapped with tie-
tie from the raffia palm and worn primarily to the farm or on dark 140

nights –
hissed and squeaked as he marched, sending any loitering scorpions and puff adders scurrying away to safety.

Joseph had every cause to be happy and proud. He had stuck his neck out, and could have lost
his head in the process if he had miscalculated. He had marched up to the Principal in his office, the day after the leopard appeared in School House.

'Dat leopard, sir,' he had begun, his bloodshot eyes beaming on the PCG. 'Give me two weeks, sir, I go finish am!'

His conditions had been minimal. A double-
barrel shotgun, and two additional night watchmen
to bring the total strength of watchmen to six. The unusual request had taken the Principal unawares. However within forty-
eight hours he had given his consent, after consultations with
the Resident for the Province, the VPGC and some of the African senior staff. The Resident had been helpful in procuring the double-barrel gun.

It was the leopard's mode of operation which had put the idea into Joseph's head. In its earlier
forays, the leopard would sneak into a dormitory, see several unprotected living human beings
lying side by side and fast asleep, and tiptoe past them to their bedside lockers to steal their
money, watches, and other personal effects. After bolts had been affixed to all external doors and

expanded metal to the windows on the Principal's orders, the wily leopard had come up with an ingenious method for hooking out students' personal effects through the expanded metal while operating from the corridor. 'This rat get beard beard!' Joseph was dead certain. Hence he asked for a fortnight, little reckoning that he could make it in half the time.

The Principal was pleased and relieved that the leopard menace was over. You could see it from the radiant smile on his face and the uncharacteristic warm handshake he gave to Joseph. His 141

blood pressure had shot up when the noise of the approaching procession had first drifted to his ears, before he ordered his night watchman to investigate what was brewing.

'Where's the body?'

'I no kill am, sir. I bring am here, sir.'

'Alive?'

Joseph suppressed the smile forming on his lips. It was disrespectful to laugh at your boss, even when he behaved like a woman. He shouted to his men to come forward with the bundle.

'Chei!' screamed the students who had formed a horse shoe round Joseph and the PGC.

'Benjamin!'

Incredible! Benjamin! The soft-spoken, fragile looking labourer who immediately evoked your sympathy as you beheld each muscle on his lean frame stretch to its limit as

he struggled to keep
pace with the other labourers while trimming the bahama on the terrace. Be njamin who looked
so transparently honest in the day. The Principal sat his eight battery camp l amp on the ground and clenched each fist in turn to reassure himself that rigor mortis had not set in.

Whoever skinned the original leopard to provide the mask for Benjamin mu st have been a first
rate taxidermist, the Principal thought as he directed Joseph to take t he leopard outfit to the
office in the morning. Everything was complete: the leopard's eyes, w hiskers, claws and all.

Where additional skin had been added, to facilitate putting on and re moving the outfit, it had
been done most ingeniously. An invaluable addition to the Principal's growing Africana collection!

One crack shot at the leopard had unmasked the masquerade, and saved Ben jamin's life. Joseph
had taken the shot from his hideout, a breach in the giant perimeter wall rou nd the college which
he believed the leopard used. The stricken 'leopard' had unconsciously screamed 'Chineke-me!

Anwuola mo!' in Igbo.

The Principal shook hands warmly again with Joseph, and then with each of the six watchmen.

He commended them for their bravery, and assured them that they would receive their reward at the end of the month. Joseph stamped his right boot to noisy attention, and gave the salute in appreciation. Each of the six watchmen attempted a salute too. The Principal directed the Prefect/Commandant of St. John's Ambulance Brigade to give Benjamin appropriate first aid, and thereafter lock him up for the night at the clinic. The VPGC would issue additional instructions in the morning.

'Amobi, U!' the Principal hailed.

'Sir!' Amobi answered timidly.

'Step out here.'

'Yes, sir.'

The whole gathering suddenly became silent as Amobi edged his way through the mass of students, his print wrapper slung across his left shoulder and held tightly round his waist.

'Nwachukwu Form One!' the Principal went on.

'Here, sir,' Chuk answered, stepping forward in his cream pyjamas and silk dressing gown.

The Principal turned to Chuk. 'With your excellent home background, no-one would have associated you with the primitive and unscientific allegation that a student of this school, and your classmate for that matter, transformed himself into a live leopard when

ever he desired. Yet
you peddled this allegation, thereby doing untold harm to an innocent boy who soon became associated with the so-
called leopard harassing everyone here in recent weeks. Are you now convinced that you have borne false witness against your neighbour?'

'Yes, sir,' Chuk muttered.

'You've just come back from a two-
week suspension, but I'm not sure it has done you any good.

Will you now apologize publicly to Amobi for unwittingly hurting him?' Chuk muttered something, biting his upper lip.

'You will say it to the hearing of the whole school,' the Principal ordered.

Chuk raised his faltering voice as high as it could go: 'I am sorry.'

'Now. Both of you,' the Principal invited Amobi and Chuk, 'shake hands as friends.'

The two boys shook hands, each so preoccupied in holding back his tears that he did not notice how moist the other's eyes were.

'Let what has happened tonight be an object lesson to the whole school,' the Principal
sermonized. 'I have repeatedly warned that school boys do not do what?' 'Tell tales!' echoed the school.

'From now on, I shall deal very firmly with any boy peddling false rumours. Finally, I want to
emphasize once again, that this school is set up to liberate all of you from the fetters of 144

superstition and juju. All that talk about men going about as live leopards is utter rubbish. Is that clear?'

'Yes, sir!'

The Principal took a quick glance at his watch. 'It's now nearly a quarter past two a.m.' He dragged the 'a.m.' for emphasis. 'School Captain. House Captains. Any boy who is not fast asleep on his bed exactly ten minutes from now should be booked for two hours detention for violating lights out regulations!'

The boys stampeded down the road from the Principal's house to the dormitories, the Principal's powerful camp light supplementing the light from the starry night.

* * * *

The tears poured down Amobi's cheeks as he slumped down on his bed. Tears of relief. Tears of joy. That his name had been cleared. And his ostracism terminated, by the Principal himself. In front of the entire student body, with Chuk, the brain behind it, apologizing publicly.

An unusual form of ostracism it had been. No formal decision was ever taken to ostracize him.

Yet, except during formal classes and other official occasion when it was imperative to speak to him or sit next to him, every student had carefully avoided him as if he were leprous. Tunji's participation in the ostracism had stung him most. Tunji, whose protection, assistance, affection, and advice had been so invaluable.

Tears of relief. Tears of joy. That the college leopard had not been his. How many nights had sleep eluded him as he weighed the chances of Dibia Ofia making a mistake

? What if the Dibia's efforts to seal off his leopard and thereby restrict its movement failed? The implications of such a 145

failure were too frightening for words, hence he had rushed off the letter to his father, to prompt Ofia to check his fences and mend any holes.

As the tear ducts began to dry up, the words of the Principal raced back to him: 'All that talk about men going about as live leopards is utter rubbish!' How he wished the Principal was right.

It would mean the end of all his problems. He could unequivocally dismiss Dibia Ofia and men of his ilk as charlatans and damn the consequences. But how safe, how realistic would it be to swallow the Principal's words as gospel truth? How could he explain away his own recent experiences?

Should he go to the Principal and tell him all he knew? Everything, including Dibia Ofia's explanations and rituals? Such detailed information should assist the Principal and the other learned masters at the college to undertake a detailed, scientific study of the leopard phenomenon and establish the facts once and for all. Perhaps the Principal would agree to send some of the masters to Ndikelionwu to see Dibia Ofia, Mazi Nwafo, and other knowledgeable men, to collect useful information for the study. The recent action taken by the Principal to import girls from Ogbanelu into the college and the detailed programme mounted to teach the final year students how to behave in the presence of girls was sufficient evidence that the authorities would go to great lengths to solve any pressing problems for students.

Yes. He would go to the Principal. When? ...

Wait ... Would it be a good idea to go through 'Computer', the one master who had shown an
appreciation of the problem? 'Computer' ... Ah! Had 'Computer' not warned him against raising
the issue anywhere else at the college? His words of advice flashed back: '... use your chewing 146

stick in the privacy of your bedroom ... Stop raising those questions in class. You will not receive any useful answers, and yet you'll keep tarnishing your public image ...'

No. He would not raise the issue with the Principal or with any other master . Let things be as the Principal had said. That would at least leave him free to continue with his studies unmolested. He
would chew his stick diligently in the privacy of his bedroom. Hopef ully, one day his discreet
but determined search for the truth would yield fruit, and help to thr ow light on some of the mysteries of African Science. Provided Dibia Ofia continued to keep his leopard bottled tight.

147

OceanofPDF.com