



Chukwuemeka Ike

The Potter's Wheel



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Chapter One

'Obuechina Maduabuchi ...'

Obu could not contain his joy as the headmaster read out his name. He jumped off the creaking bench on which he sat and dashed out of the school building. After displaying unrehearsed acrobatics on the uneven bahama lawn outside, he ran back to his seat sweating all over as he vibrated with excitement. He came top of Standard 1 in the end of year examinations, thereby qualifying for the privileges generously conferred by the headmaster on all end of year 'firsts': exemption from fetching firewood for teachers all through the first term of the ensuing school year. He was itching to gallop home to announce his distinguished achievement to his parents, and wished the headmaster could skip the remaining names and let him go.

Obuechina was the only boy out of seven children born to Mazi Lazarus Maduabuchi and his wife. The names of the five girls who preceded him – Uzoamaka (the road is excellent), Nkiru (that which is yet to come is greater), Njideka (hold what you have), Nkechi (whatever God gives), and Ogechukwu (God's time is the best) – showed with how much anxiety and faith his parents had awaited his coming. Little wonder they literally worshipped him and showered on him all the names they had been saving up for boys who never came – Obuechina (the compound must not revert to bush), Ezenwa (infant 1 King), Nwokenagu (a male issue is desirable). He was also Onyibo – a companion – to his father, and Obiano to his mother because his arrival brought solace to her soul. After the birth of her fifth daughter, her husband's family had intensified their pressure on him to take another wife who could give him male issues. With Obu's arrival, his mother's place had been firmly secured; she could sleep in spite of thunder, no matter how many other wives her husband decided to take. The memorable event, Obu's arrival, had fallen nearly

nine years back – in January 1934. Hopes of having a second boy disappeared when, a little over two years later, Mama Obu gave birth to another daughter, Amuche (no one knows God's mind).

Obu's distinguishing features were a large head, which his parents believed carried a giant-size brain for outstanding scholarship, and a diminutive nose which seemed to have been stuck to his face as an afterthought. The nose had earned him the nickname 'when the war is over', implying that a larger nose would be ordered for him at the end of World War II when all rationing would have ended. His head swung from side to side on a torso that was so thin proportionately, that he sometimes reminded you of a tadpole. His legs had gradually straightened as he grew older, but a rugby football or a fluted pumpkin could still pass between them when he stood to attention. His father had started off with such legs, which straightened with time and contributed to his impressive height.

Obu's mother, popularly called Mama Obu as if she had no other children, was about to leave for the market when the children came home. Giving birth to seven children had not taken much out of her; at the age of forty she could clip ten years off her age and no one would disbelieve her. There was nothing superfluous about her – average height, an athletic body that was slender without being thin. Two rows of tattoo marks ran parallel to each other from her chest to her navel, and sideways from each corner of the mouth, terminating just short of a crater-sized dimple.

'Mama! Mama!' Obu shouted from the gate leading into the compound.

'I'm here, Obiano,' his mother replied. She could tell from the boy's excitement that he had passed his examination. She carefully arranged the pumpkins she was taking to the market for

sale inside her long basket, smacked the sand off the palms of her hands and moved towards Obu's voice. Obu ran to her, shouting: 'Mama!

I've passed! I came first in the whole class!'

'What did you say?' Mama Obu spoke as if she did not believe him.

'I came first in the whole class, Ma!'

She lifted him up with amazing ease, considering the weight of his head, pressed him to her chest and then lowered him: 'Obiano, my son, well done. Well done. Thanks be to God.'

She went to the kitchen and pulled down the large basket hanging over the fireplace. From it she tore off a piece of smoked fish and stuffed it into Obu's mouth. She also tore off a larger piece from the dried nchi (grass cutter) meat and handed it to him, advising him to eat that with palm oil and pepper.

Ogechukwu sneaked in, weeping as if she had broken a precious pitcher at the stream. Mama Obu asked her superfluously whether she had failed. She replied with a crescendo of weeping. The weeping only stopped when Ogechukwu saw that her mother was too engrossed with Obu to take notice of her penitent sobs.

'I'd always maintained that this big head contained nothing but brain for book work,' Mama Obu teased Obu. 'That was why your father and I did not take you seriously when at the age of five you said you did not want to go to school ...'

As she packed her basket for the market, she recounted Obu's earlier refusal to go to school. That was nearly four years ago. It was a story she had told many times over. She repeated it every time Obu excelled in an examination or his teacher extolled his academic ability. Yet on each

occasion she told the story as if she had never told it before. Now it did not matter to her that she did not have an audience.

Chapter Two

Po-pu po-pu po-o-pu! Po-pu po-pu po-o-pu!

'Egwu na amu!'

'Obi sala sala!'

The unique bicycle horn, the 'egwu na amu' (fun and laughter) greeting and the 'obi sala sala' (carefree cheerfulness) reply heralded one person and one person only, Mazi Lazarus Maduabuchi, Obu's father. A cloth dealer whose humour and lightheartedness had become proverbial, he was popularly known at Umuchukwu as Mazi Laza, and as 'Egwu na amu' throughout the several towns to which he carried his bales of cloth. The 'egwu na amu' greeting and his 'obi sala sala' reply stood for his maxim that fun and laughter are the outward signs of a happy, contented and relaxed mind. He was tall and handsome; a great dancer in his youth, sought after, to his mother's dismay, by many girls. Unlike his son, Obu, he had a prominent nose, straight like a bamboo. His hair and goatee beard were richly sprinkled with grey, appropriate for a man of fifty, but he appeared to be in no danger of growing bald.

Mazi Laza was hardly ever at home except on Sundays or during the planting season when he stayed back to plant yams. He carried his bales of cloth, mostly brightly coloured jioji, from one

large market to the next, from one town to another. His arrival at each market was heralded by his unique horn, followed by the customary greeting.

Because of his inefficient brakes, he had to run several yards after jumping down from the bicycle before he could bring it to a complete stop. However, he deliberately gave the impression that it was all part of his infectious humour and that he could have stopped his bicycle dead without running one inch if he so desired. He would shout at any person standing in his way to save his life because his bicycle came from the same stock as Chief Okeke Okafo's famous bicycle.

Chief Okeke Okafo was the first person in the Umuatulu Clan, over which he reigned, to own a bicycle. He had seen the white District Commissioner ride one, after which he had concluded that such an 'iron horse' would befit his dignity and minimise the strain of travel from one town to another. The District Commissioner helped him to acquire one from England, but whoever had shown him how to ride it had failed to draw his attention to the brakes and as to how to use them. The Chief, who had seen the D.C.'s bicycle stop at the desired spot, was surprised to see that his carried him beyond his own destination. He concluded that the D.C. had deliberately acquired a blind iron horse for him. Until he saw the D.C. to lodge a formal complaint, he decided to make the best of a difficult situation. If he wanted to travel from Umuatulu Clan headquarters to Umuchukwu, he would despatch four stalwart men on foot to Umuchukwu to await his arrival. Two other stalwart men would help him on to the iron horse at the point of departure, pushing and helping to keep the bicycle in balance until he could pedal away. At his destination, it was the responsibility of his four subjects to snatch him safely from the blind horse, and to save the horse from crashing. This required tremendous dexterity, but he soon built up a team of experts who could do it safely at any speed. The only snag was that he could dismount only at previously

agreed points. If friends waved to him to stop on the way, he would simply shout that he was in a hurry and fly past, ringing his bell non-stop to keep pedestrians, goats, sheep and chickens off his track.

Chief Okeke Okafo was long dead, but Mazi Laza helped to perpetuate his memory. Such humorous incidents served to draw many customers to his makeshift roadside shed. His unique horn announced his arrival, the Chief Okeke Okafo anecdote explained away his faulty brakes and kept you waiting while he quickly unpacked his baggage, put up his instant mat shed and spread out his bales of cloth for sale.

'Ogbuefi,' he would address a man walking past his shed without stopping, 'may the morning mop up any evil which may have survived the night. A man who walks past Egwu na amu without stopping to greet him must have been locked out the previous night by his wife. If you suffer what most of us men suffer so often from our wives, let me show you the cloth you will buy for her so that afterwards she will never again lock you out ... ' and he would proceed to display a piece of cloth.

'Nwanna,' he would call to a passer-by in a torn jumper. 'Don't be put off by this display of so-so jioji material. Egwu na amu has what you're looking for.' Then he would dive underneath a pile of cloth and produce a piece of toughlooking brown khaki material. 'If you don't know it, this is Win-the-War stuff. As you can see, I deal in jioji but I brought this piece specially for you because I know it will solve all your problems. That's all I have in stock – what you see here. Our soldiers say this is what the Germans wear, hence British bullets can't penetrate their bodies. If I tell you how I managed to get this cloth, you will not believe me. James, the Church teacher at Ududonka, brought a jar of palm wine to thank me for selling two yards to him. The poor man

had patched and repatched his jumper till his ingenious wife gave up any further efforts at patching it; the jumper just couldn't stand any more patching. It was at that point that Egwu namu sold this same stuff to James. Since then James's prayers have been for long life so that he can enjoy his jumper world-without-end! If you doubt my words, go to Ududonka and ask for James; if he is not wearing this material, return yours to me and take back your money ...'

As soon as Obu heard his father's bicycle horn outside their compound, he abandoned the wooden spectacles he was making and rushed to the gate. Mazi Laza had landed but had not yet brought his bicycle to a standstill.

'Papa, I passed! I came first in the whole class! Ogechukwu failed.' All that came out in one breath.

By the time Mazi Laza had balanced his bicycle on its metal stand Obu already clung to him. He bent low to Obu's height: 'What did you say?'

'I came first.'

The proud father lifted his son to eye level and then lowered him to his feet. Obu always enjoyed this so his father threw him up and caught him three times before he confessed the boy was growing too big for this exercise.

'So it's book, book, book inside that big head after all?' he teased his son proudly. Obu indicated that he wanted to be thrown up again.

'OK. I'll do it just one more time. You're a big boy now.' Again he threw Obu up three times, to the boy's delight, and then wheeled his bicycle inside the compound. Obu hung around as he unpacked his remaining merchandise.

'Here's something for you for doing so well.' He gave Obu a long, bright red tin flute, marked 'Made in Japan'. Obu looked at it excitedly, put it into his mouth and blew a long shrill note. His father showed him how to vary the sound by blocking the holes on the flute in turn. He was dashing out to exhibit his new acquisition to his playmates when his father pulled him back and asked him to name the favour he wanted as a reward for his brilliant result.

'I want a goat.'

'You'll have one for Christmas. Any other request?'

'I want to learn how to ride a bicycle.'

That was an awkward request. Obu had made it on a previous occasion but Mazi Laza and his wife had agreed to ignore it. Mama Obu had maintained that he was too young to handle a bicycle. What if the bicycle carried him away and he crashed to his death? Who would give her another son? He could wait till he was older and stronger. Mazi Laza knew they stood on slippery grounds. Polycarp who belonged to Obu's age grade had been riding a bicycle for the past six months. His legs could not reach the pedals if he sat on the bicycle seat, but he could ride sitting on the bicycle frame or ride in the 'monkey style' by crouching below the frame.

'All right. You can use my bicycle to learn how to ride.'

Obu was beside himself with joy and ran out of the house to exhibit his new flute and broadcast his father's other promises to his playmates, particularly to Oti. When he approached Oti's house he whistled their special call signal, but received no reply. But having come that far, he decided to enter the compound just in case Oti was asleep.

He learnt from Oti's mother that Oti had accompanied Samuel home.

Samuel. That bully. That cheat. That trickster. He and Oti had an identical hatred for Samuel. Was it hatred or dread, or a pathological fear? Samuel was older and clearly outside their age grade. Yet he chose to associate with them. His small stature helped to mask his real age; Obu and Oti nicknamed him 'Nwa etogha mpio', he who would never grow taller than the drainage hole at the foot of the compound wall. It was a nickname they used when Samuel was not within earshot; he would have cracked the sparks off their eyes if he had heard either of them refer to him so insultingly.

Obu remembered all the tricks Samuel played on them, including making them bruise their knuckles by goading them into a silly contest to determine whose knuckles would produce the loudest noise when knocked against the stone-hard tip of an old pair of shoes probably worn by Samuel's father at his wedding. Afraid to offend him, they would go on knocking at the shoe until one of them, unable to bear further bruises, burst into tears.

Should Obu track Oti to Samuel's house? No. He ruled that out; no child voluntarily gives himself up to Samuel. Then, later, he changed his mind. There was no other child around and he had to share his good news with somebody. What if Samuel kept Oti for the whole day, as he could very easily do? The weight of the good news might crush Obu if he waited indefinitely. He ran to Samuel's house.

What he saw on opening the carved outer door into Samuel's father's compound reminded him of another of Samuel's wicked tricks, one which he had forgotten. Oti sat at one corner of the compound, with a large heap of palm kernels in front of him which he must complete shelling before going home. The quick glimpse he had of Oti's face before he decided to shut the door and bolt to freedom was enough to show that Oti could not have been shelling the kernels

voluntarily. But your feelings made no difference to Samuel. He did not, in fact, expect any boy to enjoy shelling whole mountains of palm kernels. He did not enjoy it himself, hence each time his mother left him a pile to shell he always tried to trick or force younger and weaker boys into doing it for him.

Once you were in his clutches he would not release you until the heap of kernels was shelled, unless your parents sent for you. Obu and Oti had invented one escape valve. Suddenly you would answer a loud 'Ma!' and announce that you heard your mother calling you. As this was one of the permissible grounds for your discharge, you were allowed to escape to freedom. The escape valve worked until Oti quarrelled with another boy, Moses, who told Samuel the trick Oti and Obu had been playing on him. From that day, Samuel ruled that he would ignore any mother's call that he himself did not also hear.

Obu knew that if he ran, Samuel might hear his footsteps and try to find out who was running and why. That way he would be landed with a heap of kernels to shell. He therefore decided to melt away by walking on cat's paws. Samuel was too smart for him. From his late father's hammock-like cloth chair from where he supervised Oti shelling the kernels in the sun outside, he had observed Obu through the door without being seen.

'Don't run away, I've seen you!' he shouted at Obu, jumping out of the chair and dashing to the door to make sure a second helper did not escape him. He got to the door as Obu was discreetly combining walking with running.

'Obu! Come back here at once!'

Obu knew he could no longer pretend not to hear. He swung back, feigning surprise.

'Why are you running away?' Samuel queried, taking one or two steps nearer. Oti made bold to abandon the heap of kernels and tiptoe to the door without being seen by Samuel.

'I wasn't running,' replied Obu.

'All right, if you weren't running, why were you walking away?' Samuel pressed on in a tone that suggested that he had no time for puerile tactics.

'I came to look for Oti, but when I opened the door and saw nobody I decided to go away.'

'I see. I thought you saw me and deliberately decided to run away. You will come in now that you know I'm in?'

'No, I must go back to Oti's mother to report that Oti is not here,' lied Obu. 'She sent me to find Oti and bring him home immediately.'

'I'm here!' shouted Oti, suddenly shooting out like a tadpole popping up for fresh air, and smacking the sand off his palms. Samuel turned sharply and reproachfully in his direction, angry that he should have abandoned the kernels without his express permission.

'Are you sure Oti's mother sent you here with that message?' Samuel asked Obu sternly. 'And before you answer me, I hope you know I can skin you alive if you tell me lies!'

'I've just come from Oti's house,' Obu replied evasively.

'All right. You wait here while I go to verify from Oti's mother.'

'All right.' Obu decided to take the chance, hoping that Samuel would not take the trouble to go and check up. Should he decide to do so, he and Oti could run away before he returned, provided he did not lock them in, as he could well do.

Samuel made a show of his determination to investigate Obu's story. When he observed that Obu maintained a resolute attitude right through he concluded he was not playing pranks and dismissed Oti without as much as a thank you.

'Are you going, too?' he asked Obu.

'Yes. Mama Oti wants two of us.'

'All right. Go. I'll shell my kernels without you. I know I'll do it faster and better than both of you combined.'

As Oti and Obu moved off silently, Samuel observed that Obu was trying to hide something inside his jumper. 'Obu, what's that inside your jumper?' he asked.

'Nothing,' Obu replied, spreading out his hands as he pressed his new flute to his body with his left elbow. He knew what Samuel would do with the flute if it fell into his hands. The bully was always maliciously envious; he would destroy any toy he found in the possession of a small boy if he did not himself own such a toy.

'All right stick your arms above your head, if you are not clinging to anything. Come on; do like a German prisoner of war.'

Obu raised the right arm only, complaining that the left arm was smarting. Samuel suddenly sprang on him and tickled him below the ribs. In the scuffle that followed, Obu's new flute dropped to the ground. Samuel promptly stepped on it and threatened to smash it with his foot if Obu put up further resistance. Obu surrendered. Samuel picked up the flute, bade the two boys goodbye and stampeded into his compound with Obu's flute.

'God will punish you,' Obu muttered in a suppressed voice, struggling to keep back a tear.

'Let's get away from here first,' counselled Oti, happy to have been released from the ordeal Samuel had imposed upon him.

Obu did not have the courage to report the fate of his flute to his father. His father always began with the assumption that you were careless if you reported any loss to him, even before he had heard your case. He would then go off on the virtues of carefulness, using himself as a shining example. But for carefulness, he would have been nowhere today. Both his parents had died before he tied the cloth round his waist, and what little education he had had been financed by his hard work – shelling kernels for sale and doing any other job that offered itself to him. He always extolled his ability to preserve his property: he could readily produce the slate he had taken to school, the few plates and dishes he had inherited from his parents, and what was left of the first wrapper he bought for himself to mark his attainment of the age of puberty. He would show you his bicycle which was fifteen years old and yet retained all its original parts ... Obu found it easier to confide in his mother first. She knew best which loss must not be disclosed to Papa Obu, and how best to break the sad news of any loss about which he must know.

It was already twilight, the time of day when you can hardly recognise a close friend if he is more than a few yards away, the time when Mama Obu came home from her monthly Happiness Group prayer meeting. Each prayer meeting was generally a festive occasion. The duty of hostess rotated among the members, and each member tried to outshine the preceding hostess in the lavishness of her hospitality. That day it was the turn of Mama Doctor. Although her name was Mrs Margaret Osondu, she resented being so designated; she was said to have filed a major charge against one of their members at a previous meeting, accusing her of deliberately calling her Mrs Osondu instead of Mama Doctor. Her son was the first and only qualified medical practitioner within a radius of twenty miles. Although her husband was alive, she decided to be

identified as the mother of the doctor rather than as the wife of Mr Osondu. She had bragged that Mama Doctor would surpass every previous hostess when it came to her turn to 'carry the meeting'. She kept her word. Not only did she top the palm wine with one dozen bottles of lemonade, which was double the highest number ever served by any hostess, but she introduced a new item of hospitality. She served three bottles of Tennent's Beer.

Mama Obu was returning lightheartedly home, singing one of their special Happiness Group compositions, when Obu confronted her with the story of his flute.

'Samuel again? That wild pig again?' She shouted as soon as she got the full story. She dropped her raffia hand- bag with Obu and stormed towards Samuel's mother's house, shouting all the way that she would not let Samuel or any person for whom he worked as agent snatch away her one and only Obiano from her. She repeated the story of the flute to every passer-by who cared to ask why she sounded so ruffled, and the verdict in each case was always against that mother's curse called Samuel.

As soon as Samuel heard her voice and the threats it carried, he dropped the flute with his mother and disappeared. He knew how to hide when wanted for a reprimand; search as scrupulously as you wish you would be unlikely to find him. People often wondered whether he could go in and come out of ant holes at will like ancestral spirits, or masquerades as the schoolchildren called them.

'Is this the thing you are looking for?' Mama Samuel enquired, producing a dirty looking flute. 'I found it abandoned in the kitchen.' She made it transparently obvious the way she talked that she did not consider the bone worth all that contention.

'Where's that wild pig?' fumed Mama Obu snatching away the flute.

'Whom do you call a wild pig?'

'Don't you know your mischievous son?'

'It's your son who's a wild pig, not mine!'

'I see!' Mama Obu replied, lowering her voice. Mama Samuel's outburst had taken her by surprise. 'That's why people say you are responsible for his actions. You heap sand around his waist, you prop him up in his vicious action!'

'She who has her private headache will drop it in her house and come to my own house to raise trouble with me! Please take the thing that brought you here and leave me alone!'

'All right. If that is the way you look at it, keep heaping sand around him. One day you will gather your harvest home.'

As Mama Obu stepped out of the compound on her way home, she felt something fly past her face. She could not tell what it was, except that a few grains of sand flew into her open mouth, which she quickly spat out. She quickened her pace without appearing to run. From her reaction, Samuel knew he had missed his bull's eye; he had aimed at landing a handful of sand in her two eyes, to teach her a lesson she would never forget. Because of the darkness he could not aim properly; he had to rely on her footsteps and his estimation of her height. If he ran after her to have another shot, he would let the cat out of the bag. He bit his dirty finger and saw he had no alternative but to bide his time. One day she would regret ever calling him a wild pig all because of a cheap wartime Japanese flute.

Chapter Three

'Won't these children get up?' Mazi Laza shouted as he washed his face for the morning. Mama Obu stood by dutifully, to take the cup from him at the end of his ablutions and hand over the chewing stick for cleaning his teeth. 'They may be sleeping like Government workers, thinking this is still term time when all they do is eat and go to school. What I know is that I will not dig up the yams and also carry them home from the farm, while my day-old chicks sleep on!'

His voice evoked spontaneous movements inside the house as the girls rose and rolled up their mats. It was hardly six o'clock on a misty and chilly harmattan morning, but whenever Mazi Laza stayed home for farm work he believed in setting off as soon as it was light enough to see the ground in front of him. That way he could beat the scorching sun to a lot of work. He had suddenly decided to spend the week at home when he discovered that work on the farm was falling behind schedule. Christmas was barely three weeks off and it was his habit to harvest and tie up all his seed yams before Christmas, leaving the early weeks of the new year free for cutting the special grass for roofing the mud walls round the compound, and for collecting from the farms and storing away stakes strong enough for further use.

Hired Agbenu labourers worked hard only under effective supervision, and Mama Obu had been too preoccupied with one thing or the other to give them such effective supervision. As for his daughters, they hated farm work, and he was the only person who could sit on them to do it. The higher they went at school the more they resented being identified with farm work. They preferred to describe their father as a trader than as a farmer. He had bellowed at Uzoamaka, the eldest daughter, when on one occasion before her wedding he overheard her telling her younger

sisters how she looked forward to the day when she would either take a teaching job or marry a non-farmer, so that she could get away from the tedium of farm work.

Mazi Laza stuck the chewing stick into his mouth, removed his wide-brimmed raffia farm hat from where it hung on a peg on the compound wall, took the shorter of his two yam diggers and left for the farm before his daughters emerged from the house. His breakfast was usually brought to him at the farm. Neither Mama Obu nor any of their daughters had acquired the habit of eating late breakfast from him. They ate their breakfast in the house before setting off for the farm, fearing they might collapse if they worked on empty stomachs.

Mazi Laza had hired two Agbenu men to assist him in the digging, and so needed all available heads to carry the harvested yams. He had therefore ordered that all the children should carry yams, including even six-yearold Amuche to teach her to appreciate the value of food. After the girls had rushed through their morning chores – sweeping the house and the compound, fetching water from the nearby stream, throwing away the overnight ash and warming all leftover soup and food – and were sitting round a large plate of cassava foofoo and a bowl of bitterleaf soup, Ogechukwu remembered that Obu was still sleeping.

She ordered Amuche to go and knock him up.

'Don't listen to Ogechukwu,' Nkiru countered.

'Why not?' Ogechukwu retorted. She stuck the cassava foofoo she had rolled into a ball on to the second finger of her right hand, dipped the foofoo into the soup and swallowed hard. 'Why shouldn't we call Obu? If little Amuche can go to carry yams why not Obu? Does he have two heads? After all Papa said that all of us ...'

'Ogechukwu!' Mama Obu shouted from the kitchen where she was packing her husband's breakfast. 'If I hear you call Obu, cholera will purge you to death! It's when you return to this house that your strength gets into your head. When you get to school no one hears your name; that's why a child three years younger than you has already caught up with you. Stupid. If you are too lazy to go to the farm, say so, but let me not hear you mention Obu again!'

'I warned you!' chided Nkiru in subdued tones.

'She forgets we are girls,' Njideka put in, also in subdued tones. 'I keep telling her that all the time but she never remembers.'

'Is that why Mama should remind me of my ill luck in the examination? Am I the first to fail an examination in this house?' Ogechukwu pulled a long face.

'Is there anything wrong in being a girl?' Amuche asked, looking herself over as if to ensure she was not leprous.

'Sh ... sh ... sh ...' Nkiru pointed towards the kitchen. The sounds of activity there had suddenly stopped and she was sure their mother was straining her ears to catch what they were saying. The girls ate their foofoo in silence, chorused 'Thank Ma' one after the other before their mother in the kitchen, and took their baskets to the farm. Mama Obu asked them to tell their father she would bring his breakfast along after cutting some fodder for the goats. In truth she did not want to interrupt Obu's sleep, nor to leave for the farm while he slept alone in the house, so she decided to kill time by collecting food for the goats from a nearby bush, even though the goats had not consumed the leaves hung up for them the previous night.

Although Obu was nearly nine, he would not give up some of his childhood habits, and he had his mother's connivance. He shared his mother's bed with her while his younger sister, Amuche, slept on the floor with her elder sisters. Mama Obu wanted to feel him near her always, especially at night. He rarely ate supper along with the rest of the family, being usually fast asleep by the time supper was ready. It was futile to wake him up to eat; you had to guide his hands all the time or he would mistake a nostril for his mouth when eating a ball of foofoo, or dip the foofoo into the bowl of water for washing the hands, mistaking it for the soup pot.

His mother kept his supper handy so that he could have it at whatever time of night he called for it. It could be midnight, it could be in the small hours of the morning: all he needed to do was to shout 'Mama, I want my food!' and he would be served. After that he would go back to sleep, in preparation for breakfast the following morning. Mazi Laza talked himself hoarse without convincing his wife that from the time he went to school Obu should be made to drop some of these habits. She saw no reason why Mazi Laza or anyone else should be concerned since she gladly accepted the inconvenience of serving Obu his supper at any time he called for it. When Obu grew older he would adjust like all the others.

The bleating of the jubilant goats as they saw the fresh green fodder Mama Obu was bringing to them woke Obu from his sleep.

'Mama!' he cried.

'Obiano!' she replied from the goat pen at the back of the house. 'Are you awake now?'

'Yes, Ma. Good morning, Ma.'

'Morny, my son. Are you coming out?'

'Please bring me one cloth.'

'Did you pass water after I left you?'

The pair of khaki shorts Obu wore in bed was stinking with his urine, and so was the cloth his mother had used to shield him from the mosquitoes. Bed-wetting was one of the childish habits he was bound to drop at his own pace sooner or later, Mama Obu had maintained in an argument with Papa Obu; there was no need to develop hypertension over it, she said.

Obu rushed through his breakfast. Oti had arrived while his mother was scrubbing his back with his sponge to ask him if he had forgotten that their Mgbedike meeting had been scheduled for that morning; everybody else had arrived and they were all waiting for him at David's house.

When Mama Obu satisfied herself that the Mgbedike proposal did not expose her son to any danger she gave it her blessing, though not until she had warned the two boys not to cross the path of any real 'masquerades'.

The girls returned from the farm with their first load of yams as Obu and Oti were making for the outer door. Ogechukwu was mad.

'Obu where are you sneaking off to?' she asked angrily. Don't you see us carrying yams? Do you think you alone know how to play? Papa said we should tell you ...' 'Ogechukwu! Ogechukwu! Ogechukwu!' Mama Obu shouted threateningly at her daughter.

'Nto-o-o!' Obu jeered at Ogechukwu, sticking out his tongue and pulling down his two lower eyelids at her.

'Mama since you defend Obu always, you should warn him to stop making Nto-o-o at me and showing me his lower eyelids. Otherwise when this basket of yams leaves my head I'll show him that I gave him three good years, even though he may answer a boy!'

Obu melted away with Oti. He and Ogechukwu had not fought for the past two weeks, but since the announcement of their examination results she had been clutching at any opportunity to precipitate a fight. He was not ready for her at that moment so he decided to disappear without toying further with the leopard's tail.

At David's house, Polycarp and Jerry were watching a demonstration by David when Oti and Obu arrived. David had returned recently from Nnewi where his father served as a Police Constable, and he had offered to teach his friends how to make masquerades resembling the ones they made at Nnewi. His friends, none of whom had left Umuchukwu, were fascinated to see how easily you could produce an impressive looking masquerade with either dry banana leaves or strips of raffia. Polycarp volunteered to serve as a masquerade. In no time David used the dry banana leaves he had collected to transform him into a much more convincing masquerade than anything the children had ever seen before at Umuchukwu.

'What do you want to be?' David asked Polycarp. 'Mgbedike,' he replied.

'You don't talk like a masquerade,' corrected Oti.

David turned Polycarp into an Mgbedike by putting a rope round his waist. 'We'll have to find you a wooden matchet.'

'Shall we move out now?' Polycarp enquired, sounding very excited.

'Not today,' David replied. 'Have we learnt the songs to sing and made other arrangements?'

'Who'll give you money if you go round houses now?' Obu added. 'This is not yet Christmas.'

The future held bright hopes for them as they made their plans under David's able leadership. David was born the same week as Obu, but he looked much more mature and was a class ahead of Obu. As the he-goat said, travel has its advantages. David's experience outside Umuchukwu marked him out as leader of his age group. His expertise in turning out a masquerade further strengthened his claims. All five agreed that their masquerade would put to shame all other children's masquerade groups in Umuchukwu. They envisaged some of their rivals disbanding in shame and tearing up their palm fronds and other leaves as soon as their champion Mgbedike appeared. To ensure that no other group saw their backs, all of them pledged not to divulge their secrets to any boy outside their group. They agreed to exercise extra guardedness in their dealings with Samuel, as they were certain he would try his tricks on them to get at their secrets.

They accepted David's suggestion to keep their number at five, and to subscribe six pence each towards an operating fund from which they could buy an ogene and any other essential musical instrument. They would meet from time to time to learn the songs they would sing and to arrange their Christmas rounds. They agreed that all money received during their public appearances, whether as individual performers or as a group, would be paid into their operating fund. At the end of the Christmas season they would meet to decide how to share or invest their takings.

Chapter Four

How much longer could Mama Obu sustain the smokescreen around Obu to restrain Mazi Laza from dragging him to the farm? The question bothered Obuechina as he lay wide awake, itching to get on with his full programme of activities for the day but afraid to emerge from the house lest his father order him to the farm. Amuche, his youngest sister, had successfully made two trips per day to the farm for nearly a week, knocking all credulity out of his mother's stock plea that he was still too young to trudge the two miles to the farm. It did not matter to Mazi Laza how many trips Obu made to the farm on one day, nor the number of yams he carried per trip. All he wanted was to establish the principle that every person who breathes must regard work as an essential ingredient of life, and everybody who eats food must work for it. Anybody who shunned work was bound to end up a ne'er-do-well, and Mazi Laza had dreams of a much brighter future than that for his only son.

Obu did not share his father's fears. He and his friends were fully occupied, too busy at times even to eat their meals. They filled their time with things that mattered – designing, producing and testing new models of bamboo goggles, wooden tricycles and monocycles propelled in many different ways, with or without spokes. Oti's father recognised the importance of their work and brought home for his son the trunk of an okwe tree, excellent for making wheels strong enough to carry human beings. A marrow which a baby could remove effortlessly ran through the stem, providing a hole large enough to take a wooden shaft. The acquisition of that trunk resulted in a major breakthrough by the boys. All the tricycles, bicycles and monocycles they had produced so far were mere toys; none of them could carry anything bigger than a fly. Now they were poised to produce a vehicle that could carry human beings, baskets of yams, cassava, anything. That was work, more important work than trudging to the farm several times to carry yams. Obu

had no intention of becoming a farmer, certainly not if he continued to perform brilliantly at school. He would rather be an engineer or a doctor. Knowledge of farming would not help him to succeed in either profession, and he wished his father would understand this and help him the way Oti's father helped Oti.

The giant Rhode Island Red cock which Mazi Laza had bought to improve the local breed interrupted Obu's rumination. Its throaty crowing, like a faithful alarm clock, proclaimed the dawn of a new day. The cackling hens and their chicks, as if waiting for the starter's gun, began the day's race for earthworms, ants... In the partial darkness, Mama Obu felt for Obu as if to make sure he had survived another night. She then felt for her loincloth.

'Mama,' whispered Obu, 'I don't want to come out until Papa leaves for the farm. If I do he will take me to the farm. Leave my food where I can find it. Don't lock Papa's room; I shall learn to ride the bicycle today.'

'Who will teach you?' his mother enquired, also in a whisper.

'David.'

'Is he strong enough to hold the bicycle for you?'

'Yes, Ma. It was he who taught Polycarp.'

'All right, but don't let that wild pig called Samuel come near you. He is already as stone-hearted as his dead father. That's why he is stunted. And his mother is not the woman to bring up a boy properly. That boy doesn't look at you with good eyes, so beware. You remember your flute ...'

She stopped short when Mazi Laza, on his way to the lavatory at the back of the compound, asked whether she was talking to him. She lied that she was praying. As she stepped off the bed she felt Obu round his hips. He had not wetted his bed.

'Well done!' she congratulated him. 'If you keep it up for one week, I'll kill a cock for you!'

Before leaving the room, she advised Obu to take care of himself and not to accept food anywhere except at Oti's. She did not have another son and it appeared God had sealed her womb since Amuche was born six years ago.

Obu jumped off the bed as soon as everyone else had left the house. He rubbed each corner of his mouth hard, in case he had 'eaten the morning lizard' (as his mother described nocturnal salivation) and left evidence of it trailing down the sides of the mouth. He could not afford the time for a bath, even though he was certain his mother must have left bath water for him in the earthen bowl which served as his bath. Overflowing with excitement, he rushed into his father's room to take proud possession of the bicycle. The bicycle was there! Somehow he had feared it might have vanished. He grabbed the handle bar. The bicycle was locked. He searched frantically for the key all over the room. It was nowhere to be found. He searched again and found it at the foot of the mat on his father's bed. He rolled the bicycle out to the compound. Should he take it straight to David or have his breakfast first or rush to the tailor to be measured for the Christmas outfit his father had ordered for him? Thoughts of the major breakthrough in vehicle invention momentarily melted into thin air.

In the end he decided he would mount the bicycle first before attempting anything else. It was an opportunity he had waited for for so long. He remembered clearly how he had seen the cyclists do it – place the left foot on the pedal, kick the ground with the right foot to gather momentum,

let the cycle roll a short distance, kick again with the right foot, and then swing the right leg over, balance on the seat and pedal away. It seemed so simple. He was smart enough to save the bicycle from crashing, but the pedal scraped part of his shin bone, exposing delicate white flesh which soon turned red as blood formed around it. Carefully he stood the bicycle against the compound wall and went outside to look for the medicinal herb (*Aspilia latifolia*). Unable to find any, he returned to the compound, and used the bitterleaf instead, crushing it and squeezing the green smarting liquid on the wound.

'Now that I've sustained an injury, I should master the bicycle without difficulty,' he assured himself as he gulped down his breakfast of cassava foofoo and ora soup. The ora soup had been prepared for the cocoyam foofoo which everybody else had for supper and breakfast. Obu would not touch cocoyam foofoo because he claimed it stuck to his throat, so cassava foofoo had to be pounded just for him. He was too excited to be bothered with eating the head of the chicken as the only boy in the house, or to pack away the plates and pots. On his way out he remembered that he had not chewed his stick for the morning, which he should have done before eating. He broke a twig from an orange tree outside the compound, scraped off the skin from one end and plunged the improvised chewing stick into his mouth. On his way to David's house, he thought how grand it would be if he could ride rather than walk to the tailor's to have his measurements taken.

David was shivering on his grandmother's bed, wrapped up in an old, black, Police blanket. His parents had not come home with him because his father complained that he had still not recovered from the expenses he incurred when the whole family came home the previous Christmas. To satisfy his mother's desire to see the children, he had agreed to send David home for Christmas. David was grandmother's favourite, so the compromise was acceptable all round.

Grandma had diagnosed iba, a word which could mean anything from malaria to infective hepatitis, and blamed it on negligence on the part of David's mother who had failed to include a mosquito net in David's holiday kit. It was cruel to expose township born and bred children like David to the giant mosquitoes at Umuchukwu. She brushed aside the malarial tablets David had brought from home and went in quest of lemon grass and the other herbs which went into the concoction appropriately called 'iba shut up' at Umuchukwu, being the most effective cure for iba.

The mixture was boiling in a giant-size iron pot outside the kitchen at the time Obu came in.

'Nwokedote cannot play with you this morning,' grandma announced as soon as she saw Obu. 'You can see him rolled up there,' she pointed at the bedroom where David was lying. 'He has been knocked down by iba, but I shall soon command iba to shut up!' Grandma had given David the nickname Nwokedote after she had overheard him at the age of five warning the bully Samuel in tears after Samuel had trounced him: 'Nwoke tote o che ibe ya', meaning that when a man grows up he has no alternative but to watch the younger ones catch up with him sooner or later.

'I brought Papa's bicycle so that you could teach me to ride .. .' Obu began after David had pulled the blanket off his face.

'No bicycle today!' grandma shouted. 'Nwokedote see whether you can get up; "iba shut up" is ready to put you on your feet again!'

Obu knew what an ordeal awaited David. He had gone through it on two occasions, and did not look forward to a third. He had been stripped naked and asked to sit on the nwa Ekwulobia, the low kitchen stool. The giant-size iron pot of steaming 'iba shut up' herbs was placed directly in front of him, with the lid off. He was ordered to bend over the steaming pot, to inhale the

medicine through his nostrils, eyes, pores, through every possible opening. To ensure that none of the medicinal steam was wasted, and that every part of his body was covered, mats, blankets and heavy cloths were used to encircle him and the open pot, shutting off all fresh air. He was ordered to breathe normally all along.

When the heat began to wear away, somebody poked a stick into the pot, stirring the contents and releasing imprisoned steam. When he was thoroughly steamed and all the heat had gone from the pot, he was permitted to breathe fresh air once again. But that was not the end of the ordeal. He had to bathe in the dirty green liquid from the pot, and to drink a cupful of the repulsive stuff every day for one whole week.

After sympathising with David, a disappointed Obu rolled his bicycle away. Outside the compound he licked the tear that had drifted to his upper lip from his right cheek. 'David was well yesterday. He has been well all these days. Just today when he is to teach me to ride, iba decides to knock him down. The day I decide to go hunting, antelopes learn to climb trees and snails develop wings ...'

What should he do? Return the bicycle until David recovered sufficiently to teach him? No, he could not do that, after being so emotionally worked up. Should he go to Oti to seek his advice? No. Oti would be angry with him for not turning up to help with their new vehicle. Or Oti might beg him to let him learn to ride too, a situation he had tried to avoid by making the arrangement with David alone.

Polycarp! He would go to Polycarp to teach him. Polycarp was not nearly as adept as David. He could not converse freely while on a bicycle, neither could he ride with only one hand. But he could ride to the school and back without falling.

When Obu arrived at Polycarp's house, half a mile away from David's, he learnt to his utter discomfiture that Polycarp had accompanied his elder brother to Obutu river to catch fish. At that point he decided he had had enough. Without waiting to accept or reject the large slice of boiled yam which Polycarp's mother had dipped into the vegetable mixture and held out to him, he turned his face towards home. He had never experienced such a succession of disappointments in one short morning, and he began to fear that his chi did not want him to learn how to ride that day. His bruised shin might have been intended as a bad omen, warning him to leave the bicycle where he found it. He would take the bicycle home and pray for David to get well soon.

On his way, Obu walked right into Samuel, as an unsuspecting fish would swim into the open jaws of a crocodile. He was passing through ilo hockey, said to have served as a hockey field in the early part of the century when a flourishing school stood on that site. A white missionary dying to play his favourite game with somebody had insisted on teaching the game of hockey to teachers and pupils alike, and had improvised hockey sticks from the curved ends of bamboo stems. All that survived of the one time school were three mango trees and the open field, considerably reduced in size by the ever encroaching yam plots. It was at the foot of one of these mango trees that Samuel sat hatching his next mischievous plot. He and Obu were each taken aback at the sudden appearance of the other, but Samuel quickly took control of the situation.

'The crab may swim across large and small rivers, but ultimately it will end up in an old woman's soup pot!' Samuel snatched the bicycle handle from Obu as he spoke. 'You crab have now found your way into my soup pot, and you're not escaping from it!'

Obu looked around to see if any adult was within sight or hearing; not one was around. That meant that Samuel could pound him like foofoo as much as he fancied, and no adult would come

to separate them. The prospect was not very encouraging. Howbeit, he held on to the bicycle seat, if only to give the semblance of some resistance, while thinking hard how to wriggle free from the clutches of a leopard.

'It seems you've gone dumb, eh? Whenever your mother is not around you go dumb, but when she is around you talk faster than a weaver bird.'

'I've not abused your mother, O,' pleaded Obu. 'Please leave my mother alone. She hasn't done anything to you.'

'Who told you?' Samuel asked, in disagreement. 'She came to my mother's house to abuse my mother and myself the other night.'

'She didn't abuse your mother!'

'She did!'

'She didn't!'

'She did!' shouted Samuel, 'and shut your dirty mouth when I'm talking or I'll smash your jaw!'

Obu did not reply. He held on to the bicycle seat.

'Tell your mother that she was in luck that night,' Samuel continued when he found that Obu was not in a hurry to talk. 'If Samuel had been Samuel that night, she would not have seen her way home, neither would she have dared abuse me again, just because of a Japanese made flute!'

'Do you know you spoilt that flute beyond repair?' Obu asked.

'Sharrap! Is that why your mother should come to my house to abuse me and my mother? Just for the sake of a penny flute!'

Obu again shut up, even though he wanted to remind Samuel of the poor man who said the beef was sandy simply because he had no money to pay for it.

'Whose bicycle is this?' enquired Samuel.

'Papa's.'

Samuel gave a dry laugh: 'Is this the thirty-year-old anikilija which everyone says your father looks after more than he looks after his children?'

Obu was finding it increasingly difficult to contain his anger, but he knew the consequences of any precipitate action.

'What are you doing with it?' Samuel continued his cross-examination.

'I took it to the repairer,' Obu lied.

'What was the complaint? Old age?'

'I don't know.'

'I'll soon find out.' Before Obu could protest, Samuel had run some steps with the bicycle and ridden off towards the tailor's house. Obu ran after him, then gave up the futile chase and retired to the foot of the mango tree to nurse his anger.

Samuel cycled round the field six times, cracking offensive jokes at Obu each time he passed the mango tree. At the end of his rounds, he dismounted in front of Obu.

'This is proper anikilija,' Samuel remarked derisively as he pushed the bicycle to Obu. 'I hope none of the spokes has pierced my body .. .'

'Shut up!' Obu shouted as if someone spoke through him. 'How many bicycles did your father own in his lifetime?'

Samuel glowered at him like a wrestler hypnotising his underdog challenger. 'Ask that question again,' he ordered.

'I repeat, how many bicycles did your father own before he died?' Obu was surprised to see that his fear was evaporating.

Samuel ordered him to drop the bicycle. Obu complied. Then Samuel grabbed Obu's right hand. Obu knew that if he allowed Samuel to twist it behind him he would be completely helpless. It would not be unlike Samuel there after to lead him to the mango tree, and bash his head against the trunk as many times as suited his fancy. Obu therefore threw all his energy into his resistance. Samuel tried one technique after another to twist Obu's hand, to no avail.

'I'll let you go today, but bear it in mind that I owe you a thorough beating. Your cup is overflowing. And when I'll beat you it will be in a more secluded place than this open field where people are likely to come to your rescue ...'

Obu picked up his father's bicycle and reluctant to engage in any further verbal exchanges with Samuel walked gradually away. A thought was running through his mind. Samuel had failed to twist his arm as a result of the resistance he had put up. This was the first time Samuel had failed to overpower him. Could it be that Samuel's strength was declining or that he, Obu, was becoming as strong as Samuel? Or could it be that Samuel was no more than a toothless bulldog?

Samuel was a menace to his life, but the experience that afternoon revealed the prospect that perhaps with determination Samuel could be resisted. The experiment was worth repeating on another occasion.

Obu's thoughts were interrupted by the blare of a loud speaker mounted on a landrover. It reminded the people of Umuchukwu of the free 'cinema show at ilo hockey that night.

Chapter Five

The Mobile Cinema Van brought an innovation into the Yuletide activities at Umuchukwu. It gave everyone (except the less than a handful who had been to a township) their first opportunity of seeing a cinema, and the whole town turned up at ilo hockey, in spite of the cold harmattan evening; men, women and children came from even the remote villages of Olpeze and Okpunifite.

The first supporting film consisted of shots said to have been taken at the war fronts. They included gigantic buildings, the like of which had not been seen by anyone at Umuchukwu, being reduced to ruins by demolition bombs. There were shots of bridges blown up at strategic moments, and fast trains consequently crashing into the ravines below. Nazi bombers were shown bursting into flames in mid-air and falling apart. From time to time women and children in the audience shrieked or covered their eyes at the gruesome scenes. The film portrayed the

British as humane and courageous, while the Germans were avaricious, heartless and senselessly destructive.

The second supporting film showed what happened to the palm kernels and the rubber collected from the various villages for the war effort, from the time they were received in the villages till they appeared in different forms at the war front. This enabled the villagers to see more clearly how by shelling kernels or digging up the roots of the rubber shrub they were helping to win the war. It made the audience feel that they belonged to the Allied family.

The main film took the ingenious form of a battle in the animal kingdom, a ferocious battle between the mongoose and the cobra. The battle raged long and fierce, with moments of real anxiety over the fate of the admirable mongoose. In the end the unexpected happened: the harmless looking mongoose killed the awe-inspiring and venomous cobra to the spontaneous jubilation of the tense audience. The message was obvious. The cobra represented everything evil, in other words, the Germans. The mongoose represented the powers of light, in other words, the British. To fight on the side of the British was to assist the powers of light to overcome the powers of darkness, and the film left the people of Umuchukwu with no alternative but to continue throwing in all they had on the side of Britain.

The Second World War, then entering its fourth year, was being fought in far-off lands, but some of its tremors were felt at Umuchukwu as in several other Nigerian towns and villages. Vans, fitted with loudspeakers, drove through Umuchukwu at least once a month, to exhort the villagers to intensify their shelling of palm kernels and their search for rubber. Obu remembered the Court Messenger who had been sent to their school to teach the teachers and pupils how to identify the rubber-yielding shrub in the forest. He always had trouble over the letters 'l' and 'r',

pronouncing 'lorry' as if it were 'rolly'. As a result, each time the word 'rubber' came into his speech he would call it 'lobber', making the pupils giggle. When he took each group of pupils to a nearby bush to identify the rubber plants among the other shrubs, pupils who already knew the plant very well would from time to time hold up the correct plant to him for identification, just to hear him say 'Yes, that is lobber'.

Salt rationing could have created real hardship at Umuchukwu, but for the availability of local salt at Ubulu. Ubulu women had produced salt as far back as any living person at Umuchukwu could remember, by heating in earthen pots the salt water from their lake until all the water evaporated leaving the salt. They then broke the pots and cut up the large cakes of salt for sale and for consumption. Before the war, few people outside Ubulu had taken Ubulu salt seriously. With the rationing of imported salt and the bad blood it generated, Ubulu salt swept the market. Scarcity of cloth presented less difficulty. Hems moved up inches above the knee, resulting in the short dress nicknamed 'Calabar Style' at Umuchukwu.

The war had at least one healthy effect on Umuchukwu. The recruitment teams swept away the thieves and ne'er-do-wells as a sanitary worker sweeps off refuse from the market. One of them, who nicknamed himself King Kong, had been a terror to most people at Umuchukwu, especially to women and children. He could impound any jar of palm wine or any foodstuffs brought to the market for sale, without paying for them and without apology. He could walk into any maize farm and cut as many cobs of maize as he wanted, claiming that he was merely walking in the path of Jesus Christ who reaped where he did not sow. He bragged that he had a single bone in his lower right arm which more than doubled the strength and effectiveness of that arm, and claimed that any man he struck with the full strength of that arm would crawl about eating grass without knowing what he was doing. Secret representations had been made to the District

Commissioner to extract some muscles from King Kong's right arm, but without success. At one time it was rumoured that even the white men feared King Kong. As soon as the recruitment drive began, every one daring enough to do so goaded King Kong into enlistment, flattering him by saying that all Britain needed was a handful of supermen like him to confound the Germans. His departure was celebrated widely, and there was no doubt that prayers were regularly offered in secret that he should not return from the war, or that if he did, it should be with the proper number of bones!

The second man everyone was happy to see taken away in the 'Belly-never-full' lorry (as the monstrous looking army lorry was described) was Uke, who could steal your shirt from your back in broad daylight without your knowledge. If he paid you a visit and began to compliment you on your well-fed goat or sheep you promptly warned him that you would hold him responsible for any goat or sheep missing from your house. He was believed to take the form of a leopard at will, if that appeared the only means of obtaining what he wanted. It was alleged that he concealed a scar on his left arm where he was shot one night carrying a goat and scaling a wall. The owner of the goat reported that he had fired at a leopard and hit its left fore-limb. Uke did not appear in public for a month after the leopard incident, and nobody knew his whereabouts; it was therefore easy to link him with the leopard.

Uke opted to join the army, to wipe off the public disgrace which came with his theft of the only goat of an aged woman fast losing her sight. He had been made to parade the village, his hands tied behind him and the pot in which the goat meat had been found boiling, on his head. He had been cursed, spat on and flogged all the way. At the end of it he had joined the army after buying the old woman another goat.

The war seemed to have transformed Uke, judging from the letters he wrote from Burma. He said he had shed his bad ways as a snake discards its old skin, and planned to lead a decent life on his return from the war. He had written to the Church teacher to enter his name in the Church books and sent some money as his initial payment. He had asked his age grade to find him land, preferably close to a main road, where he would build a decent house and open a shop on his return. In his letter to Mazi Laza, he expressed a strong desire to find a wife. Beautiful Indian and Burmese girls were pestering him for marriage, he wrote, but he was determined not to marry a foreign girl. His preference was for a girl from Umuchukwu; but knowing what problems might confront him at Umuchukwu, he said he would consider a girl from any of the neighbouring towns. He enclosed a photograph of himself in army uniform, for presentation to the parents of any girl considered suitable for him. He urged that the photograph of whichever girl was selected be taken and air-mailed to him. He would make some money available to Mazi Laza for the bride price as soon as this became necessary.

'If the war can transform people so easily, all of us should seek enlistment!' So remarked everyone as the news from Uke circulated round Umuchukwu.

Chapter Six

'Who are you?' Mazi Laza enquired sleepily and angrily as the knock on his door persisted. The Rhode Island Red cock had not yet signalled the break of dawn, and no part of the night was as enjoyable and rejuvenating to him after a tedious day as that last lap between the second and the third (and final) crowing of the cock.

'It's me,' replied Mama Obu, angry that it had taken him so long to end his snoring and respond to her persistent knocks.

'Is it Missus?'

'Does my voice sound strange today?' she replied impatiently.

'Is all well?' he asked as he rose from the bed, his eyes still heavy. It could not have been later than 4.30 a.m. He threw the heavy dirty-brown army blanket aside and groped for his loincloth where he had left it on the clothes line which served as his wardrobe. It was his habit to retire to bed free of encumbrances; his room was usually hot and stuffy as he dared not leave the single window open for fear of thieves and mosquitoes. On cold harmattan nights, such as this, he would strip all the same before going under the heavy army blanket he had purchased in the whitemarket during his travels.

'You say all is well?' he repeated as his wife entered the room and sat at one end of the wooden bed.

'It's you to whom I should ask that question,' she replied, sulking visibly. 'After knocking for some time I asked myself whether it was ordinary sleep. Egwu na amu.'

'Agu nwanyi. I can't remember any night that my wife has brought herself to me, so can you blame me?' he teased her.

'You will know who has brought herself to you. It's because of Obiano that I am here.'

'Hm.' Mazi Laza was apprehensive without wanting to disclose it.

'I had wanted to discuss it with you after supper last night but I knew how worn out you are the day you return from your travels ...'

'I would have liked to see you sit down to talk after supper without snoring,' interrupted Mazi Laza, 'but I am not trying to interrupt.'

'Even the civet cat will not sleep if it has to carry the load which has weighed me down for so long. I know I've mentioned it to you before, but you merely dismissed it as woman's talk. The more I try to forget it, the more things happen which convince me that I should do something before it is too late ...'

Mama Obu recounted the different incidents which strengthened her suspicion that Obu was an ogbanje (a child who is born into the world over and over again). More than one knowledgeable person had said the same thing about the scar on Obu's left cheek. It was a short vertical line which appeared to have been deliberately carved. It was suggested that it had been carved on him by the last family to which he had been born over and over again, when they found him out. With that mark accompanying him to the grave, he could not return to the same family or the mark would expose him. A family desperately in need of a son was bound to lavish kindness on him, so he had chosen to be born to Mazi Laza and his wife.

I had ignored all such suggestions, knowing that it is not unusual for children to be born with natural marks.

Yesterday I changed my mind.' 'Why?' enquired Mazi Laza, fully awake.

'On the advice of Nwakaku, that woman who had such ill luck with ogbanje children, I called Obiano into my room after lunch to question him about the mark. As soon as my eyes went to the mark, his eyes lost their sparkle. By the time I had ended my question, he had developed a high temperature and begun to shiver as if he would have convulsion. I had to apply coconut oil on him to lower his temperature.

'Hm ... And what do your ogbanje experts advise you to do?'

'You ask as if you were a stranger to Umuchukwu, or as if you were born yesterday!' she retorted.

'Will you keep your voice down?' chided Mazi Laza.

'Why must I keep my voice down?'

'If you can't keep it down, leave my room or I'll leave it for you! I'm sure I can still catch one bout of sleep before day breaks.'

'All right, I'll keep my voice down,' Mama Obu conceded, speaking softly. 'But I must say that I'm tired of being treated as if I don't know what I'm doing or saying. If Obiano doesn't mean anything to you, he means the whole world to me. I know what I suffered before God sent him to me; I know all the insults I received. I will not fold my arms and see anyone snatch him away from me because I know what my condition will be if he is no more. So when I fret about his welfare, everyone should recognise that a mad man is not without some common sense.'

'You don't need to tell me what Onyibo means to you as well as to me,' remarked Mazi Laza, anxious to get to the meat of the matter now that his wife had released the pent up steam.

'If he means that much to you, show it!'

'You think I don't?'

'I don't know,' Mama Obu replied.

'May be because I don't walk on my head, or because I don't agree to feed him on eggs and to insulate him from housework. However, that's another matter which I'll take up with you on another occasion.' After a brief pause Mazi Laza went on. 'With regard to the ogbanje discussion, do you now insist on calling that Awa woman to examine him?'

'Yes, unless you know a better method of handling the matter.'

'I don't know what the Catechist will say if he hears that Laza brought a pagan woman to ...'

'Don't annoy me with that stale story of yours about the Catechist,' cut in Mama Obu. 'The Catechist should not push his mouth into something he knows nothing about. If he chooses to do so, that is his own lookout. If he can remove ogbanje, let him tell us; if he cannot, he should shut his mouth and stop interfering with those to whom God has given the power to do so.'

Mazi Laza yielded, but wanted to be given prior notice of the date when the Awa woman would come; that would enable him to arrange an alibi for himself to escape the Catechist's certain query when he got to learn about the visit.

The day the woman came, Mazi Laza left home on his Eagle bicycle early in the morning to collect money from his several debtors. It was only two days before Christmas and he needed the money badly before schools reopened.

Nwomiko, the Awa woman, was the leading ogbanje expert for miles around, and she had a hard time keeping her several engagements. She was pint-sized, notwithstanding the innumerable cocks she received as part of her professional fees. Her little feet alternated so rapidly as she walked that people wondered whether they ever hit the ground before taking off again. She had a pair of sharp, penetrating eyes which saw you before you saw them. She was accompanied by a young girl carrying a long market basket for the fruits of her labour.

As soon as Nwomiko arrived, Mama Obu took her to the kitchen verandah facing the back wall of the compound where they shared a kola nut. Nwomiko threw a lobe into her mouth and her teeth went to work at terrific speed; she was always in a hurry. Mama Obu presented the sacrificial gifts to her – a raffia mat on which the gifts would be displayed, a comb, twelve large coconuts, three large yams, two bars of soap, six yards of white shirting, six yards of jioji cloth, and one cock. The sacrifice was imperative if the other ogbanje were to release Obu. Nwomiko readily agreed not to offer the sacrifice close to the compound so as not to embarrass Mazi Laza. Since sacrifices for the ogbanje must be placed on anthills if they are to be accepted, she would deposit the sacrifice on one of the anthills she had spotted far from Mazi Laza's house. Her attendant collected the offertory with practised hands.

'Obiano!' Mama Obu called. There was no reply.

'Obuechina!' she repeated. Still no reply.

It looked like a miracle. Obu had disappeared within the short time she took Nwomiko to the kitchen verandah. His mother saw in this conclusive proof that he was an ogbanje, otherwise how did he recognise Nwomiko when her visit had been a closely guarded secret?

'When and where does he usually visit?' enquired Nwomiko.

Mama Obu named a few persons whose houses he normally visited, pointing out that they did not bring him up to visit people's homes. 'He is in Oti's house,' Nwomiko announced. 'Send for him there.'

Mama Obu chose to go herself to avoid further obstacles. Nwomiko was right; there Obu was, fidgeting with the wheels of the okwe tree cut for Oti by his father. Obu walked up to her silently and she led him home. As soon as he saw Nwomiko, he burst into tears. His mother swallowed hard.

'This looks an obvious case,' Nwomiko observed. 'Howbeit, let me see your left palm.'

'And the right,' she continued, after examining Obu's left palm. At the end of the examination, she turned to Mama Obu and nodded: 'Yes, he certainly is!'

'It is not true, Ma,' Obu shouted, sobbing. His mother went over to console him.

'Leave him alone,' Nwomiko admonished her. 'It's women like you who encourage the ogbanje by pampering them all the time. Do you know that the boy you fondle that way has signed to leave you the day he attains his ninth birthday?'

Mama Obu's heart flew off and her hands dropped from Obu as if his body had suddenly been charged with electricity.

'What did you say?'

'He signed up that he would live with you for nine years only, after which you would have had a corpse on your hands.'

Mama Obu looked at her son who had stopped sobbing. Nwomiko asked Obu to take her to the place where he had buried his ogbanje stone, the mysterious stone which determined how long the ogbanje would live. He did not utter a word. Nwomiko went out, followed by Mama Obu who dragged Obu by the arm. They trotted after Nwomiko as the fleet-footed woman surveyed the compound, shaking her head at the end of the tour. She could not find any clue. She stole a momentary glance at Obu, paused for a while and made for the door leading out of the compound. She did not take much time outside the compound before she stopped with finality by one of the orange trees in front of the compound.

'It's here,' she pronounced.

Mama Obu felt great relief that the spot had been located, hoping that the woman was right. Since Nwomiko mentioned that Obu planned to die on his ninth birthday, her blood pressure had soared sharply. She feared that the hour glass might run out even before they could discover the spot where Obu buried his ogbanje stone.

'Someone should fetch me a hoe,' Nwomiko instructed. Ogechukwu who had worked her way into the group ran inside the compound to bring the hoe. Obu could be heard trying to restrain his running nose.

Nwomiko did not dig deeper than a foot before she plunged her hand into the hole with lightning speed, fingered the earth beneath, and produced a small object.

'Here it is,' she announced, presenting the ogbanje stone to Mama Obu. 'He had buried it much deeper than this initially, but it rises nearer to the surface as the end of his present life approaches.'

Mama Obu looked at the mysterious object. It looked like the kind of pebble one would find at the bed of a river or at the seashore, white and smooth. 'Does it mean that everything is all right now?' she asked as she returned the stone and the group returned to the house. 'Can he now remain with us all the time?'

'Yes,' pronounced the woman with that air of authority and finality which comes only with years of successful practice. 'Now that I have impounded his stone, he ceases to be an ogbanje.'

Mama Obu's superabundant love for her only son gushed back as if it had been held in check by a powerful dam. She bent down to clasp Obu warmly to her chest as she would welcome a prodigal son, thankful to God and Nwomiko that her days of anxiety were over, and that she could not have acted more promptly. Had she succumbed to her husband's reservations, she would have lost her most treasured earthly possession in two weeks' time. All the Catechist could have contributed would have been to bury the child and tell his parents that the dead are blessed ... She would keep all that until Papa Obu returned from his meaningless journey.

Nwomiko left as soon as she had collected much more than her professional fee from an excited Mama Obu. She had another child to save at Obuchie before returning home that same day, and so could not afford to wait for a meal. As soon as she left, Mama Obu went to see her son. He was fast asleep on her bed. Although Nwomiko had told her that Obu would go into a long sleep lasting several hours, she bent close to make sure that he was breathing and alive. He was, so she let him sleep, deeply relieved and happy that she now had a son born to stay.

Could Nwomiko be right in speculating that she might yet bear more sons, now that the ogbanje who had blocked her womb to keep back any rival had lost his powers?

How wonderful it would be if it could come true; to have an only son is to leave yourself too much at the mercy of the gods. But Nwomiko had been reluctant to stake her reputation on it, and age was creeping in, so ...

Chapter Seven

'Polycarp,' began David after both boys had stripped off at the grass covered bank of Nkwukwo stream, 'throw water at me and I'll throw at you.'

That was one acknowledged way to take the bite off the cold water. Polycarp accepted, and they stepped into the water as if they had been ordered to dip blistered feet into a bowl of iodine. At first each flung at the other as many drops of water as one finger could carry; then two fingers, and soon one palm. In a short while each was splashing water on the other with two hands. The initial shock gave way to an exhilarating experience.

Oti and Obu were not as brave. They stood a safe distance up the embankment, arms tightly clasped round the body, teeth clattering involuntarily, and white smoke exuding from their mouths and nostrils as if they smoked invisible cigars. Each was envious of Polycarp and David as they gave the impression that they were enjoying the cold bath, but neither had the courage to go near the water. Samuel who was already at the stream by the time the four boys arrived was still standing beside his bucket; he had not even removed his clothes. Reluctant to concede that

Polycarp and David had more guts than he, Samuel quietly removed his clothes and walked nonchalantly to the stream, holding a small calabash bowl for scooping up water.

Standing on the edge of the stream, Samuel bent over, filled the bowl with the cold water, spun round, took a few steps and, in a flash, emptied the contents of the bowl on Obu and Oti, clothes and all.

'May the cold in this water go after you rather than me,' Samuel shouted before rushing into the stream and splashing water all over himself before anyone else could.

It was the coldest Christmas Umuchukwu ever had. The harmattan blew with a vengeance. The temperature the previous night had dropped to its lowest ever, making even adults dread 'washing off the morning face' with cold water. Dry, brown leaves from the iroko tree which dominated the Church compound fluttered everywhere and littered the church grounds which the Carol Members, as the youth group was called, had laboriously swept clean the previous evening.

Christmas, no matter how cold, was nonetheless one morning in the year when being an angel to your parents and well-to-do relations paid high dividends. Obu would not, otherwise, have accompanied his playmates on such an early morning trip to the stream.

Obu caught himself several times during the Christmas service admiring his brand new danshiki dress, made of blue poplin with white, rather broad, longitudinal stripes. 'Dennis the tailor' had done beautiful decorative work with yellow thread on its neckline and the borders of each of the two side pockets. The cap itself, the most fascinating part of the dress to Obu, had the shape of a long bag, beautifully embroidered at the open end with yellow thread. Before leaving the house

that morning for the Christmas service, Obu had tried tilting the cap at various angles, using a hand mirror, to choose the most effective.

Whenever the congregation sat down, he switched his attention from his clothes to his shoes. They were his first pair of shoes ever – a pair of sandalets popularly nicknamed 'stand by'. They were a size too big for him, and this had not been discovered earlier since the gift was a closely guarded secret not only from Obu but also from his father, who had ruled against buying shoes for his children while they were still at school. Obu could not miss the thrill of showing them off on Christmas day so he had decided to wear them, oversize though they were, rather than keep them in cold storage until after Christmas when they could be exchanged for ones of his size.

The Church itself was in a festive mood. Externally, its recently erected aluminium roof glistened at the impact of the first rays of the sun to pierce through the harmattan haze. Inside, it was beautifully decorated with palm fronds, flowers and banana trees. The children, who took up most of the benches, brought added colour with their 'Christmas clothes'. Very few of the choristers joined the procession; they preferred to sit with the rest of the congregation so as to show off their new clothes which would otherwise have been obscured by the nondescript choristers' black and white robes.

'That's better,' Obu muttered to himself when he felt he had got the danshiki cap at the proper angle. The harmattan air outside the church was dry and dusty, making you thirsty and drying up your lips so that you could not even smile naturally without bleeding, but it was better outside than inside the church where he could not wear his cap. The Catechist was on his way to the pulpit for the Christmas sermon when Obu lied to the church- warden saying that he wanted to relieve himself outside.

He was drawn to the children running around on the ilo hockey, showing off their new clothes complete with the manufacturers' trade marks, or enjoying the fun of attempting to catch the yellow leaves shaken off the iroko tree by the harmattan wind before they touched the ground, and threading them together to drag home at the end of the service.

Obu decided to join them, to see how many leaves he could catch, but soon discovered that he had not yet got used to his new shoes and so could not run in them. With measured steps, little more accomplished than a leper in shoes, he made his way to the foot of the iroko tree, to enjoy the crunchy noise the shrivelled brown iroko leaves make when you trample on them.

Obu hardly had time to rush through his rice luncheon. He gobbled down the large plate of rice, save up the head of the chicken till supper when he could eat it more leisurely, removed his Christmas outfit reluctantly, and dashed off to David's house for the maiden appearance of their Mgbedike masquerade. They had agreed to wear only their physical training shorts, except Polycarp who was to carry the mask; he was allowed to wear a khaki shirt as well, to reduce the discomfort. They had intended to make their debut at the ilo hockey and to delay visits to individual houses till the 26th and subsequent days. That way they would advertise their masquerade while at the same time contributing to the pool of public entertainment for Christmas. They were forced to make a last minute change of plans when they learnt that the competition among the different village women's dance groups, being organised by the Umuchukwu Patriotic Union, had been shifted from 27 December to 26 December, following an appeal from Godwin Ume who had fixed his wedding for 27 December. Their only chance of making any money to recover their modest expenses and create a common fund lay in visiting individual houses on the 25th; the events of the 26th and 27th afternoons were bound to draw most prospective donors out of their houses.

The boys were pleased with their turn-out. The Mgbedike was dressed in banana leaves, the dry strands from the banana stem and yellow tender palm fronds. A strong rope tied round its waist served as the leash for holding it under control from behind. It carried a large matchet which dazzled your eyes as it reflected the rays of the sun, a matchet which the boys claimed could slash off, in one stroke, the limb or head of any person or animal foolish enough to come within its reach. Obu had the major responsibility for keeping the Mgbedike in check. This kept him constantly on his toes, constantly anticipating the Mgbedike's movements.

David played the two-toned ogene. That was the natural role for him, as the live wire of the group who taught the others the few songs that made up their repertoire. The two-toned ogene was the dominant musical instrument, and much of the success of the group depended on how well it was played. Oti played the small ekwe cut from the hollow stem of the bamboo. Jerry played the uyo, one in each hand. Each boy tied a strip of cloth round his head and stuck an eagle feather into it. They also tied white handkerchiefs on their left wrists.

As soon as the boys and their masquerade appeared at ilo hockey, a large crowd of envious boys and girls thronged around them. David's voice pierced through the dusty harmattan air as he led the others in one of their many songs:

Ubosi anyi jelu bute ogene anyi belu so ise, mgbo!

Aganakpo ngbo, aganakpo mgbo!

Mgbedike nwaga na ga, n'ife melu n'ikolo, mgbo! Aganakpo ngbo, aganakpo ngbo! ...

'Whoom! Whoom!' responded the Mgbedike – sounding like a miniature locomotive engine – as it took giant, deliberate strides towards the spectators, notably the girls and the children, matchet

held high, poised to slash off the head of any of them within its reach. Obu kept pace with it, ready to pull it back before it came dangerously close to the spectators, most of whom were already stampeding backwards from the impending danger. Then, with amazing agility, the Mgbedike spun round and made for Obu. Obu drew the ovation of the spectators as he artfully dodged his assailant from one side to another, the leash firmly in his two hands. At this point David, the master brain, gave the signal, and the group made its way towards the first house on their list: Mazi Nwafo, an Umuchukwu trader who had made good in Port Harcourt. David invited the spectators who clamoured for more entertainment to come with them.

An impressive crowd flanked them as they moved to Mazi Nwafo's house, reminding you of the children held spellbound by the Pied Piper of Hamelin. In his usual generous manner, Mazi Nwafo gave them five whole shillings plus a packet of biscuits. This exceeded all their expectations, and added more zest to their efforts. Ogbonnia the tinker, their next host, treated them to a long sermon on their duty to their parents, at the end of which he placed a half-penny in a saucer and ceremoniously handed it over to David.

'Thanks, Sir,' David responded on behalf of his colleagues, as he showed the saucer round before throwing the coin into his pocket. 'We did not expect so much money.'

'If you didn't why did you come?' Ogbonnia asked with a dry smile. David led his group away before the miser changed his mind and demanded his half-penny back. Obu fanned the Mgbedike to cool it down after the vigorous performance which had earned only half a penny.

Their cash takings from the various houses were nearing twenty shillings when the unexpected happened. As they sang and danced their way up Ngene road, buoyed up with hopes of the money they were certain to bag from Dennis the tailor, a real masquerade suddenly emerged

from a side road. It had the dirty-brown colour of Obiora's wicked masquerade – the evil masquerade which moved around unaccompanied by any human being and unheralded by the ogene to warn people, especially women and children, of its approach. Its sudden emergence brought a melodramatic end to what had been a successful debut. Each boy took care of himself as they dived into the bush on both sides of the road. Obu spontaneously dropped the Mgbedike rope and sped like an antelope through the maze of palm trees. Polycarp tore off his banana habiliments, so as to run more freely. Surprisingly Obiora's masquerade did not follow them into the bush. It had reckoned that they would keep to the road, making it easy for him to catch them as a group and teach each one of them a lesson he would never forget in life. When they scattered into the bush like the seeds of an oil bean pod, he gave up the chase. Next time he would lay a more successful ambush.

The boys blamed the incident on Samuel. It was the kind of thing he would organise. His attempt to join the group had been resisted by all five members, and it was his habit to seek to destroy what he could not enjoy. Obu kept the incident a secret from his mother.

Chapter Eight

'Onyibo!' Mazi Laza hailed his son.

'Sir!' Obu answered from the front yard where he was admiring the latest model from Oti's production line – a four-wheeled contraption which could support his weight and which moved forwards or backwards when you pushed it. A few more engineering hurdles still had to be scaled before the vehicle could be ridden down the steep hill known as Ugwu Ajilija: it needed a steering mechanism and reliable brakes. Obu was asking Oti to swear that the contraption was invented by him and not by his father when Mazi Laza hailed him the second time. He muttered something about fathers who excelled in shouting at their children rather than in helping them to build vehicles like Oti's father and dragged his feet to the barn where his father was sorting out the yams he would give away later in the day.

'Where were you when I was cutting up the goat?' asked Mazi Laza.

'I don't know at what time the goat was cut up,' Obu replied evasively, 'but I didn't go anywhere.'

'You probably didn't know that you could learn a lot by watching me cutting up the goat?'

'About cutting up a goat?' Obu's tone was intended to make his father's question sound ridiculous.

'You speak as if cutting up a goat is the same as cutting up stockfish! You don't know that there are specified procedures for cutting up a goat, especially if the meat is to be shared with others or parts of it presented for certain purposes.'

'Must every person know how to cut up a goat?' Obu did not care for the acquisition of the goat cutting skill and he wished his father would take the hint and release him to return to Oti and his contraption.

'I'm sorry, my son.' Mazi Laza did take the hint. 'I had forgotten that it's not everybody who has been destined to lick other people's hind sides like Egwu na amu. Of course not everybody need know how to cut up a goat! My prayer to God is that He endorses your aspiration to be one of those who will consume the goat meat cut up by illiterate people like your father!'

Obu knew the time had come to keep quiet.

'I didn't really call you over the cutting up of goat meat,' Mazi Laza continued, getting over his momentary anger. 'I want you to go to the houses of the following people and remind them that it is this afternoon that I and my wife want them to visit us: Pius Ukoha and his wife, Anazodo Nweke and his wife, Eke Ume and his wife, my namesake Lazarus Okoro and his two wives, Nwobiara Nwafo ...'

'But I don't know most of these people nor their houses!' protested Obu.

'Which ones don't you know?' Mazi Laza asked sternly. 'All of them have been coming to this house regularly during the past year to help on the farm and in many other ways.'

'I don't remember them.' Obu's mind was on Oti's contraption outside, and so could not register any of the names listed by his father.

'To make sure you don't miss out even a single name,' suggested his father, 'go and get paper and pencil so that you can write the names down.'

Obu took the opportunity to appeal to Oti to wait a little longer for him. Having brought the paper and pencil, he took down the names, ten, excluding spouses. His father brushed aside his excuse that he did not know the houses of the ten persons by reminding him of the proverb that he who is inquisitive never goes astray.

'I'm leaving some spittle on the ground,' Mazi Laza concluded jokingly. 'If it dries up before you return your navel will vanish!'

'This is the kind of thing that irritates me,' Obu complained to Oti. 'Just when I'm about to do something of my own Papa comes up with something else I must do for him. Look at the long list of persons he says I must go and tell something to!' Oti glanced at the list. 'There are five others in this house and it's only me he can send on such a time-consuming errand. Can you come with me?'

'Oh no! Go and do what your father has assigned to you.'

'All right, wait a little for me, then?' Obu pleaded.

'How long?' asked Oti.

'Just a little bit. Let me see Mama.'

Mama Obu agreed to help. She would split the assignment between the girls; in any case each of the persons invited knew the day and she doubted whether a reminder was all that necessary. Obu ran out gleefully and disappeared with Oti before his father manufactured some other assignment for him. He had forgotten about the spittle and his navel.

Mazi Laza soon discovered that the snuff left in his snuff box and bottle might not go round his guests when they came. He therefore called Nkechi to grind a head of tobacco for him.

'Nkechi is not in,' Amuche replied.

'Where has she gone?' enquired Mazi Laza.

'To remind the people who work for us about the feast today.' 'Who sent her?' 'Mama,' replied Amuche.

'Ask your mother to come here.'

'Who sent Nkechi to Pius Ukoha and the others?' Mazi Laza interrogated his wife as she entered the barn.

'Why are you asking me such a question?' countered Mama Obu. 'Was it not your idea to remind people of an arrangement we have been singing into their ears for several weeks?' .

Mazi Laza shut the round wooden box from which he had produced a head of rolled up tobacco. He saw that his wife had adopted the antagonistic attitude which she used as a defence mechanism when it suited her, and so took special trouble to keep his head. 'Come nearer,' he said coolly.

'I have a pot of afulu soup on the fire, so I'm keeping one foot outside,' she replied. 'If you know what you want to ask me, ask me quickly because one doesn't spend the early hours of the day in sharpening arrows.'

'I want to know who sent Nkechi because I had given that assignment to Onyibo whom I assumed ...'

'If that is what you are heading for, he told me that he had something urgent to do,' she interrupted, 'so I decided to send the girls.'

'Did he tell you what that urgent thing was?'

'He said he had something urgent to do, the girls were available, your message is being faithfully delivered, what more is there to knock our heads together over? I'm going if that is all.'

'It is not all,' shouted Mazi Laza, unable to cover up his anger.

'Please cut the rest like a scarf. If the afulu soup burns you will complain about it for one month!'

'Missus. We will talk about Obuechina when you don't have a pot of soup on the fire. For the moment, I want to say that things happen every day which convince me that we are spoiling rather than helping that child. He is my first and only son, who will take my place when I am no longer here. I will not allow things to continue this way, especially now you say they have removed his ogbanje. That's all I wish to say now. When I've given more consideration to the matter, I shall notify you.'

Mazi Laza retired to his obi, wiped the stone reserved for grinding tobacco, spread out and settled on a raffia mat to grind the tobacco himself. Nkechi was the only member of that household other than himself who could grind tobacco to his discriminating taste. Njideka and Nkiru were like their mother – too impatient to grind the tobacco into fine dust, with the result that you could sort the snuff they produced into tobacco and potash; the particles were not much smaller than the grains of fine garri.

He detached the two tobacco leaves he wanted to grind from the head, tied up the remainder meticulously in brown cement bag paper to preserve its flavour, and packed it away in the round wooden box. He then separated the tobacco leaves properly from the midribs and their tiny branches, to grind each set separately first, before mixing them up later and adding potash.

Because the harmattan haze had swallowed up the sun, he used a glowing faggot to crisp the tobacco leaves and facilitate the grinding.

With his loincloth tucked under him and the grinding stone held in place between his outstretched legs, he began the long and painstaking process.

As his two hands gradually crushed the tobacco on the grinding stone, his mind went in quest of his son, Obu. That boy was slowly but surely developing into a useless boy. He took no part in anything that was done in the house; all he wanted was to be left to wake up at his leisure, to be given what food he wanted at any time he wanted it, and to be free to play whenever he was not eating or sleeping. Worse still, he showed no interest whatsoever in what went on around him. He could not tell the location of his father's farms. He could not distinguish the water yam from other yams. He had shown no interest in his father's trading activities. A boy soon to attain the age of nine was still bed-wetting and saw nothing odd about it. He saw no shame in sharing his mother's bed with her at his age, nor in clinging to his mother as if he were a little girl.

The only positive quality Mazi Laza had so far discovered in his son was his academic brilliance. His teachers, without exception, had spoken warmly of his academic ability, right from Class Infant 1. Academic brilliance was a welcome quality. Mazi Laza did not pray that his son should end up as a farmer or trader; Mazi Laza's own education would not have ended as abruptly as it did if he had had anybody to pay his fees. His own teachers had acclaimed his hot brains, but the opportunity to stretch his potential was not there. Since God had endowed his son with a replica of his hot brain, he hoped his son would climb the educational tree to its tip and pluck from it all it had to offer. All the same, academic brilliance could not flourish for long without a measure of common sense to back it up. The way Obu was developing, there was no sign that he would

develop much common sense. No man had been known to acquire common sense without suffering; there could be no sweet without sweat, not even for thieves.

Obu appeared to have come to the world to enjoy the sweet side of it. If he had been a girl, he would have earned the name Obiageli, one who comes to eat and enjoy wealth and abundance. The verdict that he was an ogbanje fitted into the picture since the ogbanje chooses to be born into families which provide him with enjoyment, not sweat. Mazi Laza admitted that he could not exonerate himself entirely from blame for shutting his eyes and mouth while Obu cascaded downhill every day. If he had put his foot down more firmly from time to time, the situation might have been a little better. He should not have left everything to his wife. A boy should not be brought up by his mother while his father still breathes. His long absences from home had contributed very much to the unfortunate situation. More often than not, Obu saw him only during the week ends, and his intermittent attempts to mould the boy's character had not been successful. Obu's mother was always around to protect and defend him, creating the impression in Obu's mind that his mother loved and cared for him, while his father did not.

Mazi Laza dismissed the idea that he did not love and care for his son. If he did not, how many other sons had he? Nobody needed to remind him of the ordeal he had been through, the innumerable offers of advice he had received, all because he did not have a son. On one occasion when many people feared he might not survive a serious attack of jaundice, he had appealed to God not to leave him without a successor. His joy at the birth of Obu knew no bounds; he was so pleased with his wife that he promptly bought her a sewing machine, even though she did not know how to use it. The price tag he and his wife placed on Obu's head had been very high. Obu knew this and exploited it to the utmost. The suspicion that Obu was an ogbanje had further revalued that price tag upwards. Now that the ogbanje had been removed, Mazi Laza pondered,

was there any justification for continuing to pamper the boy? It had created much unhappiness among Obu's sisters, particularly Ogechukwu who immediately preceded Obu. Above all, it was ruining Obu's future. No child brought up that way could make good. He must put a stop to it, and without further delay, otherwise that boy would constitute a painful nuisance, like a boil which chooses to flourish in the pubic area.

Mazi Laza put a pinch of the snuff into each nostril in turn, and nodded with satisfaction. The drop of eucalyptus oil which he had ground into the snuff had its characteristic sensational effect. He scraped the grinding stones – the main stone and its round 'arm' – with the special short knife for the purpose. Then he went over them again with a tough home-made coconut brush. Light action with a horsetail ensured that no snuff remained on the grinding stones before the heavy stone was stowed away, upside down, in a corner of the obi until when next required. The unruffled and meticulous manner in which he cleaned the stones could not be matched by a Reverend Father cleaning up his vessels after administering the Holy Sacrament!

He had enough time for a wash, after which he put on his jioji loincloth and brown flannel shirt to await the arrival of his guests. He knew how much help he and his family had received from each of his guests and, as had become his practice, the day after Christmas was the day to entertain them in return.

Pius Ukoha and his wife were the first to arrive, closely followed by Lazarus Okoro and his two wives. Mazi Laza received them in his customary light-hearted manner. He offered kola nut and, since every adult at Umuchukwu knew that Mazi Laza did not eat kola nut, he took a little helping of the okwa ose – the melon catalyst for the kola nut – to demonstrate that what he offered his guests was poison-free.

'Is that to show that you won't kill us?' Pius teased him.

'You never can tell nowadays,' Mazi Laza replied, smiling.

'Go and sit down,' Pius chided. 'Any day I begin to suspect Egwu na amu, I will know that the world is coming to an end!'

Lazarus Okoro was the first to compliment Mazi Laza on his excellent snuff. 'Namesake, please tell me which woman sold snuff to you so that I can buy from her.'

'Give me the money and I'll buy for you' Mazi Laza replied evasively.

'You ask as if you don't know Egwu na amu's hand,' observed Anazodo Nweke, the town crier for Umuchukwu who had joined the group. 'I always find myself sneezing when, as I go on my rounds at night with my ogene, I pass by this house while Egwu na amu's snuffbox is open!'

'My travels have shown me that good snuff can win you many things. The timely production of my snuff box has enabled me to sell cloth to customers who were already giving up buying.'

Nwobiara Nwafo, known to have been Mazi Laza's childhood playmate, applied the snuff round her gum, saying it was her daily palliative for toothache. Most of her teeth were already the same colour as the snuff. She went outside to clean out her mouth when she saw the plates of abacha ncha coming in.

Before the party adjourned to go and watch the activities at ilo hockey, they had gone through plates of abacha ncha with special dried fish, plates of rice and stew, and giant slices of boiled yam with afulu soup. Later in the evening they would return to eat cassava foofoo and share the boiled leg of a goat presented whole to them together with ngwo ngwo. Mazi Laza tasted a modest sample of each course served before leaving his guests to fire away undisturbed.

Chapter Nine

5 January 1943 passed without incident. It was Obu's ninth birthday on which, according to Nwomiko, the ogbanje expert, Obu was to have died if he had remained an ogbanje.

Mazi Laza had not resumed his trading; he still had seed yams to tie in his barn and heaps of grass to cut for repairing the roof of his compound walls.

That morning, however, he announced that he was too weak to work; the truth, which he did not wish to disclose even to his wife, was that he had been apprehensive of what Obu's ninth birthday would bring. When he dissociated himself from the ogbanje ritual, he did so only to establish an alibi in case the Church teacher or someone else took him to task for being a member of the Church Committee and yet presiding over a pagan ogbanje ceremony in his house. He had seen enough evidence to convince him that the ogbanje existed, but since the Church preached against it he had no option but to dissociate himself openly from the ritual. He was happy that his wife had ignored his objections, and he had no doubts about the efficacy of Nwomiko's work. However, as Obu's ninth birthday drew nearer, he found himself getting more and more jittery, praying that Obu would not turn out to be Nwomiko's lone mistake. He could not afford to lose his only son.

All through the night, Mama Obu hardly slept a wink. Each time she stirred, she listened to Obu's breathing to make sure that he was still alive. The little sleep she could have had was abruptly ruined by a horrible nightmare. When the day finally broke, she roused Obu from sleep and decided to spend the rest of the day keeping vigil over him to make sure nobody snatched him away from her.

'Missus, thanks be to God that Obuechina is still with us,' Mazi Laza addressed his wife, three days after Obu's ninth birthday. 'There is now no question as to whether or not he is an ogbanje.'

'When you thank God, you should also thank me,' Mama Obu reminded him. 'It is easy to disappear from your house and leave someone else to carry your responsibility. When you return you thank God!'

'I said what I said deliberately. I know you invited Nwomiko, and she claimed to have removed the boy's ogbanje. Whether she did or not, or whether or not the boy was ever an ogbanje, neither you nor I know. That is why I said we should thank God that the boy is alive. He knows what is what.'

'I have been watching the way you shape your mouth to discuss a major lump inside the body as if it were mere craw-craw on the skin. I wish – no; I could not wish that anything had happened to Obiano. Let me accept that I was the daughter of a sheep, as you've always regarded me.'

'Let that point go with the wind.' Mazi Laza saw the time had come to get to the heart of the matter. You could never tell how long Mama Obu would keep awake at an after supper discussion. 'The main thing I want to tell you is that I have decided to send Obuechina away to serve as houseboy to a teacher.' He shot his bolt neatly and awaited his wife's reaction which he was sure would be violent.

Mama Obu's initial reaction was surprisingly cool. She had anticipated the decision, having eavesdropped on one occasion about Christmas time when her husband was sounding the Church teacher on the idea. She had detected a grim determination in his tone that day which warned her that his mind was made up. She had prayed he would drop the idea, at least until she could get a second boy as the ogbanje woman suggested might happen.

'I don't know whether you heard what I said,' Mazi Laza asked after Mama Obu had said nothing.

'Or are you already asleep as usual?'

'I'm not asleep!'

'Why then don't you say something? Am I vomiting fodder?'

'What am I to say?' .

'If you have nothing to say, say so. He who keeps silent acquiesces.'

'If I talk or do not talk, would it make the flood flow uphill? Can the words of a woman make you change a decision you have already taken?'

'Who told you I've already taken a decision?'

'Is it today that I came into this house?' Mama Obu replied.

'What have you to say?' persisted Mazi Laza who genuinely wanted reassurance that he had hit on the right idea.

'My son is not going to anybody as houseboy!'

'Why?'

'He who produces the child should train him,' Mama Obu replied curtly.

'It is because you have not trained him very well that I'm talking about sending him away before he dissolves completely like a bag of salt!'

'If I have turned him into a bag of dissolving salt, what have you turned him into? Is he not your son, or does he become my son when he behaves in a way you do not approve?'

'I know I should have done something long before now, but my frequent absence from home and your concern for him prevented me from playing my role as father. Now that the awkwardly located boil has been taken care of I have decided to do something before Onyibo becomes utterly useless. It is surprising that the girls are better trained than he, except of course that wild animal called Ogechukwu who, I pray, will get the kind of husband who will put red pepper into her two eyes.'

'You seem to forget that Obiano is still a child,' Mama Obu pleaded. 'Is he not just nine years old?'

'Oh yes; I know he's not old enough to know how to bathe beyond his belly! I'm not even sure that he has developed milk teeth!'

'All right, slaughter him if you like! He's old enough to marry! Only after killing him you must also go ahead and carve him up for meat!' She rose to leave.

'Before you go, Missus, I forgot to add that Onyibo will leave home two Nkwo market days from today to live with Teacher Zaccheus Kanu. That's all.'

Mazi Laza was surprised and relieved to see his wife leave without snapping back at him for his announcement. He was amazed that she could.

'With whom do you say Obiano will live?' Mama Obu's tone was that of someone who suddenly registers an unpalatable piece of information and frantically hopes she has not heard properly.

'Teacher Zaccheus Kanu,' Mazi Laza replied, waiting for the boiling pot to throw off its lid.

'Zaccheus Kanu!' Hers was a tone of incredulity. 'Do you say you are sending your son to live with Zaccheus Kanu?'

'The dog does not eat the bone chained round its neck.'

'Mgbafo Okoli!' exclaimed Mama Obu, forgetting that she should not shout so loudly at night.

'My only son, this sole boy who has been loaned to me by the gods to wipe the tears from my eyes; is this the boy you want to send to that evil man who behaves as if he entered his mother's womb through the backyard?'

'He who does not suffer hardship cannot develop any common sense. Zaccheus Kanu does not swallow any person alive ...'

'That might be better than skinning the person alive!'

'If you knew what training I went through as a child, you'd have no mouth to plead for Onyibo ...'

'Which night have I spent in this house without being told about your childhood suffering?' interrupted Mama Obu. 'What I know is that my only son will not go anywhere near Zaccheus Kanu's short, wicked arm!'

'If you knew John Akpuka to whom I was sent after I had lost my mother and my father, you will not make a noise over Zaccheus Kanu. This was the man who could put red pepper into your eyes, or anywhere else he thought would hurt you most. John Akpuka could swing the cane from morning till night and his arm would not ache. He would ask you to balance a bucket on your head while he landed his notorious lashes on your back – lashes that stung more painfully than the sting of scorpions. If the bucket fell or you stepped beyond the line he circled round you with his cane or chalk, he discounted all the lashes he had already given you and began all over again! John Akpuka would not ...'

'Please keep your story about John Akpuka for those who haven't heard it,' Mama Obu cut in impatiently. 'If you were sent to suffer because you were a child with neither father nor mother that is no reason why Obiano should be sent to that wicked man and the witch he has as wife, not while I am still breathing. If you insist on sending him, you should send me along with him. I will not allow another woman to end my life while it is yet morning!'

With that Mama Obu stormed out. In the kitchen she kicked an enamel cup left carelessly outside, and rained down invectives on Ogechukwu before Ogechukwu grunted that Obu was the last to drink from the cup but had stubbornly refused to take it inside. Mama Obu left the cup where she stumbled on it and was leaving the kitchen when she saw the fish basket still dangling over the fireplace.

'Nkechi!' she bellowed.

There was no reply. With the exception of Obu and Amuche who were already in dreamland, the other children had overheard enough of the heated discussion going on between their parents to know that it would be disastrous to get within reach of their mother's arm. Although Nkechi heard the call, she waxed her ears as if she had given birth to a female child.

'May the leopard tear your jaw apart if you think I'll call you twice! Nkechi!' .

Nkechi resisted the pressure from her sisters to answer.

'If you have suddenly gone deaf, you wait for me to reach you there so that you can tell me whether it is your chi you expect to take down the fish basket from the fireplace for you.'

Nkechi accepted the advice of her sisters to sneak out before it was too late. Her opportunity came when the sound of her mother's footsteps showed that she had gone to the drainage hole at

the foot of one of the walls to pass water. Then she tiptoed fearfully into the kitchen to unfasten the fish basket to take it inside.

'Who's that?' Mama Obu asked as she heard the noise in the kitchen when Nkechi slipped on a banana peel and fell. 'It's me,' Nkechi replied faintly.

'Why didn't you wait for me to reach that room where you were sleeping your eyes out? Bush rat that you are!'

Obu was sound asleep when his mother entered the bedroom. She turned up the wick of the hurricane lantern which he had lowered before he went to sleep; it was his habit to have the lantern burning whenever his mother was not in the room at the time he retired to bed, otherwise he could not sleep. He was sprawling right across the bed in his characteristically disorganised manner. You could never tell what he would do in his sleep; he could end up sleeping with his feet on the bag of rags his mother used as pillow. It was useless putting a cover over him; he would fling it off in no time. On some occasions, his mother had had to grab her own cover cloth from him as he pulled at it unconsciously. Only a doting mother could have tolerated his appalling sleeping habits for so long, but there was nothing Mama Obu could not take from the child whose arrival raised the pitch of her voice in her husband's family.

She smacked Obu lightly on the back, asking him to lie properly. He grunted involuntarily and as he swung his head from one side to the other, his mother detected a trail of saliva stretching from the corner of his mouth to his chin. She remembered how he had assured her only recently that he would never again 'eat the morning lizard'. She had caught him in the act, and looked forward to showing him the dry whitish trace which the saliva would leave on his chin by morning. She

turned him on his back, preparatory to dragging him into position on the bed. His erect genitals suggested that he might soon wet the bed.

'Obiano! Obiano!' She called as she smacked him with maternal gentleness. He opened his eyes without taking in anything and shut them again as if with calculated slowness.

'Obiano! Go outside and relieve yourself!'

Obu was back in dreamland, and his mother knew what that meant. She had to carry him out if she wanted her bed to remain dry that night. Although in his sleep he was heavier than fermented cassava, she had discovered from unpleasant experience that it was less irritating to carry the bag of fermented cassava than to attempt to lead him by the hand while he staggered out like a blind drunk.

Mama Obu had little sleep that night. Why should her husband deliberately set out to kill someone whose funeral expenses would be borne by him, she kept asking herself. To send a helpless child to live with Teacher Zaccheus and his wife was nothing short of murder.

Mr Zaccheus Kanu, known to all as Teacher, was as dwarfish as his name suggests, being barely five feet tall. It was his stature rather than the action of the Biblical Zaccheus that prompted the Church teacher at Umuchukwu to hand the name down to him when, at 17, he qualified for adult baptism. He was widely known as a dare-devil who carried out his intentions without caring whose ox was gored. He had no reservations in recounting the number of thieves he had killed with his sword, or his double-barrelled shotgun, or his bare hands – and dumped into pit latrines. The two-edged sword, which he named 'killer of the handsome', was always strapped to his bicycle whenever he travelled, in a scabbard made from the skin of a cobra he claimed to have

killed early in his teaching career. He also carried a koboko, a long leather whip, which he administered to any pedestrian who got in the way of his bicycle.

He was the only teacher capable of administering three biting strokes of the cane to each of the 220 pupils in the school without showing any strain; if he paused in the process, it was to drain off the sweat from his forehead or to admonish a timid pupil. Although as Second Master he had no authority to punish teachers, he did punish them and took special delight in doing so in the presence of the pupils. He had, on more than one occasion, punished female teachers by making them scrub the mud walls and floors of the school latrines.

Was this the man to bring up her one and only son, Mama Obu asked herself over and over again, shrugging her shoulders each time. The situation might have been bearable if Teacher had a motherly wife, and not Mrs Deborah Onuekwucha Kanu, better known as Madam.

Externally, she looked the antithesis of her husband – tall, slim, elegant, of pawpaw complexion, with the ostrichlength neck and Caucasian nose which brings to mind the famous statue of Queen Nefertiti of Egypt. The modest clothes Teacher provided for her sat attractively on her figure in the way ordinary dresses appear distinctively elegant on the dummies in a boutique.

Attempt to penetrate the sweet externals and the antithesis immediately ends. Many believed that God produced her specifically for Teacher: no other woman could live with Teacher, and no other man could stand Madam as a wife. A song composed about her when she was only six years old showed that even at that tender age her granite heart had become clearly evident:

Deborah, whoever takes you as wife

Will shrug his shoulders – Kponkwem!

She had no friends during her school career. She could throw any boy or girl in her school, and so was dreaded by all. Few expected her to marry, and her parents received no offers before Teacher's, by which time she had already clocked up twenty-five years. Teacher was himself forty, with an unenviable record of humiliating rebuffs. Teacher and Deborah became man and wife, and since two men cannot procreate, they had no issue.

That was the couple to whom Mazi Laza announced he would voluntarily hand over her only son. 'Tufia!' muttered Mama Obu. 'God forbid! It is those whose legs go to the river that the river can drown. This one son God has given me will not step into Teacher's house. Nobody tickles the eye with the stick intended for tickling the ears!'

Chapter Ten

'Obuechina,' Ogechukwu called in a voice which could have been mistaken for Njideka's.

'What is it?' Obu countered.

'Is that how you answer your elder?' Ogechukwu came out in her true voice when she saw that the camouflage had failed to lure Obu into her trap. 'I deliberately called you in Njide's voice, to see whether you could answer her as disrespectfully as you answer me because you often think I belong to your age group.'

'You can't deceive me,' Obu jeered. 'You want me to answer my name so that you will shout Odu and say you have beaten me. If your long throat is longing for roast yam, go and engage Amuche or another child you can beat without difficulty.'

'You can brag as much as you like. I need just one more answer from you to win and nothing will stop me from getting it before you go wherever they say you are going. Father Tortoise cannot contradict that.'

'Look,' Obu touched his Adam's apple repeatedly and pointed to the sky as he continued: 'your throat can elongate until it touches the top of the iroko tree, but you'll not get any roast yam from me.'

He had hardly completed the sentence before Ogechukwu made for the finger which he used to mimic the elongation of her throat. Obu ducked as if he had anticipated the move and ran out of the kitchen. Outside, he shadow-boxed in Ogechukwu's direction in a manner that infuriated Ogechukwu. She rushed at him and he sped towards the compound gate. She stampeded after him.

'O-ge-chu-kwu!' Mama Obu shouted from her room where she was getting ready to go to a special meeting of the Church women's Happiness Group. 'Has your madness erupted again?'

'It's Obu who has been insulting me and showing me that he has boxing skill.'

'Do you ever remember that you are older than he? If your elder sisters harassed you the way you harass him, how would you feel?'

'Does he acknowledge that I am older than he? Because he knows you are always around to heap sand round his waist he thinks he can keep his mouth however he likes when talking to me.' Ogechukwu's tone was becoming unsteady with emotion.

'It's enough! I'm sure you haven't peeled all the cocoyam for tonight's supper. It's when you see Obu that you develop wings. Get back to the kitchen before I get out of this room. You make me talk all day long as if I were a weaver bird!'

Ogechukwu sulked back to the kitchen, muttering words that were inaudible to her mother. Mama Obu decided to ignore her; you do not beat a child and at the same time order her not to cry. Ogechukwu was returning to the kitchen as ordered; she could sulk and grunt as much as she liked in the process, it was as effective as making faces at someone in pitch darkness.

Ogechukwu had hardly settled down to resume peeling the heads of cocoyam when Obu sneaked in, placed the first finger on each cheek, pulling on each lower eyelid, and shouted 'Nto-o-o!' at Ogechukwu. Ogechukwu flung all the cocoyams she could lay hands on, peeled and unpeeled, at the brute and, as if this were not enough, stampeded after him.

'Ogechukwu! Ogechukwu!...'

Ogechukwu ignored her mother's call as she ran after her brother. She came back only after she had recognised to her indignation that Obu was a safe distance away.

'What is it this time?' Mama Obu enquired angrily, now out of her room ready for her meeting.

'Is it a rule that she who begets children must not have a moment of rest?'

'Mama ... it's Obu .. .' Ogechukwu was still panting.

'He came to the kitchen ... to tell me nto-o-o!'

'Where is he?'

'He has run outside.'

'Obu! Obu!' When Mama Obu received no reply from Obu, she promised to deal with him on her return and appealed to Ogechukwu to ignore him meanwhile and return to the kitchen to continue peeling the cocoyams.

Ogechukwu picked up a piece of charcoal and scratched a short vertical line on the outer wall of the kitchen where she marked the number of occasions on which Obu had offended her. There must have been twenty such short vertical lines!

Ogechukwu's thoughts promptly returned to the Odu game while her hands peeled the cocoyams. She and Obu had been at the game for a little over a week. If Obu called her at any time between daybreak and the time chickens retire for the night and she answered 'Hm' or 'Yes' without prefixing it with 'Odum', he would shout 'Odu' and score a point, and vice versa if she called him and he answered the same way. The first to catch the other unawares five times was the winner. The winner's prize was a roast yam, sufficiently oiled and salted without being sliced into individual pieces. The loser, who provided the roast yam, closely watched the winner as he ate

his prize yam. If while eating it the winner dropped any morsel from the yam, no matter how tiny, he was required to return the uneaten piece to the loser.

Ogechukwu had already scored four points to Obu's one, and she was determined to score the winning point in the next day, so as not to allow Obu any excuse for not roasting the yam for her before leaving home. Her chance soon came.

Although it was already past eight in the morning, Obu was, as usual, fast asleep. Ogechukwu stole to the back of the small wooden window of the bedroom in which he slept. In a relaxed but firm and cleverly camouflaged voice, she called Obu as she tapped on the window.

'Who is that?' Obu replied in his sleep. Ogechukwu was disappointed, but she decided not to give up. Obu's voice revealed that he was not fully awake. She allowed an interval before trying again.

'Obu,' she called, in a voice that could have passed for Amuche's. 'Obu,' she repeated, when there was no reply.

'Hm,' Obu replied sleepily, unsuspectingly.

'Odum,' snapped an excited and jubilant Ogechukwu in her true voice. 'Mine is now complete! Mine is now complete! You must roast my yam for me today. Father Tortoise has nothing to say about this one!'

'May dysentery purge you to death there!' Obu cursed as it dawned upon him that he had been tricked.

'Dysentery may purge whom it pleases, but you must roast my yam for me today, and it must be a big sweet yam!'

'Go and sharpen your throat on the grindstone, if you like. You will know who will roast a yam for you. You think I'm a sheep's offspring who doesn't know the rules of Odu!'

The elder sisters constituted the first court of appeal. Ogechukwu had waited until an angry looking Obu had arrived in the kitchen, with a white line of dried saliva linking each corner of his mouth to his chin. Njide and Nkiru had been privy to Ogechukwu's strategy; in fact the idea had been proposed by Njideka, but both of them pretended they were hearing about the matter for the first time. Once in a while, all Obu's elder sisters showed signs of envy towards him for obvious reasons, although this attitude was never carried outside the compound. Immediately they left their father's compound, Obu was their only brother and they would go to any length to defend him.

The girls ruled against Obu, who had argued that he was still in bed at the time and so his day had not begun. They reminded him that the rule referred to chickens, not to human beings. The chickens had begun their daily chores hours before Ogechukwu called him, so he should begin to select a yam to roast for her. Obu rejected their verdict and announced that he would appeal to their mother. The girls did not give their mother the chance to change their ruling, which they feared she would do if the matter were presented to her as a straight case between Obu and Ogechukwu. Mama Obu always approached any disagreement between Obu and Ogechukwu by assuming that Ogechukwu was the culprit. This time the girls threw their weight for Ogechukwu, and presented the case in a way that made it impossible for their mother to demonstrate her usual partiality for Obu.

'I won't roast any yam for Ogechukwu,' protested Obu, shaking his large head so vigorously that his mother feared it might roll off. She pulled him to her side in an attempt to cool him down.

'I won't roast any yam for her,' he repeated. This time his head was pressing on his mother's side so he could not roll it from side to side.

'I'll help you to roast the yam,' Mama Obu offered. 'Let Ogechukwu eat her first roast yam in life.'

'I will eat that yam, whether it is the first or the last in my life!' Ogechukwu retorted.

'Leopards will tear your mouth apart before you talk back at me like that!' Mama Obu countered. 'You're not ashamed of yourself, engaging in Odu with a small boy. Why don't you compete with Amuche? She would be the appropriate match for you so that you can cheat her more easily. I'll know what you'll do when Obu leaves home, wild beast!'

Ogechukwu could no longer restrain the rain clouds. 'There's never anything I do which pleases Mama,' she shouted as she wept. 'There's no truth in anything I say. It's Obu who does the right things. It's Obu who speaks the truth. Every day Ogechukwu is either a wild beast, or a mad woman, or a serpent, anything bad. All because that thing with a head like a man and tiny legs like an idol is called a boy. Did I create myself? Did I beg you to bring me into this world?'

'Mama,' interrupted Obu, 'warn Ogechukwu to stop calling me that thing she called me now.'

He had hardly come to the end of the sentence when Ogechukwu flew at him. They engaged each other like two evenly matched wrestlers. Mama Obu spontaneously tried to tear them apart but neither would let the other go. The scene of action shifted from the kitchen to the grounds outside, with the other children rescuing pots and other utensils in the way of the combatants. Ogechukwu had stopped weeping, to conserve all her energy for the fight; her only hindrance was an attempt to hold back her running nose.

Mama Obu decided the only solution was to flog them apart. Just then Obu seemed to achieve what he had been aiming at; he succeeded in clutching firmly on to one of Ogechukwu's legs and it was clear he would throw her in the next minute. Mama Obu unconsciously relaxed her efforts at breaking the two loose when she saw that Obu might emerge victorious. She had secretly looked forward to the day Obu would demonstrate that he could trounce Ogechukwu convincingly; that would be the surest way of bridling her cantankerousness. Ogechukwu struggled to counter Obu's moves, but when she saw that she could not resist much longer she decided on a more effective means of saving herself from the impending humiliation.

'Mama O!' Obu shrieked, 'she has bitten me! She has bitten my arm!' As he shouted in pain, he channelled his vengeance to the uninjured arm with which he landed two pugnacious blows on Ogechukwu which set her shrieking too.

'He has hit my stomach,' she shrieked, clutching her stomach as she bent double.

'See where she bit me!' cried Obu as he held out the bitten arm. Mama Obu held up the arm, surrounded by the other girls. A little mound had grown on the spot, bounded by the imprint of Ogechukwu's teeth. Amuche pulled her eyes away and cried. Mama Obu released the arm gently and turned towards Ogechukwu who was writhing on the ground. The sight of Ogechukwu in obvious pain saved her from her mother's wrath. Mama Obu had warned her time without number not to fight with her teeth as if she were a dog, but she would not hear. Only recently Mama Obu had warned her that she would clip or even extract the offending teeth the next time she bit any person; that was after she had nearly bitten off the finger of a school mate during a scuffle over one udala fruit.

'Wild beast,' she cursed Ogechukwu, obviously unhappy that she could not execute her threat. 'I hope that blow will teach you a lesson.'

Ogechukwu did not believe that was all she was to receive from her mother. Although the blow on the stomach had given her a smarting pain at the time it landed, the pain was now completely gone, but she continued writhing on the ground like an earthworm on which the liquid from fermented cassava had been poured, in the hope that by so doing she might escape from her mother's vengeance. When she saw Mama Obu emerging from the kitchen store with a kitchen knife she shrieked as if the pain had quadrupled; the sight of the knife reminded her of her mother's threat to pull out the offending teeth. When, however, she discovered why her mother had brought the knife, she opened her mouth without coercion and allowed her mother to scrape off some deposit from her teeth for treating the bitten arm.

For the rest of the morning, Obu and Ogechukwu avoided each other; by lunchtime they were brother and sister once again and but for the patch on Obu's arm all about the morning fight would have been forgotten. Obu had not only accepted defeat in the Odu game, but had decided to fulfil his obligations. Nkiru had roasted the yam for him on the orders of their mother; Obu was never allowed too near the fire, for fear that he might fall in, and so did not know how to keep a fire alive much less cook with it.

All the girls stayed around after lunch to watch Ogechukwu eat the roast yam. She had bragged that she would make history as the first winner in their house to eat the entire yam; all previous winners had dropped something midway and consequently lost the remaining piece.

Obu's yam had been roasted in hot ash rather than over a burning fire. Yams roasted that way were generally softer than yams roasted on a burning fire. When the yam was done, Nkiru used a

knife handle to beat it even softer, before it was cut open lengthwise in a zig-zag manner and oiled, ready for eating.

Although the yam was ready before lunchtime, Obu delayed handing it over until after lunch when he felt Ogechukwu would have little appetite for it and would consequently take less trouble over eating it. Ogechukwu ate little at lunch, in readiness for the roast yam. The kitchen floor in front of her stool was swept clean, so that anything seen on it after she had begun eating would be regarded as having dropped from the yam. A cup of drinking water was kept handy, so that she could reach it easily without rising if she needed a drink.

Ogechukwu received the yam with one hand, held her other palm under the yam and was about to take her first mouthful when Obu raised a protest.

'Take away your hand from under the yam! It's against the rules.'

'Who said so?' challenged Ogechukwu. 'The rules say I should not put a plate underneath, isn't that so, Njide?' The verdict went in favour of Obu. Ogechukwu held the yam securely with the two hands close to her mouth, forming a cup with the hands into which any morsel dropping out would fall. Each time she bent her head down for a bite, Obu applied every permissible device to make her laugh or shake her body; no trick moved her. She gradually reduced the length of the thin soft yam, lifting her mouth after each mouthful only after she had licked each lip with the tongue to ensure that no stray morsel hung on it to spoil the game for her. Halfway through the yam, Obu grew tired of clowning. The smile on his face began to dry up as the prospect of regaining his yam receded. Ogechukwu did not utter one word, she did not even open her mouth except when about to take another mouthful of yam.

'There it is!' Obu shouted, pointing at the floor.

'It's a lie,' replied Ogechukwu after studying the floor rapidly. 'I haven't dropped ...' As she spoke, some unswallowed yam went the wrong way and choked her. She reached out for the cup of water, dropping a few tiny bits of yam in the process.

'There they are!' Obu was clearly jubilant. His trick had worked. Although there was no morsel on the floor at the time he claimed one had fallen, no one could now say that Ogechukwu had not dropped bits of the yam.

'I won't accept ...' Ogechukwu took another mouthful of water and tried to clear her throat. The yam was still choking her. Nkiru smacked her on the chest and cleared her own throat as if she were practising sympathetic magic. Both she and Njide warned Ogechukwu to keep quiet until the errant piece of yam had retraced its steps. Obu waited like a boxer restrained by the rules from unleashing the winning punches on an opponent who had fallen to the canvas.

'I won't accept it,' Ogechukwu resumed, clearing her throat.

'Give me my yam. See what is all over the floor.'

'There was no single morsel of yam on the floor when you shouted. There are other people here. Any one of them who saw one should say so!'

'Nobody asked you whether one morsel fell or not. And I have no time for all this argument. Give me my yam!'

Obu rose from his stool, to recapture his yam if Ogechukwu would not return it voluntarily. Ogechukwu threw the remaining yam into her mouth and rose to defend herself. Obu made for her mouth, determined to tear it apart and retrieve his yam. Ogechukwu held on to his hands to foil his plans, at the same time working her teeth at double speed. Kitchen stools began to glide

about as they got into the way of the combatants. Nkiru did not want to be the elderly person who sat in the house and watched a goat in tether give birth. She knew pots would be shattered if the scuffle was allowed to continue. She beckoned to Njide to help her to break the fighters free. When their combined strength failed, they pulled the fighters out into the kitchen grounds where they continued. Ogechukwu swallowed aloud from time to time, to demonstrate to Obu that he was fighting a lost cause. This fanned the embers of Obu's wrath and intensified the scuffle. Then Obu broke free and landed a blow on Ogechukwu's chest. Ogechukwu replied with both hands and claws.

Po-pu Po-pu Po-o-pu! Po-pu Po-pu Po-o-pu! 'Egwu na amu!'

'Obi sala sala!'

The unmistakable sound of their father's bicycle horn and voice worked like a charm. Before Mazi Laza's bicycle reached the front gate, there was no evidence anywhere that a fight had taken place in the kitchen, or that the Odu yam had been eaten there. Obu was at the gate to receive the bicycle from his father; even Amuche who had already begun to cry as soon as the fight began had cheered up and rushed out to welcome papa who always brought something home for her. It was Mazi Laza's first business week following the Christmas and New Year recess. He had come home a day earlier than usual because of Obu's impending departure.

Chapter Eleven

'If I were you, I would go to Aka,' David counselled Obu. 'I am sure you will be happier there. If it is a township, it will save you trudging several miles every day to fetch water from a dirty stream; there will be water taps everywhere; just open a tap and clean water gushes out. You can go to a proper cinema and not depend on Win-the-War mobile cinemas. You can accompany real masquerades without first being initiated into the masquerade society. Even if it is not a township, you will still enjoy it. You will enjoy all those privileges accorded to teachers' boys such as exemption from fetching firewood and water for teachers, and from bringing bamboo, palm fronds, manure, and so on for the school.'

Obu needed little persuasion. He had always secretly longed to be like David. David could look any grown-up in the face without batting an eyelid; his eyes appeared to have been purged of all fear. David's hair carried evidence of a barber's clippers, unlike Obu's shaved with his mother's blunt razor and sewing machine scissors. David alone throughout Umuchukwu spoke pidgin and he alone could kick a tennis ball in a professional manner. David had acquired all these enviable skills because he had left Umuchukwu. Obu allowed his imagination to project him into the next Christmas season, visualising in his mind's eye how different he would look then, when he came home on holiday from Aka.

Oti could not contemplate life at Umuchukwu without Obu.

'Mama, can I go with Obu?' he asked his mother.

'Why not?' she had replied. The years of intimate friendship between the two boys had woven strong bonds between the two families as well; consequently, Oti's mother had no anxieties whenever Oti announced that he was going out with Obu. Obu would never lead him astray.

'Tinti-nkolo, nkolo, nkolo! Tinti nkolo!' jubilated Oti. His exuberance surprised his mother, who did not understand the cause of his mirth until he asked her for a box in which to pack his belongings. He burst into tears when she told him it would not be proper for him to accompany Obu. It was treacherous for Obu to abandon him at Umuchukwu. How could he cope with Samuel the tyrant, all by himself?

As for Samuel, he could not hide his envy at the news that Obu would be leaving home, even though he acted as though Obu were a buffoon to consent to such an arrangement.

'Is it true that you are going to serve as houseboy to that person called Teacher?' he asked with a sneer.

'I'm going to live with him,' Obu had replied guardedly.

Samuel burst into wicked laughter: 'Is that not the man they say is shorter than the Nri dwarfs?'

Receiving no reply, Samuel continued: 'If you have not beheld your chi in his stark nakedness, be prepared to do so as soon as you set foot in that man's house. My mother said that his wife specialises in scraping the houseboys' mouths on rough ground! When you come home as thin as a broomstick, don't say Samuel didn't warn you!' Samuel knew neither Teacher Zaccheus nor his wife, but had based his remarks on the stories his mother had told him in an effort to counteract his desire to go with Obu.

Samuel's account of Teacher and his wife had frightened Obu. 'Mama, is it true that Teacher's wife scrapes her houseboys' mouths on the ground?' he had asked his mother.

'Who told you that?'

'Samuel'

'Does Samuel know Teacher and his wife?' Mama Obu asked evasively. 'One thing you must recognise is that no other woman will treat you like your mother.'

Mama Obu knew that Samuel was correct for once, but she did not want anybody to stir up the horrors she had been struggling to cover up as one would cover a masquerade. She had used all conceivable means to talk her husband out of the crazy idea of sending Obu to live with Teacher. 'Blow that child's eyes off,' she had reminded him, 'is an order easier given when the child concerned is not your own. How can you deliberately send your own child to have his eyes blown off?' She had lost her temper and used discourteous words, she had burst into tears, she had tried to win Mazi Laza over by every conceivable means – all to no avail. Mazi Laza did not agree that Obu's eyes were in danger of being blown off. Teacher and his wife were strict, not wicked; even if they scraped Obu's mouth on the ground, 'The man who is murdered by his kinsmen does not bleed,' he had contended.

Mama Obu resigned herself to the situation. She was Obu's mother, not his father, and as a woman she knew her bounds. She prayed night and morning, asking her chi not to allow goats to eat palm fronds off her head. One morning, as she pondered over her impending misfortune, a thought came to her. Why not accompany Obu to Teacher's house? That would give her the opportunity to talk to Teacher's wife as one woman to another; she could also spend a couple of days helping Obu to adjust to his new environment.

From morning till night on the day preceding Obu's departure Mazi Laza and his wife were besieged by relatives and well-wishers. From the solemn manner in which men, women and children wished him God's protection, Obu could have been a conscript on his way to certain death in the Arakan Yoma theatre of war!

'Did not Chukwudifu name his son Jidelundimuo?' observed Mazi Nwokike, Oti's father, as he and Mazi Laza sipped the palm wine he had brought to help Mazi Laza in entertaining his many callers.

'If I may speak the truth,' Mazi Laza interjected, 'that is a very bad name to give your own child. I can't give any of my children such a name; but let me not divert your mouth from what it was about to say.'

'The point Chukwudifu was making – which is also what I wanted to say – is that we who are parents are merely keeping custody of these children for the Creator above. When he wants to recall any of them, no human being has the power to stop him no matter whether the child is sucking his mother's breasts or fighting the Germans in Burma.'

'You will live long,' Mazi Laza replied cheerfully. It was a welcome change to hear someone who did not consider him a murderer for contemplating sending his only son to live with Teacher. Most other callers had irritated him by behaving as if Obu was more precious to them than to him. On the contrary, Mazi Nwokike spoke sense; he spoke as someone who still remembered the difficult storms they weathered in their youth, without which none of them could have grown up into something. Of course Mazi Nwokike always spoke sense, unlike that vagrant called Ume whose only contribution was to remind Laza that he who has one eye owes the spirits a debt.

'You know that since we got the news that Obu would live with Teacher, Oti has been asking whether he could also go,' Mazi Nwokike reported.

'That's the sign of a child who will be sensible,' replied Mazi Laza.

'He had nothing else in his mouth the whole day. At a point when my ears tired of hearing the request, I almost came to ask whether he could go with his friend, Obu. But when I thought about it I doubted whether it would be a good thing to send both of them to the same house. They will not remember that they have left Umuchukwu!'

'Nobody tells the deaf that the market is ablaze ...' Mazi Laza dragged out the proverb very slowly, to enable him to think before going any further. 'Yes I agree that it will be unwise to send two of them to the same house.' What he had wanted to say was that no iron was too tough to temper in the hands of Teacher Zaccheus and his wife, and that the friendship between Obu and Oti would not make any difference whatever. He changed his mind when he suspected that Mazi Nwokike might have dropped a deliberate bait for him. Nwokike was a good man, but he had one weakness: he enjoyed plunging into a breadfruit meal without bothering to ascertain from his host the cost of the breadfruit. He would wait until you had cleared the evil bush and then walk in with his hoe to ask if he could farm part of the land. Mazi Laza suspected that Nwokike might be trying to take advantage of his arrangement with Teacher to send Oti along with Obu. If he wanted his son to live with Teacher, why could he not undertake the negotiation himself?

Over in the kitchen, Mama Obu received her own callers – mostly women, except for Mazi Nwokike and one or two other men who enquired about 'Agu nwanyi' as they took their leave after talking with Mazi Laza. Oti's mother sat longest with her, long enough 'to crush to death not one but several black ants'.

'You are wise to insist on accompanying Obu,' Mama Oti commended Mama Obu. 'That is ...'

'Oh! I haven't told you! My master has decided that I'm going nowhere.' Mama Obu's tone revealed her grief at the decision.

'Mgbafo Mgbokwu!' exclaimed Oti's mother. 'Why?'

'Go and ask him!'

For some time neither woman spoke; Mama Oti helped Mama Obu in shelling a plate of egusi seeds which she would use in making Obu's delicacy – small balls of ground egusi mixed with various ingredients, wrapped in leaves resembling those of the elephant grass and boiled.

'Where is Aka located?' Oti's mother asked, unwilling to drop a point she wanted to explore.

'Who has been there before? All I know is that they say it is near to Ubi and that the bitterleaf grows wild there because the people do not know how to eat bitterleaf soup.'

'How Papa Oti would like to be thrown there like a pebble, to eat up all the bitterleaf! I've not seen any man who cherishes eating bitterleaf morning and night, every day. His son, Oti seems to be following his footsteps; the way he convulsed his face the other day when I gave him okro soup, you would have thought he was drinking a bowl of "iba shut up".'

'I don't know what Papa Obu likes, and I'm not sure that I still have the energy to try and find out. Mama Obu sounded worn out. 'All you get from him are complaints – if the strands of the bitterleaf are not too long they are too short; when the okro soup does not draw too much, it is too watery to be called okro soup. Sometimes I wish he marries his second wife.'

'I thought he had given up the idea of a second wife with Obu's arrival?'

'I heard him telling the Catechist that he does not want a second wife. I told you the Catechist had threatened him with excommunication if he took another wife. It is his decision to send Obu to live with that wicked couple that makes me wonder whether his brothers have resumed their practice of heaping fire on him to marry another wife.'

'I don't like throwing my mouth into a matter on which my opinion has not been sought.' Mama Oti's voice was low and serious. 'But the relationship between you and me and our two families is so strong that I now regard your problems as my problems. Any stranger who sees how Oti and Obu play and move about would call them brothers. So if I fail to put my mouth into this matter I am just being mischievous. To tell you the truth, I think you should take Obu to Aka, at least to see the place for yourself. It does not sound right in my ears that you should yield on this matter. These men don't understand; if they had to carry one child inside them for nine months, they would understand. It is important that you go and see where your only son is going to live. I would not yield on that if I were you.'

'What do you say I should do?' Mama Obu asked, lifting her eyes away from the egusi seeds and beaming them at Mama Oti.

'You know how you and your husband get on, but if you think it will help, I will ask Papa Oti to persuade your husband to let you go. Men take things more seriously when they are proposed by their fellow men. Let me see whether he is still in the obi with Papa Obu. Oti!'

Oti and Obu had gone out, but Amuche informed the two women that Papa Oti had already left. Mama Oti left soon after, to track him down and send him back to talk sense into Mazi Laza.

As the darkness thickened, Mazi Laza found he could no longer steady his nerves: BETTER LATE THAN NEVER had not arrived, in spite of the firm assurances given him by its driver, 'John whose face knows no laughter', that he would spend the night at Umuchukwu. He left the compound, partly to escape his wife's taunts and partly in an attempt to steady his nerves. From where he sat in his obi, every noise sounded like an approaching lorry. On two occasions he had

ordered Amuche to run to ilo hockey to verify whether the approaching vehicle was BETTER LATE ...; on both occasions, Amuche had come back to report that there was no vehicle in sight.

From his house, he moved to Uhuana village, to find out whether Comfort, John's mistress, had received any message from her man cancelling his plans. But she had not, and she was concerned that he had not yet arrived and wondered if anything had held him up. It was unlike him to drive after dark any night he decided to spend at Umuchukwu.

Mazi Laza walked back to ilo hockey. The lorry had still not arrived. He followed the dry season road from the church compound up to the point where it joined the trunk B road, the only road the lorry could take. By the time he returned to his house, it was clear that 'John whose face knows no laughter' had failed him, thereby shattering his plans to hand Obu over to a driver he knew and trusted. He walked towards the kitchen with the uncertain steps of a man apprehensive of the reception his wife would lay on for him.

Mama Obu was now directing operations, bellowing at any of the girls who did not promptly carry out whatever instructions she had yelled to her. Mazi Laza soon gleaned from her orders that she was aiming at taking one of the rickety, excessively loaded lorries which went past Umuchukwu from midnight until 3 a.m. – in the attempt to escape the Police – stopping at Umuchukwu only if they saw passengers on the main road. It was also clear that she had decided to accompany Obu to Aka. He silently cursed 'John whose face ...' for putting him in a situation in which his wife would call the shots while he sat glowering with his hands tied behind his back. He thought he had successfully resisted Mama Obu's attempts to accompany Obu, in spite of pleas from Oti's father and several other relations and family friends. Now that his alternative arrangement had failed, he had no answer to allay his wife's fears over Obu's safety so he had to

concede victory to her. He avoided a head-on collision by initially maintaining a dignified silence and later fitting his actions into Mama Obu's plans.

'When you get there, do what your master and his wife ask you to do.' Mazi Laza had kept his words of advice to the very end, to make sure that they remained fresh in Obu's mind as he arrived at his new home. Supper over, what remained was for Obu to put on his travelling clothes. 'Forget what you are here. Don't expect to eat as many meals or as much as you eat at home. Forget what your father and mother are; forget the number of sisters you have, and the help they give you. You are going to Teacher as a houseboy, as a servant. You should therefore humble yourself and accept whatever amount of suffering may come your way. There is no sweet without sweat; unless you suffer you cannot develop any common sense. Don't send messages to me to remove you from there because

I will not do so ...'

Mazi Laza went on to describe his childhood vicissitudes and how he had borne them, to his eternal credit. But for Mama Obu's curt interruption, he might have gone on indefinitely.

'Is that not the sound of a lorry I hear?' she shouted. 'Obiano, get up from there and put on your travelling clothes. It's not today that your father knew you were travelling, but he will wait till he hears the sound of the lorry before he begins to fill everybody's ears with stories of his childhood sufferings. He has nothing to tell you which he hasn't told you several times before today. Get up at once and put on your clothes. Njideka; you run to the main road and tell the lorry driver to wait for us. Mark my words, run, and don't say you are doing "coal tar walk" for me! Nkiru; Ogechukwu; you follow Njide with the loads. We'll follow as soon as Obiano is ready.'

Mazi Laza swallowed his words. By the time Obu reappeared in a tight-fitting floral jumper made for him two previous Christmas seasons, Njideka had come back panting, to report that no lorry was anywhere around.

Nkiru and Ogechukwu followed her closely.

'Missus,' Mazi Laza hailed his wife, 'since you are now going with him, I will hand over to you his school fees for the year.' He handed the money over to his wife. 'Here's transport money for both of you, including the money to bring you back. I would have suggested that you turn back from Onitsha, after putting Onyibo in the hands of a good driver bound for Ubi ...'

'If your concern is over the transport money, take your money back!' Mama Obu did not wait for him to complete his sentence. 'I am taking Obiano to Aka and I have enough friends who can lend me the return fare!' She held out her hand with the money in it.

'I take back my words! There's enough money there to take you to Aka and bring you back. My suggestion had nothing to do with money.'

'Hold tight to your suggestion, I beg you!' retorted Mama Obu. 'We've all seen what has come of your suggestion to travel with "John whose face knows no laughter"!' "

Mazi Laza decided to ignore his wife. She was upset about the severance from her son, and this had affected her attitude to the man who took the decision. A little patience was all he needed; very soon the whole matter would blow over. He held Obu by the hand to say a last farewell: 'Onyibo ... God bless you ... You will come back well and meet us well ... God will protect you ... Obey and respect your master and mistress and any others there older than you ...' He stopped when tears trickled down Obu's cheeks. Amuche followed his example and soon each of the girls had a running nose. Oti who began by consoling his friend, Obu, ended up shedding tears too.

'What's the matter with all of you?' shouted Mazi Laza, surprised at his ability to keep a steady voice. 'If your weeping draws people to this house, you'll tell them who died that you're mourning!'

Obu and his mother left shortly before 1 a.m. The whole of Mazi Laza's household were at the road to see them off except Mazi Laza; Oti was also there. Obu shrieked as he was helped into the lorry from the rear end, not out of grief for leaving home but because he had been told that every child generally cries the first time he enters a lorry. Unfortunately his sisters misunderstood him, and soon all of them joined him as an expression of solidarity.

'Do you mean people here still cry when someone is about to travel?' asked a mischievous passenger.

'A town that throws a public party when a woman buys an enamel washbasin is capable of anything,' chipped in the lorry conductor as he forced an opening through sleeping passengers to create space for Obu and his mother.

'Has everything been put in, Njide?' enquired Mama Obu as she squeezed her legs into the tight space between their bench and the one in front.

'Yes, Ma,' replied Njide.

'That woman is asking as if she is carrying the whole world,' observed the same mischievous passenger.

'My man, if you were deliberately sent here to abuse me, go and tell whoever sent you that his medicine will not be effective. Please put your mouth back in its scabbard and leave me alone.'

'Who is holding you?' the passenger asked, waxing stronger. 'If I want somebody to hold, you think I'll leave these your beautiful daughters to hold you?'

Obu muttered a low cry as he was jerked towards the tail board at the movement of the lorry. His mother held him firmly, at the same time rattling endless instructions to Nkiru, Njide and Ogechukwu about how they should look after the house and their father during her absence. They could not have picked up much, because the sound of the moving lorry spontaneously evoked a song from the passengers:

Ojolima elugo Umuoji, ka m'na, Ojolima elugo Ojoto, ka m'na,

Ojolima elugo Oraifite, ka m'na n'ike agwum – O.

Mazi Laza was not sure he slept a wink that night. He did not want to admit that he was already missing Onyibo. Was it wise to be sending his only son to live with Teacher Zaccheus? Should he not have yielded to his wife's entreaties?

Chapter Twelve

Mama Obu hardly uttered a word all the way back from Aka to Umuchukwu, not even during the bicycle journey from Aka to Ubi when a half-starved cripple shouted at the man carrying her to enquire whether his cargo (referring to her) was for sale, as if the cripple was in a position to make a bid. She merely spat a dry 'tufia' at the imbecile in utter disdain.

As the lorry approached Umuchukwu, she felt like a woman returning from the maternity home with nothing to show for her nine months of suffering and expectation. On occasions she had the mysterious feeling that she was somehow naked, even though she knew she was not. Obu had

become so much a part of her that she felt incomplete from the time she set off from Aka without him.

'I'm so happy that I took Obu there myself,' she confided in Mama Oti whom she found in the compound on her return. Mama Oti had come to enquire how the girls were doing in her absence.

'I told you to go,' Mama Oti replied, anxious to underscore her part in the matter. 'I told you these men don't know one thing about children; except to claim them when they have become something.'

'Without going to Teacher's house to see things for myself, I don't see how my eyelids could have closed in sleep. The stories people told about that man, especially about his wife, I didn't know that anybody could spend one night in their house without either being flogged to death by Teacher or starved to the bone by his wife ...'

'Are you trying to say that those stories are not true?'

'I can't say anything about what other people saw there, but I can talk about what I saw. Teacher and his wife received us with a clean heart. Teacher's wife embraced me as soon as I entered the house, not minding the dust I had collected on the long journey. They made available a tarpaulin bed for me, but when I asked to be allowed to sleep on the floor with Obu they let me. You know,' Mama Obu lowered her voice, 'Obiano still wets his bed and I did not want him to do so on his first night there, while I was still around. Sleeping with him was the only way in which I could ensure that I took him out at intervals during the night to pass water.'

'You are the first person I've heard speak well of Teacher and his wife.'

'My husband saw nothing bad in them, but since he never sees faults in anybody when it suits him not to do so, it is not easy to go by what he says.'

'Did you remember to ask them about Oti?'

'Yes,' lied Mama Obu, 'but they said that if they had known about him earlier they would not have agreed to take another boy.'

'It's Papa Oti's fault! As soon as you told me about Obu I asked him to arrange for Oti to go too. But he is like the nkakwu which waits until the labour pains set in before setting about to prepare the nest in which to nurse its baby. Can you believe that it was on the day you and Obu were getting ready to leave that he first mentioned the matter to Papa Obu! Anyway, any time Oti cries because he did not go away with Obu, I'll send him to go and cry to his father.'

Mama Obu quickly changed the topic. She knew she was not a convincing liar, and feared that Oti's mother would see through the lie if the discussion proceeded much further. She had deliberately refused to ask whether Teacher would take Oti; why must Oti's parents always wait for somebody else to clear the bush for them?

Mazi Laza felt tremendous relief when he received his wife's report. He had cancelled his plans to proceed on his usual business trip that morning on the excuse that he and his wife could not both travel out of town the same time; his actual reason was to await his wife's return so as to be sure that Obu was well settled. Knowing his wife as well as he did, he was certain that she would bring Obu back if she considered the atmosphere around Teacher's house too hostile for her son, hence his objection to her accompanying Obu. Mama Obu was not the person to swallow phlegm in the name of decorum.

On the two occasions on which Mazi Laza was able to shut his eyes after Obu and his mother had left, he dreamt of Obu. Each dream was bad. On the first occasion, the boy was shrieking as he was hotly pursued by a monstrous looking snake. Mazi Laza himself shouted at the sight of the deadly snake, and his voice woke him up. What a relief it was to realise that it was only a dream. On the other occasion Obu was struggling for life in the middle of a wide lake. He had already taken his second gulp of water and, as was widely believed at Umuchukwu, one more gulp and he would drown. Mazi Laza waded into the lake until the water reached his chest and the ground began to slip under his feet. Then a strange huge bird, much larger than the eagle, and with a beak tougher looking than that of a hornbill, hovered over Obu as if to ascertain what he was. Mazi Laza immediately shouted at the boy to avoid the bird. To his huge relief, his voice again woke him up. At that point he abandoned his bed for fear of having more nightmares. He brought his cloth chair into the bedroom and reclined on it until the cackle of chickens foraging for food signalled the dawn of another day.

'The manner in which they received me confounded my eyes,' Mama Obu reported. 'I did not see any of those bad habits acquired by some of our people living at Onitsha and in other townships; they received me as if I was their mother. I even ate with them from the same plate.'

'Teacher and his Missus take me as somebody, even though I am nothing,' said Mazi Laza. 'It is true that a chicken does not forget the person who plucked its tail feathers during the rainy season, even if only few chickens choose to remember nowadays. Teacher has not forgotten the good things my father did for his father. If I had known you would accompany Obu, I would have collected something to send to them; it's a strong man who will agree to add another mouth to his household in wartime.'

'Don't say if you knew I would accompany Obu. You did not want me to accompany him.'

'Let the smoke carry that point. I hope they liked the yams I sent them.'

'Oh, I forgot to mention that. They reckoned those yams would cost twenty shillings and more over there. As for the big asa fish I bought for them at Onitsha, Teacher's Missus danced round it several times until I begged her to stop.'

'So you bought fish for them as well,' asked Mazi Laza. 'Then I don't need to regret not buying them something.'

'You owe me twenty-five shillings for the fish, O! It doesn't matter whether you regret or not.'

'All right. Twenty-five shillings is plenty of money but not that plentiful to oust us from our house. Add it where you write down my debts; when the bell rings for paying debts, each of us will add up what the other owes!'

Mama Obu knew it would end that way, with Mazi Laza jocosely brushing away her request for reimbursement. This was, however, one of the occasions on which she could not care one way or the other; she had spent the money on Obu, even if indirectly, and no mother keeps an account of the expenses she incurs on a loved child.

'You didn't tell me that Teacher's Missus has no child,' Mama Obu changed the topic.

'I told you, but I may have done so on one of those occasions when you don't retain what you hear!'

'If I knew, I wouldn't have asked about her children. It grieved me when she told me that God had not yet sent her any.'

'I know I told you,' Mazi Laza spoke more seriously, at the same time tearing off some of the down on a feather which he wanted to use in cleaning out his ears. The movement of the feather in his ear, as he spun it round with his fingers, always gave him a pleasant sensation. 'I remember telling you, too, that Teacher recently decided to marry another woman for the sake of his mother, to bear children for the family as Teacher is the only surviving male. Everybody, of course, knows that the woman with Teacher's mother is meant for Teacher. The church will stop him from teaching if he takes a second wife or changes wives.'

'The way she treated the children living with them while I was there, you would think she was mother of them all. The patience with which she listened to my plea in respect of Obiano, this was unlike the behaviour of a barren woman. Imagine what Veronica would have done if she had been in that woman's place: the bitch with twenty teeth would have torn me to shreds!'

Mazi Laza set off on his rounds the following morning in his usual light-hearted mood. Mama Obu had given him the tonic he very badly needed – an assurance that he had not sold his only son into slavery.

'Silence!' hailed Madam, Teacher Zaccheus Kanu's wife.

'Number one,' whispered Silence, a fourteen-year-old boy entering his penultimate year in the elementary school. He was as cunning as the tortoise and as slippery as the eel. His eyes were larger than an owl's; his head was larger than Obu's, with a square forehead that came close to a child's early sketches of a cow's head. The large head was filled with tricks and, surprisingly, with book knowledge as well. Everyone in the house except Teacher and Madam knew that Silence never answered a call the first time it was made, unless he was in a particularly happy mood or he anticipated something pleasant or he feared another houseboy would expose him. He

usually ignored the first and second calls, hoping that Teacher or Madam would assume he was unavailable and call someone else. If they persisted and went on to the third, he would answer as if, like a masquerade, he had just emerged from an ant hole.

'Silence!'

'Number two,' counted Silence.

'Is it not your name that Madam is calling?' blurted Obu innocently, surprised that Silence should remain so adamant when he heard his name so clearly twice.

'Whose is that voice?' asked Madam. Silence gave Obu the expression of a killer as he put his first finger on his lips and mimed a warning to Obu not to mention his name if he did not want his head shattered. 'It's me,' Obu replied.

'Who is that monkey who does not have a name?'

'It is Obuechina, Ma.'

'Show your ogbanje face here at once.'

Obu was shaken by the unprovoked aggression. Silence jeered at him in a most clownish and irritating manner.

'Where is the ogbanje that I summoned here?'

Silence again mimed to Obu, this time to warn him that Madam would skin him alive if he didn't double towards her immediately. Obu walked to the piazza with leaden feet, swinging his big head as if it would soon break off. Madam was sitting on one of the two lounge chairs which, with two hard benches, formed the piazza furniture. The lounge chairs, like the lounge chairs in

the main sitting room, were intended to be used with cushions, but none of them had any cushions. Teacher did not believe that the African backside was fashioned for such pampering.

Madam looked him over from head to toe and shaped her mouth as if she would spit derisively. 'Is that how you answer your mother when she calls you?' Her tone was surprisingly mild. Obu did not reply; he was biting his lips in an effort to bring his temper under control, and looking at the ground away from Madam's feet.

'I thought you were only an ogbanje. I didn't know you were also dumb!'

'I'm not an ogbanje! grunted Obu, unwilling to stomach the affront any further. Before he could take a breath sparks were flying off his eyes. He was having his induction into the baptism of fire; when Madam meant to smack with good effect she avoided the soft inviting cheeks and hit the face square: eyes, nose, mouth and cheeks.

'One of the first things you'll learn in this house is not to talk back at me, that is if you are still capable of learning. People wait until their children rot like the breadfruit and then dump them on Deborah to salvage the seed from the putrid waste.'

Obu burst out crying, encircling his head with both arms and yelling 'Mama, m'O!' louder than he did when he had received his first strokes of the cane at the Umuchukwu school. He stopped abruptly when he heard a soft feminine voice behind him.

'My friend.'

Obu was stunned to discover on turning round that the sweet feminine voice came from Teacher. The voice and its owner seemed so utterly irreconcilable. Obu was to learn later to expect the worst whenever Teacher called him 'My friend' in such a mellow, harmless and disarming tone.

Teacher was naked down to the waist and sweating profusely. The white woven cloth he tied hung down loosely from his waist, exposing part of his backside and most of his pubic region. When he saw the direction of Madam's corrective eyes, he swung the cloth to the side, exposing more of his right thigh instead. His bloodshot eyes showed that he had just emerged from deep sleep; he did not take a siesta as a regular habit, through a general aversion to regular habits, but when he did nobody other than Madam had the authority to interfere with his sleep. Madam had learnt over years of association how to exercise her discretion judiciously.

'Who's this who says I must not sleep in my own house?' asked Teacher, swinging his searchlight from Obu to Madam. In the brief moment when his eyes met Obu's, Obu could not tell which of the two eyes was artificial. Teacher had lost an eye in his youth; some accounts said he had it replaced with a sheep's eye, some a glass eye.

'It's that wild pig who hasn't spent one full day here; the bird which gives off twenty droppings even before it lands on the ground,' Madam replied.

Teacher's eyes swung back to Obu who dipped his in trepidation. 'Obuechina.' The voice had suddenly become masculine, ominous. The unexpected change frightened Obu who immediately burst into tears, not shouting for his absent mother this time but pleading to the leopard in front of him to spare him this once.

'Come here!' ordered Teacher, gesticulating as well, as if to ensure that he was understood. The stern expression on his face showed that he was not impressed with Obu's display of timidity. Obu saw the gesticulating hand as a thrust of the leopard's deadly paw in his direction, so he sprang back in fear, at the same time pleading for pardon with both his mouth and his hands.

Unfortunately for him, his backward leap landed him too close to Madam. With amazing speed and energy, she rejected the unwelcome intruder. Madam probably aimed at pushing him straight into the leopard's bosom; he actually crashed into the wall separating the main sitting room from the piazza, missing Teacher where he stood by some inches. His forehead landed on the wall with a painful thud, and for a brief moment he forgot that he was now within easy reach of the leopard. He pressed his forehead hard with both palms, to hold down a lump that was shooting up like an inflated balloon. His weeping took a sharp crescendo.

'Shut up!' Teacher bellowed like a lion.

Obu promptly shut up, but he still pressed on to his forehead as he turned to face Teacher.

'My friend,' Teacher returned effortlessly to his mellow voice, giving the impression that the storm had blown over. At the same time, he pulled up his woven cover cloth to cover his corrugated belly. 'A child is not flogged the day he throws away palm oil; it is the day he throws away the liquid waste from the oil that he receives the cane. If you want to live in this house, you must learn many things immediately, and one of them is not to play with a tiger's tail. Run back to the kitchen – I say, run!'

Obu jumped as the voice went up an octave, ran through the main sitting room and out into the open space separating the house from the kitchen. Silence, who had been eavesdropping, suddenly pretended to be dusting the low table on which food for Teacher and Madam was usually set in the lobby directly behind the main sitting room.

'You didn't tell us you are an ogbanje,' Silence said as he joined Obu in the kitchen.

'Shut up!' Obu exploded in a manner that took Silence off his guard.

'It seems you're not satisfied with what they gave you over ...'

'I say shur-r-r-rup!' Obu repeated.

Silence stepped over with a stern face as if he would smite. 'Are you telling me to shut up?'

At this point Obu could feel the air from Silence's nostrils as Silence stooped to Obu's eye level. Obu pushed him backwards, accusing him of being responsible for what he had suffered that afternoon: 'You tortoise! If you had answered your name when Madam called you, all this would not have happened to me.'

'That's why you should not only abuse me but also strike the first blow?' With that, Silence grabbed Obu's arm and gave it a wring which overcame all the resistance Obu had mustered, rendering him powerless. Silence wrung the arm further until Obu shrieked with pain.

'Will you abuse me another day?'

Obu ignored the question. Silence wrung the arm another half turn. 'Will you abuse me another day?'

At this point Obu burst out weeping. Silence promptly released his arm and tried to shut Obu's mouth so that his weeping might not be heard by Madam or Teacher. When Obu tried to bite his fingers, he removed them quickly and used a nearby aluminium kettle to produce a noise which might drown Obu's sobs.

'Obuechina!'

'Madam.'

After Madam had listened to Obuechina explain why he wept, she summoned Silence before her. 'He has been abusing me all day and ...' 'You're lying,' Obu interrupted Silence.

'He has started again; you hear him now calling me a liar.'

'It's because you refused to answer when Madam called you that this...'

'Hey!' Silence shouted as if Obu had concocted a bewildering lie. 'How could any sensible person in this house refuse to answer Madam? If it's medicine ...' 'Enough of all this,' Madam ruled. 'The way all of you in this house tell white lies in broad daylight, it is impossible to say when any of you is speaking the truth or telling a lie. Go back to the kitchen both of you and let me not hear any "fim" again from either of you!'

After supper that night, Silence filed a case against Obu, for the adjudication of the special standing tribunal on quarrels among the houseboys and girls living in Teacher's house. He charged Obu on two counts: reporting Silence to Madam, and striking the first blow in the scuffle with Silence. Monday, Madam's cousin, directed the proceedings as usual. He was about nineteen, the oldest member of the domestic staff. He had failed the First School Leaving Certificate examination three times and Teacher stoutly refused any more entreaties from Madam to pay his fees for a fourth shot. His people had pleaded with Teacher to let him stay on with Teacher, to save him from conscription. He had applied for jobs in the Railways and elsewhere, and while awaiting the outcome of his latest applications he was apprenticed to a mechanic. He returned to the house in the evenings which minimised his usefulness in the house, but he was required to stay back in the house every Saturday to compensate for this. He was of average height, and his fair complexion and Caucasian nose showed that he and Madam came from the same stock. His hair was ebony black but noticeably wavy; taken along with his nose and

complexion, it was not surprising that some friends teased him by referring to him as an Igbo-made white man.

Obu was dumbfounded by Silence's action. If anybody had any charges to file, he thought, it was he, Obu, not Silence. To have put him through the bitter experience of that afternoon and, at the end of it, institute charges against him was worse than trouncing a child and ruling that the child must not cry. The injustice in Silence's action was there for everybody to see, so Obu felt all he had to do was to recount his unpleasant experience and everyone would exonerate him and condemn Silence. To his utter consternation, both judge and jury found him guilty on both counts.

Ada, a sixteen-year-old cousin of Teacher's, advocated a reprimand for Obu, on the grounds that he was a greenhorn, who had not been given the opportunity to learn their regulations and mores. Her plea for leniency was accepted and Obu was warned to be of good behaviour. Ada undertook to familiarise him with the ropes, and Monday urged everyone to help him to find his feet.

Chapter Thirteen

The harmattan made a smokescreen around the premises of Aka C.M.S. Central School, shutting off the beautiful, grass-carpeted evergreen hills shaped like giant yam mounds which formed the distinguishing landmark for miles around.

The school was located on what used to be a controversial piece of land, disputed by the three adjoining towns of Afufa, Kita and Aguana. The dispute was clearly irreconcilable, and after the never-ending wrangles had claimed twenty lives, the Government had decided to step in. The land became Crown Land, and was soon after leased to the Church Missionary Society which uprooted all the controversial palm trees and erected an elementary school to serve the three towns. The school was named Aka Central School to symbolise the combined ownership of the school, Aka having been coined from a combination of the first letters of the names of the three towns. Thus a former bone of contention became a symbol of unity; Aka C.M.S. Central School became the pride of the three towns which shared responsibility for its upkeep and fed it with children.

Notwithstanding the cold and hazy weather, the school bubbled over with excitement on this first day of term of the 1943 School Year. In previous years, attendance was often at its lowest on the first day of school; many pupils stayed away deliberately, to avoid the vigorous grass cutting and scrubbing of school buildings which often took up the whole of the first week. This year things were different. Teacher had instructed the churches in the three towns to announce that any pupil who did not show up at school on the first day of the term would be regarded as having withdrawn from the school. All teachers had consequently been instructed to register their pupils immediately after the first morning assembly for the year.

'What do you want here?'

Obu turned towards his interrogator. He was a big, sour-looking boy whose chin showed signs of manhood. He carried a pad on his head as if he were waiting for a load to place on the pad. Obu discovered later that this was the distinguishing mark of every pupil who 'carried his class' by being placed last during the previous year's Annual Examinations. Each 'carrier of his class' was required to carry the pad on his head throughout the first week of the new school year; according to Teacher who initiated the tradition, it had salutary psychological effects on the class as a whole. Obu's interrogator was the last in Standard 2 and was repeating the year.

'Don't you hear me? I say, what are you doing here?'

'This is my class,' replied Obu somewhat confused.

'What is your class?' asked the boy with the pad.

'Standard 2.'

'Your class is in the Infant block. Go over there.'

Obu stepped out of the classroom, looked at the inscription at the top of the door frame, and re-entered the room, confused the more. STD. II was clearly inscribed on the door.

'Did you say Standard 2 or Class 2?' another boy in the room asked him.

'Standard 2.'

'If so, this is your class,' the second boy confirmed.

'How can such a small rat be in Standard 2?'

The Class teacher's entry put a stop to the effusions of the boy with the pad, whose name turned out to be Cromwell. The class rose at the teacher's entry. The pupils who were still chatting outside promptly dashed in and occupied the front and rear benches which had been avoided by the early birds; the front bench because it brought you too close to the teacher's watchful eyes, and the rear bench because it offered too much of a temptation to sleep through every class.

'Now let me see what the Standard 1 teacher has pushed over to me.' The teacher spoke lightly as he signalled to the class to be seated. 'Are you sure you're all fit to read Standard 2?'

'Yes, Sir!' The response was more convincing than the 'Aye' in a one-party parliament. Cromwell and the five other boys and two girls who were repeating the year were the only members of the class who did not join in the loud response.

'We shall see!'

The teacher's response evoked those behind-the-desk glances which the teacher is not expected to observe or to understand. 'We shall see' was the nickname given to the teacher by his 1942 class, because of the frequency with which he uttered those words in class.

'Give me your names one by one.' The teacher blew hard at the top of his stool, to blow off any dust, after which he spread a white pink-embroidered handkerchief on the stool as an additional safeguard. Then he held each leg of his pair of white shorts at the rear, razor-sharp crease, and pulled outwards before taking his seat, to ensure that the pair of shorts did not develop any creases while he sat down. His shorts had such wide legs – each could accommodate his waist one and a half times – that the exercise also eliminated a source of distraction for the pupils on the front bench. He blew non-existent dust off the top of his table as well before opening the

exercise book to take down the names preparatory to their eventual transfer into the official class register.

As 'We shall see' took down the names, beginning from the front bench, Obu took detailed note of his teacher's charming appearance. His recently barbered hair was split right down the middle by a parting as long and straight as the Ogananya stretch on the Onitsha-Nnewi road. That was the 'I don't care' hairstyle which Obu had heard of but had never seen so attractively executed. 'We shall see' must have been using a wire brush, judging from the ripples of ebony black hair on either side of the parting. Obu was also captivated by the manner in which 'We shall see' turned up his collar at the back, and was beginning to fidget with his own collar when he realised that it was his turn to give his name.

'Obuechina Maduabuchi.'

The teacher did not write down the name. 'What class do you think this is!' he asked lightly dropping his golden Platinum fountain pen, certain that he had rounded up an impostor. Cromwell waited to offer his services in throwing the swollen headed ass out of the room.

'Standard 2, Sir.'

'Do you mean Class 2?'

'No, Sir. Standard 2, Sir.'

The teacher detected a confidence which was not commonly associated with unhardened impostors. 'Spell your name.'

Obu spelt his name slowly and correctly. The teacher was not satisfied. 'Now, we shall see.' He switched over to English. 'Spell me em – em – tintinnabulation!'

The whole class shouted as the jawbreaker rolled out of the teacher's mouth like bombs from the hatch of a bomber. No one in the class had heard a word so bombastic before. Obu rolled his big head from one side to the other and accepted the challenge. 'We shall see' was at the blackboard with a piece of chalk waiting to write the letters down as Obu spelt them.

'T ... i ... n ...' The teacher wrote the letters down.

't ... i ... n ... n ...' Obu bit his lips, held his chin with his left hand, looked at the seven letters on the board and saw the rest of the word clearly in his mind's eye:

' ... a ... b ... u ... l ... a ... t ... i ... o ... n.'

The teacher dropped the chalk without writing the last letter on the board, and rushed to shake the small hand of his new-found genius. 'Wonderful! Terrificious! Marvellous! We shall see this year.' Obu was the kind of boy every teacher wanted in his class – young, full of brain rather than brawn, the type who was destined to enter Government College, Umuahia if it reopened after the war.

Obu found the innumerable pairs of envious eyes beamed at him too glaring for his liking and tried to avoid them by checking whether his fingernails could pass scrutiny at a morning inspection. He was the youngest in the class, yet by his performance that morning he had laid strong claims to being the most brilliant. His rating in the eyes of his classmates soared even higher when he disclosed that he was living with Teacher. As the class trooped out to their various places of work at the sound of the headmaster's bell, one of the eight girls in the class hung around Obu until he moved away without noticing her.

It was a welcome change to walk home when the rest of the school was engaged in compound work. Being a teacher's boy had its privileges! And with his distinguished achievement in the class that morning, Obu rode back to Teacher's house on a magic carpet. How he wished the magic carpet would fly him to Umuchukwu so that his mother could in her characteristic manner plug his mouth with a generous piece of smoked fish! Back at the house, he discovered he had no audience to tell about his first day in his new class. Monday would not return from the workshop till evening. Silence, Ada, Bright and Mary had not returned. He decided to go back to the school to find out what was holding them up; the kitchen held no fascination for him with all his fellow servants far from it. He took a cup of water from the water pot in the kitchen since the servants were not allowed to take water from the special Inyi earthen cooler kept in the main house. He quietly replaced the giant enamel cup over the mouth of the pot and was beginning to move away from the house when Madam's voice stopped him.

'Who's in the kitchen?' she asked from her bedroom.

Obu decided to try Silence's technique of not answering the first call; Madam could not have heard his movements in the kitchen, and she might only be taking a chance to see if any of them had returned from school. If she did not repeat the call he would sneak off noiselessly.

'Does the person in that backyard not have ears, or was it a spirit I heard replacing the cover on the water pot just now?'

Obu knew he could not escape. When Ada warned him that Madam had the ears of an alligator he thought she was exaggerating; he had now seen for himself. He disclosed his identity without further delay, and ran to the sitting room for Madam's instructions.

'Why didn't you answer my first call, or are you already gone deaf?'

'I was just going to answer you when the water choked me.' Obu was learning fast one of the essential weapons of successful houseboys – the ability to improvise plausible lies and alibis.

'You were choked yet you did not cough?' Madam's question showed that Obu needed a longer period of apprenticeship to Silence to make his improvised stories more convincing. He avoided Madam's eyes and decided that this was one of the moments when, as Ada had advised him, silence paid.

'Did you say you can cook?' Madam asked.

Obu gave a garbled reply which could be yes or no, the kind of reply he had heard either Silence or Monday give when he was not certain what reply Teacher or Madam wanted to receive.

'If you say you can cook, I'll give you a little trial now'. Obu's heart abandoned him for a split second. 'Cook me a little yam pottage. Use some utazi and cook it so that I'll have plenty of pottage water to drink. If you bring the fish basket hanging over the fireplace I'll give you the fish to use. I want to feel the taste of pepper in it, to see whether it will clear the bad mouth I've carried about since yesterday, but don't empty all the pepper in the house into the pot. I'm still carrying my morning mouth, so you must finish the cooking right away. Bring me the fish basket and the yam from which I cut some slices yesterday, so that I'll give you the quantity I want.'

A nervous Obu brought the yam and the fish basket. Madam broke off the quantity of dry fish for the pottage, and had a good look at the fish left before pushing the basket to Obu to tie up. As usual, she took photographic note of what remained, to ensure that none of her houseboys or maids stole any morsel out of it. Then she sliced off as much yam as she needed, and cut it up into smaller pieces before asking Obu to gather them up and peel them in the kitchen. It was

sometime later that Obu learnt why she should be more concerned with cutting the yam into pieces than in peeling it; that way she knew how many pieces of yam to expect in the pottage.

'If you get confused at any stage, let me know; I want this pottage to be well prepared.'

'Yes, Ma.'

Obu's nervousness grew as he discovered that he could not tie up the fish basket properly. He had watched his mother tie up their fish basket at home and hang it over the fireplace and the whole exercise had looked so straightforward. Now that he was faced with doing it himself he discovered that whichever way he tied the basket, he could not balance it when the time came to hang it over the fireplace. He gave up the attempt, hoping to receive help when his more experienced colleagues returned.

Peeling the yams presented no difficulty; although he had never peeled yams before, he found he could do so without further tuition. As he peeled the yams, he prayed that some of his colleagues, particularly Ada, would return; he had no idea whatsoever what to do after peeling and washing the yams. Then an idea occurred to him: he could sneak out to consult Ada on how to cook the pottage. 'Who?' Madam shouted as Obu tiptoed out.

'It's me,' Obu replied, drops of sweat beginning to materialise on his brow.

'Have you finished preparing my pottage?'

'No, Ma. I'm going to fetch fire.'

'Use the matches. I want that pottage quickly.'

'The matches are finished. I'll soon return with fire.' Obu ran off immediately. It was better to be punished for telling lies about the matches or for disappearing before being dismissed by Madam than to be stopped from consulting Ada. He found Silence instead of Ada. 'That's the price for being a good boy,' Silence had told Obu from his hideout before teaching him how to prepare the pottage.

Everything went well and Obu was thrilled to see what was unmistakably yam pottage in the boiling pot. Cookery was not that mysterious after all, if his first shot could hit the bull's eye so easily. As he inhaled his nose, which had begun to run with his frequent blowing of the fire and excessive sampling of the peppery pottage, he recalled how he felt each time he saw Ada, Silence and the others transfer some of the soup or whatever else they were cooking to the open palm of the left hand before lapping it up with the tongue and nodding satisfaction with the air of a first class chef. As he tapped the wooden ladle on his left palm the tenth time and lapped up the peppery mixture, he felt convinced that a little more salt was needed. He picked up the beer bottle containing salt, turned it gradually over the boiling pot. The moist salt held together and none came out. He gave the bottle a tap with the ladle and ouch – half the salt in the bottle poured into the pot!

Obu scooped out as much of the salt as possible but what remained was so excessive that it cut into your tongue. He poured in three full cups of water to reduce the salt, but to little effect.

'Obuechinal' Madam hailed. Hot urine trickled down Obu's legs.

'Ma!'

'Isn't the pottage ready? Are you cooking stone?'

'It remains a little.'

Obu sneaked out to see whether Ada or any of his colleagues was around, anybody who could help him pull out of the mess in which he found himself. He didn't see anyone. He cursed himself for coming home at all and swore that on no occasion in future would he cut school work so as to rush back to the house. As he returned to the kitchen utterly confused and dejected, an idea struck him. Why not empty the pot, pick out the yam pieces and the fish, wash the salt off them, and begin afresh with the washed yam and fish, fresh water, palm oil, pepper and other ingredients? He saw no alternative except reporting himself to Madam, so he used the special iron hooks to remove the pot from the fire and poured the contents of the pot into a clean basket placed over a wooden mortar, to isolate the yams and fish.

'What are you doing?'

Obu would have jumped out of his skin had this been possible; Madam had materialised without warning in one of her characteristic swoops. Obu could have sworn that she was a ghost, except that the Madam he saw standing close to him was very much life and blood!

'There was too much salt in the pottage so I...'

The lightning struck before Obu could conclude his explanation. Madam gave him the knockout smack which was believed at Umuchukwu to turn the recipient into a grass eater. He dropped the basket of yam and fish on the mortar and staggered towards the water pot, narrowly missing it and finishing up on all fours on a nearby bundle of firewood. By the time he could recover from the dizziness Madam had tasted the yam in the basket, flung the basket with yam and fish on him and spat out the salt in her mouth in his direction. 'That yam will be your food for today and

tomorrow. And Teacher will show you your chi in all his nakedness if I tell him what you have done with the salt he spent so much money to buy.'

Obu rose as soon as he heard the receding footsteps and shook himself like a drenched dog. He did not know what to worry about: his school uniform, soiled all over with oil on the first day of the week; the scald from hot yams or the prospect of feeding on a few slices of salt yam for two days. He gathered up the yams and the fish from where they fell, blowing off the sand and dust they had picked up. With a rag he wiped his head and face and pulled off his shirt before Silence and the others arrived to rub the salt into his wounds. Then it dawned upon him that he had not shed even a tear in spite of the knockout blow. Was he already developing a houseboy's crocodile skin?

When Obu appeared before Madam later that day, it was to be informed that he must not, under any circumstance, cook or participate in cooking any food intended for Teacher and Madam. He would share Bright's responsibilities with him. Bright, who was about two years older than Obu, came from Ubana, the town in which Teacher last taught before coming to Aka. His father owed Teacher some money, and Bright was sent to live with Teacher as security for the loan. The duties which Obu would share with him included washing up the plates used by Teacher and Madam, counting the poultry every night and ensuring that all the birds were complete each night, sieving the fermented cassava ready for cooking, and general cleaning of the compound and house.

From that day Madam decided to keep the salt bottle in her custody; even brown Ubulu salt was a rarity in wartime.

Chapter Fourteen

The Catechist's first bell for pre-dawn prayers served as the rising bell in Teacher's house. As soon as it sounded at 5 a.m. prompt every servant scrambled up from the sleeping mat.

By 5.30 a.m. when the Catechist rang the second bell for prayers, the servants whose turn it was to fetch water were already halfway to the one mile distant stream, while the others swept the compound with palm fronds trimmed for the purpose, cleared the previous day's ash from the kitchen, boiled water for Teacher's bath and cooked breakfast for Teacher and Madam. They took turns in laying out the face water and chewing stick for Teacher. The water was poured into an enamel bowl and placed on a metal stand built to Teacher's height by a local tinker. A special tumbler holder stuck out from the side of the stand but Teacher preferred taking the chewing stick and cup of clean water from a servant.

Teacher's early morning routine followed clockwork regularity. At 5.10 he left his bedroom and picked up the lantern waiting for him outside the room. He also detached some leaves from past examination scripts or discarded exercise books and made for the pit latrine.

As soon as he emerged from the masters' mud-walled latrine tucked away at a rear corner of the compound, he made for the water in the basin. The servant on duty handed him a slice of bar soap and received it back when Teacher had scrubbed his hands. Next, the chewing stick; the servant knew he had to stand away from the direction of Teacher's mouth for soon he began to spit out tiny pieces of chewing stick. After this the servant received back the chewing stick, reduced in length, and handed over the large cup of water.

Teacher rinsed his mouth, spat out the water, massaged his gum with a finger, rinsed his mouth again, and again spat out the water; rinsed once more, and then drank the water left in the cup.

There was nothing, he always said, like an early morning foundation of cold water for a clean rumble-free stomach.

Teacher handed back the cup and received the soap. After a vigorous face wash, he took the brownish towel from the servant's outstretched hand, dried his face and hands up to the elbow and returned to the bedroom for his shirt and the special crocodile skin bag in which he carried his Bible, hymn book, prayer book and churchman's pamphlet.

On this particular Saturday, Teacher was scheduled to travel to Nogidi for a meeting to discuss renewed school efforts to win the war. His out of town meetings were usually held on Saturdays, and it was Monday's responsibility to ensure that his Hercules bicycle was roadworthy. Monday rolled out the bicycle while Teacher was in the bathroom – an open air enclosure, 'walled' with raffia mat.

The two tyres were down as the bicycle had not been ridden for three weeks. Monday ignored the tyres until he had meticulously dusted the bicycle to the high standards prescribed by Teacher, who could hunt for dust and cobwebs between spokes, under the bicycle seat and in other such hidden places. Teacher was already at the breakfast table when Monday turned to attend to the tyres.

'What's that?' Teacher shouted as something exploded like a gunshot. With spectacular presence of mind and agility, he put back into the plate the ball of cassava foofoo which he had not yet dipped into the agbono soup and dashed out in the direction of the explosion, using his left hand to stop his pair of khaki shorts from slipping down. Monday had scrambled up from where the shock of the totally unexpected explosion had thrown him, wiping off the dust unobtrusively while staring at the deflated rear tyre and watching Teacher without appearing to do so.

Teacher read from Monday's eyes that the explosion came from the bicycle. He stormed down the six steps from the house, felt the rear wheel and saw that all the air inside the tyre was gone. Monday retreated as fast as Teacher approached him: Alakuku the giant retreating from an Nri dwarf.

'Come here!' ordered Teacher.

'I didn't do anything to it, Sir,' pleaded Monday, still retreating. 'Perhaps it is ...!'

'Shut up!' Teacher thundered, in his most masculine voice. Monday stood transfixed to the ground.

'Come here,' repeated Teacher in a mellow tone that left Monday in doubt as to what to expect. The remnants of cassava foofoo on his fingers were beginning to form a crust.

'What happened to my bicycle?' he asked as Monday stood in front of him like a private before a major general.

'I was pumping the tyre very gently, Sir, because I knew how old ...' Teacher was not interested in any excuses and so did not let Monday concoct one. He hit Monday while he bent down to demonstrate how he was inflating the bicycle. Monday could not recall whether the blow was delivered with the palm or with the clenched fist or with something more lethal than human flesh. In his fall, he hit the bicycle with his head and both crashed to the ground. Teacher grabbed a broom which lay nearby and used the head to deal further anger-packed blows at Monday, stopping only when he noticed that the boy offered no further resistance. Then he threw the broom at him and stormed back to his breakfast.

A bucketful of cold water revived Monday and calmed the nerves of everyone else in the house except Teacher who considered death more worthwhile than a life of utter uselessness, which was the life Monday lived. He promised to send Monday to the grave if he turned up late to his meeting as a result of the boy's stupidity and carelessness.

'If you kill him, make sure you eat his carcass!' grumbled Madam as she searched her bag for shea butter for the wounds on Monday's body. 'Look at the rickety old bicycle for which somebody's first son should be skinned alive! And yet pupil teachers employed only yesterday ride brand new Raleigh bicycles.'

'Silence,' Teacher called, ignoring his wife's grumblings.

'Sir.' The atmosphere was too explosive for Silence to try any tricks.

'Take that bicycle to the repairer in hot haste. Tell him that I say he must suspend everything else he is doing and get that bicycle ready for me immediately. I must not arrive late at my meeting. Understand?'

'Yessir.' Silence almost pushed Obu and Mary down in an effort to demonstrate how seriously he took his charge.

'That's how you scallywags answer yes sir even before the instruction is given, and straightaway turn round to do the wrong thing. This time, I won't warn you; the deaf does not wait to be alerted that the market is ablaze.'

'Who's getting me water to wash my hands' shouted Teacher sucking his fingers loudly, one after the other, at the end of a protracted breakfast. Agbono soup, mixed with krenkren vegetable, provided something to chew while he moulded the next ball of foofoo. Moreover, agbono soup

lingered longer on your fingers than egusi or bitterleaf soup, when it came to sucking the fingers. Obu and Bright heard Teacher, but neither was enthusiastic to go near him; an irritated Teacher found fault with everything. Obu looked at Bright and Bright looked at Obu.

'Is there nobody in that kitchen?' Teacher shouted.

'Obu, take the water to him now ...' Teacher did not wait for Bright to go further before snapping at him. 'That person asking somebody else to bring me water, are you in labour or have you outgrown bringing me water for my hands? You bring me the water before thunder crushes you to death there!'

Obu gave Bright his tongue as if to say 'serves you right'.

Bright retaliated by flinging some water on Obu as he dashed out of the kitchen.

'Oh, is it you, Bright; already feeling too big to fetch me water for my hands?' Teacher asked as Bright walked up to him. 'There's nothing that the ear won't hear! I bet you forget that you are here because your father owes me a lot of money, and that unless you work hard enough to satisfy me I'll insist on full repayment. Hold up the water here, you bastard!'

Teacher plunged his two hands into the basin of water. Although he had sucked his fingers dry, traces of oil could still be found on them. 'Where's the soap?' he enquired in a tone that sounded surprisingly friendly. Bright was not, however, in a mood to appreciate the change of attitude. Each time Teacher reminded him of the debt his father owed, his spirits went down to their nadir. And Teacher chose the most unexpected occasions to remember the debt – he had even drawn it into an address he gave to the whole school during a morning assembly. Bright deeply resented

the publicity given to his father's poverty, and there were times when he contemplated burglary if that would help him to redeem his father's name and buy his release.

Bright was too hurt to talk. He was about to keep the basin of water on the floor and go for the soap when Teacher's fury returned. 'Oh, my friend, you don't know that I use soap to wash my hands?' Teacher spoke in the feminine voice which was normally intended to mask his inner feelings. 'OK. I'll teach you never to forget it in future.'

Teacher plunged his hands again into the water, and proceeded to wipe them dry on Bright's head. Oily water trickled down Bright's face, some finding its way into the corners of his mouth. Then something flashed through Bright's mind. Like a drenched dog, he shook his dripping head vigorously. Drops of oily water were all over Teacher's shirt before he could dodge. Teacher spontaneously struck his face, sending forth sparks from both eyes. That gave Bright full rein. The basin of oily water accidentally flew off his hands, most of it pouring down Teacher's shirt, shorts and hose.

Teacher was stunned, but not for long. The church bells – to be rung at 7 o'clock on the orders of the District Officer – reminded him that he had no time to spare if he must get to Nogidi before the District Officer.

'My friend. A child is not thrashed on the day he spills palm oil ...'

The jubilation among the servants when Silence returned from the bicycle repairer's and broke the good news that Teacher had definitely cycled off to Nogidi could not have been greater if Teacher had been conscripted into the West African Frontier Force.

'Bright, you can have my share of meat tonight,' offered Monday, lightly stroking his fingers over the bump above his right eyebrow. It was his first coherent sentence since he had had a taste of Teacher's brutality. 'I wish you had also struck his thick head with the basin!' 'I would have said, take my own meat too,' added Ada, 'but who gave the toad the privilege of wearing a coat? That chicken without tail feathers has refused to die in spite of its serious cough. So, no meat for us!'

Everyone burst into laughter, except Obu who struggled to hold back a tear. Who would dare give him dead chicken as meat at Umuchukwu?

'A – da!'

The chattering stopped simultaneously as Madam's voice reminded the cheerful servants that the house was not all theirs. 'That witch again!' muttered Ada, audibly enough for the other servants to hear. 'Have I eaten any yams in her barn, or does she hold me respon...'

'A – da!'

'May God bend your neck there if you think you can shout Ada to the hearing of the D.O.' Ada cursed for the benefit of her fellow servants, before answering 'Ma!' as if she had just heard her name for the first time.

'I thought you were deaf and I was coming to pierce your ears open, you bitch! Why didn't you answer me all this time?'

'I did not hear you.'

'What did you say?' . .

'I say I did not hear you.' If Ada knew the state of mind in which Madam was she would have eliminated the quiet obstinacy which was clearly evident in her manner. But she did not know, and so unwittingly heaped coal on a fire already set ablaze by forces of which she was unaware.

'I see we are now equals, eh? You have breasts now and hair under your armpits, so you can open your masquerade like teeth and answer me without putting Madam?'

Ada spontaneously shut her mouth – the one 'comma' in her make-up, as her admirers put it. She was a black beauty otherwise: beautiful ebony black skin, smooth and delicate to the touch; a pair of rather small eyes which sparkled against the black background like a pair of glowworms on a dark night, eyes which smiled at you and made a passionate appeal to passionate men. Her nose was the appropriate size for her face, and was beautifully rounded off at the tip as if the artist who moulded her recognised that the sharp lines of an aquiline nose would have been out of place on her. Her teeth were the only misfit: they appeared intended for a carnivore, and her normal sized mouth could not cover them gracefully no matter how she tried.

'What have you done all morning?'

'I've been to the stream to fetch water,' Ada replied.

'Has the house been scrubbed for the week?'

'No.'

Ada had hardly uttered the two-letter word before one of Madam's slippers flew in her direction: 'Vultures will eat your meat as they ate Jezebel's if you continue answering me without putting Ma!'

Ada was taken aback by what she considered Madam's unprovoked fury. But for her spontaneous dodge, the missile would have landed square on her chest; it grazed her shoulder and hit the wall instead. Her eyes immediately went to Madam's other foot. The slipper was in place. If she watched the movement of her hands she could avoid the second missile should Madam later decide to hurl it too.

'You and Mary must scrub the whole house thoroughly,' Madam ordered. 'Thoroughly, I said. You must apply the pebble thoroughly; I do not want to see any part of my floor or wall swelling up or bursting like a boil. Do you hear that?'

'Yes, Ma.'

'Before you think that is all you have to do today, you are to boil me two and a half cups of rice. If I find any stones inside it, those stones will be your meal today. Tell me when the rice is done so that I'll see whether to cook the stew myself.'

'Yes, Ma.' Ada walked off to the kitchen.

Madam's right eye blinked thrice. She immediately rose to go, telling the headmaster's wife whom she was visiting that she had just remembered an important assignment which she must complete before Teacher came back that afternoon. Whenever her eyes blinked involuntarily three times, it meant her servants were up to some mischief. As soon as she walked past the male teachers' quarters, she removed her pair of rubber slippers and put them into her handbag; it was easier to steal into the house unnoticed that way. She made straight for the kitchen, located directly behind the main house. The kitchen was empty. The pot of rice was on the fire. She opened it. Steam oozed out from six little holes staggered over the rice surface. The rice was cooked and all the water was practically dry, hence steam alone came out of the little holes. She

plunged a long spoon into the pot quickly removing her hand as hot steam burnt her. After shaking the hand and blowing on it she grabbed the spoon again. It appeared the pot was dry and some of the rice at the bottom would soon be burnt. A wicked idea came to her.

'Ada!' she bellowed.

'Ma!' Ada knew she was in the soup. She and the other servants had gone to share with their fellow teachers' servants a bunch of bananas they had stolen from the school orchard while it was still green and hidden away to ripen. Nobody had expected Madam back so soon; in any case Obu had been assigned to man the observation post, and to give the secret signal as soon as Madam stepped out of the H.M.'s house, to enable the servants to obliterate any trace of bananas and dash back to their respective duties. What had happened? Had Obu fallen asleep or had he forgotten what he was requested to do? What plausible lie could she tell?

The other servants followed Ada stealthily, each working out where to hide until it was safe to return to his or her assignment, or to steal a pot or bucket from the kitchen and disappear to the stream. When Ada saw Madam standing by the fire on which stood the pot of rice, her heart missed a beat and her mouth opened another ten degrees! Her intention at the time she went off with the other servants had been to hurry back with her own share of bananas which she could eat quietly in the kitchen. On reaching the rendezvous everyone agreed that no banana should be taken away, for fear of discovery. If she had known she would stay away that long, she would have reduced the heat by withdrawing some of the firewood from the fire. Could the rice have been burnt? She could not smell burning rice, so ...

'Come here!' ordered Madam, pointing at the floor one foot in front of her, with the pot on her right. Ada remembered her resolution never to cower before a fellow woman, so she stepped forward as ordered.

'Is this how your mother taught you to cook rice?' Madam asked, opening the rice pot. With the speed of lightning, she lifted the long spoon which she had thrust into the pot and thud! went the spoon full of steaming rice on Ada's face just as she was bending over to peep into the pot. Fortunately Madam hit with the back of the spoon. It landed on Ada's forehead, plastering her forehead and eyebrows with steaming hot rice. She shrieked with pain as she grabbed her face with both hands. The spoon dived into the pot and landed a second time on an unsuspecting and momentarily blinded Ada. This time it landed on her wrist, spraying steaming rice on her hands, chest and face.

'God!' grunted Ada, instinctively moving towards the exit and trying to open her eyes gradually as she scraped off the rice.

'Gboko beast!' Madam spoke as if she would spit on Ada. 'I hope you'll remember to tell your brother when he returns from Nogidi that he's not the only person capable of beating servants!'

Chapter Fifteen

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures!

He leadeth me beside still waters. He restoreth my soul ...

The class listened to Obu with envy, admiration, hatred as he rattled through Psalm 23, hardly pausing for breath and without missing out a single word. The whole class had been given one week to memorise the psalm in English, so that each pupil could recite it accurately even if knocked up from sleep. At the end of the week, 'We shall see', the class teacher, enquired whether each pupil had done his homework.

'Yessir!' the class had intoned in unison, with the stress on the sir.

'Tell me what the mouth cannot accomplish!'

'Nothing!'

The teacher went on: 'I can cut a broad road through the winding Milliken hill in one day. By what means?' 'With the mouth!' the class echoed.

'I will pass London Matriculation tomorrow and get a degree from Fourah Bay College the day after. By what means?'

'With the mouth!' Cromwell's voice drowned most other voices. He had no illusion about his academic ability; he hung on at school simply because his elder brother had warned him that he could not obtain a commercial driver's licence unless he passed or at least read Standard 3. Psalm 23 would simply not stick to his small round head (barbered that week in the style appropriately

designated 'sahara'). He prayed that 'We shall see' would take up more time cracking jokes so that thct recitation of Psalm 23 could be put off till another day.

'What's impossible for the mouth to accomplish?'

'Nothing!'

'We shall see' pursed his lips and nodded affirmatively like a wine connoisseur. 'We shall see how many of you have actually memorised Psalm 23 and how many merely say so with their upper lips ...

Cromwell cut him short: 'One question has been puzzling me since last night ...'

'It can puzzle you one more night, Cromwell. Today is for Psalm 23. And if you can only recite that psalm, you may find your puzzle gone because "The Lord is my..."

Go on from there, Cromwell.'

Cromwell was totally unprepared for the first shot, and the little he knew quickly evaporated in his confusion:

'De Lord is my shee-p ... my sheep ... De Lord is ... is ... not want ...'

The smile on the teacher's face dried up as he waited for Cromwell to stop. He removed his handkerchief from his stool, spread it on the table and sat on it, making sure he had prevented his wide-rimmed shorts from creasing. 'Is that how you think you will pass Standard 2 this year?'

'Excuse, Sir, please don't predict that my pitcher will break even before I get to the stream,' replied Cromwell, looking at his desk rather than at the teacher to whom he spoke, and vibrating his right leg as if to keep down his temperature.

'Who is predicting that your pitcher will break?' The teacher's voice rose shrilly, and the pupils observed an involuntary movement of his nose – the sign that he was on the verge of losing his temper. 'I'm only warning you that if you can't memorise even the first verse of such a simple and popular psalm, you shouldn't blame anybody if you fail Standard 2 again.'

'If you fail me again, will my mother's soup pot fail me, too?'

The teacher's nose moved again, this time with the up and down movement of a piston. He, however, smothered his anger when he remembered his humiliating experience early in the previous year, after which he had decided never again to allow himself to get worked up over Cromwell. It was a scene such as this that had driven him into challenging Cromwell to a wrestling contest. Although Cromwell was clearly not an infant, judging from the hairs he kept pulling off his chin during classes, yet there was nothing in his appearance to suggest physical prowess. He might have been 5 feet 9 but for a stoop which reduced his height by about two inches and made him resemble a giant semi-colon, but height was not always synonymous with strength.

On Cromwell's part, he had accepted the challenge, not because he was sure he could throw 'We shall see', but because he knew the contest would burn up the remainder of the period for arithmetic and probably erode into the period for geography. He had never seen the teacher wrestle or fight so there was no way of assessing his strength. Somehow he felt the teacher would not throw him; a man who fed on a diet of cowpeas and African spinach and who drank clean spring water in preference to the vitalising brown water from ponds could not be strong. Even if the teacher threw him, what about it? The teacher who throws his pupil could not expect an eagle's feather for doing so: a teacher should throw his pupil just as it is a dog which should

bite a man and not vice versa. If on the other hand he could throw his teacher, that would be great news. So he had hopes of gain and nothing to lose.

The eagle's feather had gone to Cromwell. He had lost the first bout to his teacher, but quickly made up for lost ground by throwing his teacher in the two succeeding bouts. The last bout was watched by at least half the school, and won Cromwell a thunderous ovation, especially when for a brief second he put his right foot on the vanquished teacher's chest the way a hunter would pose for a photograph with his foot on the body of the elephant he had killed. That was nearly a year ago but its memory remained very fresh in the teacher's mind. He had authorised the headmaster to cut off his arm, his leg, even his private parts if he was ever again caught wrestling or fighting with any pupil.

'We shall see' swallowed his anger. 'Sometimes I wonder why you don't stay beside your mother's soup pot instead of wasting precious time and money coming to school.' To avoid giving Cromwell the chance to retort, the teacher asked the boy sitting at one end of the front row to recite the psalm.

The boy recited two verses without difficulty, and a smile was already lighting up the teacher's face when the tap was turned off and the boy dried up. No amount of prompting could help him. The teacher went through the front row, pupil by pupil. None of them could recite the entire psalm.

'Is there any pupil who can recite the whole psalm?' he enquired, angry and disappointed.

A boy and a girl shot up their hands. Neither of them could make it.

'Is this the kind of class I've been saddled with this year?' Surprisingly the teacher's nose did not twitch. He lowered himself from the table where he sat and walked over to the corner of the room where the class monitor generally kept his work basket, to pick up his cane. 'If there are some of you who think that Standard 2 is the class for eating akara and playing koso, I will soon flog you out of it. We shall see!'

He bent his cane this way and that, to test its reliability. The more cowardly pupils could no longer sit on their benches. Margaret, the girl who sat next to Obu, drifted closer to him as if she needed someone to steady her vibrating nerves. The pathetic appeal on her face was obvious; she looked up to Obu to intervene and save her from the impending catastrophe. Obu stared at the blackboard in front of him, without seeing much. He knew the whole psalm off by heart, but he feared he would incur the collective ire of the class if he pushed himself forward. Then Margaret's pathetic appeal did it. It reminded 'We shall see' of the presence of the little genius at a time he earnestly wished that at least one pupil would save him from flogging the whole class.

'What about you, Obuechina?'

Obu rose from the bench, oblivious of the prayer Margaret was silently saying for him. He avoided all eyes by focusing his own on his desk. Without missing one word, and hardly pausing for breath, he rattled through the entire psalm.

'Ek – ce –llent! Ek – ce –llent!' shouted 'We shall see', proud and happy as he would have been if he had scored three-nil over Cromwell in their wrestling contest. He did not know when the cane dropped from his hand as he jumped down from the table where he sat, rushed to Obu, shook hands with him and led him by the hand to the platform. As if he were not certain the whole class

could see Obu clearly where he stood by the side of the teacher's table, he asked Obu to stand on the table.

'I hope everybody can see him clearly?' he asked.

The reply was obvious. Some pupils nodded; nobody spoke. Cromwell swore he would smash the precocious monkey's head if he thought he could put the whole class to shame whenever he chose; how much better it would have been if nobody in the class had recited the psalm. Margaret felt as if a very close friend had just emerged victorious from a gruelling wrestling contest. Unfortunately the victor was too shy to acknowledge her ear to ear congratulatory grin; the eyes of the class – hostile, envious, passive – were too many for him so he avoided them by looking at his toes.

'Give him the special hand clap!' ordered the teacher. 'One – two – three four five – six! Again –' he sang, 'One two – three four five – six! And the third time – One – two three four five – six! And one for "jara": One – two – three four five – six!'

An excited teacher helped Obu down from the table. 'Here is at least one boy who takes his homework seriously. Some of you care more for your mothers' soup pots.' The teacher deliberately kept his eyes away from Cromwell, for whom the jibe had been intended. 'I tell you, watch this boy. Watch him in five years' time, in ten years' time. We shall see where he will be and where some of you here will be. We shall then see whether it is important to do your homework ...'

The teacher was interrupted by the shooting up of three impatient little hands.

'Yes,' the teacher invited the boy who could recite only two verses; he had been bobbing up and down like a tadpole in quick motion, in his anxiety to attract the teacher's attention.

'I want to try again, Sir,' pleaded the boy, looking forward to sharing in some of Obu's glory.

'You've had your chance for today.'

'Sir, but I know it. I don't know what happened to me when I stood up...'

'The Lord will not ask you what happened to you if you are absent when He calls,' interrupted the teacher, swinging his eyes away to another pupil in a manner that brought it clearly to the first boy that his chapter was closed.

'I want to recite it, Sir,' offered another boy. The offer was rather reluctant. The boy was not sure he could recite the whole psalm. He had raised his hand so as to be counted among those who had done their homework, hoping that the teacher would not call on him. It was a technique that had often worked. You put up your hand when you do not know the answer. The teacher counts you among the brilliant pupils and leaves you to invite the less brilliant pupils – those whose hands are not up – to answer the question. He hoped the technique would work this time, but when he saw the teacher's eyes swinging in his direction, he lowered the outstretched hand unobtrusively as if it had never been raised, using it to support his head.

'No more for today,' announced the teacher, to the intense relief of the boy. 'I can't jump from eating yam foofoo and bitterleaf soup to chewing raw garri. I give the rest of you three more days to memorise the psalm. After that time, if there is still anyone of you who can't recite it as if you were reciting Our Lord's Prayer, I'll teach that person from where water gets into the fluted pumpkin! Is that all right?'

'Yessir,' chorused a jubilant class. The boy at the front row shuffled his feet and wriggled on his bench to demonstrate his unhappiness at the postponement. 'What is there the mouth cannot accomplish?' This time the class did not respond.

Obu felt something force its way into the left pocket of his brown khaki shorts. The bell for the midday recess had sounded gbo-gom, gbo-gom, gbo-gom from the headmaster's office, to the relief of most pupils, and he was putting back an exercise book into his brown raffia satchel. He promptly grabbed the pocket to catch redhanded whoever the thief was.

'I put something there for you,' whispered Margaret smiling shyly as she bent over the long desk to escape the teacher's inquisitive eyes. 'Wait until we go out for recess before opening it:

Obu released his hold on the bulging pocket. Before he had time to imagine what it was, the teacher had begun the marching song and the class began to march out, row by row, singing with the teacher:

Good morning, mister Joe.

Good morning to you all.

I'm coming to ask you about a famous war.

The people of that city, they had no sense.

When a rocket was falling, they shouted mewo! mewo!

Mewo! Mewo! Mewo mewo mewo!

When a rocket was falling, they shouted mewo! mewo!

The school rules required every pupil to vacate the classroom blocks during recess, to ensure that no pupil stayed back to work when he should be having a break for relaxation. The responsibility for enforcing this regulation was entrusted to Teacher, someone no pupil dared disobey; therefore every pupil left the classrooms every recess.

As soon as he ambled out of the classroom, Obu ran towards the school farm. Cromwell had looked at him threateningly as he marched out of the room. Fortunately Cromwell sat on the last row, three rows away from Obu; by the time the last row would march out Obu reckoned he would have disappeared from Cromwell's sight.

Giant ukwa, fried without being burnt, and nicely shelled ready for the mouth. The palm kernels were the special variety, called aku okukoro at Umuchukwu – white, soft to chew, and more juicy than the ordinary palm kernel. Obu's mouth watered as he decided whether to pour the entire package into his mouth at one go or to spread out the enjoyment by taking the ukwa and kernels one at a time, after prolonged intervals. Then suddenly his mouth dried up as the water was transferred to his eyes. It was the special kernels that did it. They rang a bell somewhere inside his memory box, and he bit his lips to hold back the tears. He found he could not. He closed the used bottle of petroleum jelly in which the gift had come, threw it into the nearby cassava plot and let loose his bottled up emotions. He was sitting on a tree stump sobbing hard when Cromwell materialised in front of him.

'No matter how many rivers the crab may ford, it will end up in an old woman's soup pot!' shouted Cromwell, panting but visibly pleased that his frantic search for Obu had not ended in vain. 'Bowl up that thing your girlfriend, Margaret, gave you quickly before I shatter your jaw.'

Before you tell me any lies, I saw what it was very...' 'Get out of here now or I'll break your head!'

Cromwell was taken aback, and spontaneously took two steps back. Until Obu rose to his feet angrily and spoke, Cromwell did not know he had been sobbing.

Obu bent low to blow each running nostril in turn and also to arm himself with a cassava stem. Cromwell took quick stock of the situation and decided that discretion was the better part of valour. Did not the proverb say that a man who wakes up in the morning and finds himself being pursued by a chicken should run for his life, for who knows whether the chicken grew teeth overnight? Moreover his eyes had scanned Obu's pockets and the ground on which he stood without alighting on any trace of Margaret's gift.

'Do you know it's me, Cromwell, you are addressing like that?'

'Go away, even if you are giant Alakuku, or I'll break your head with this!' Obu advanced two steps, determined to execute his threat if Cromwell did not have the good sense to leave him to his sorrow.

'I see Margaret gave you a scorpion and you are looking for somebody else to say he beat you.' Cromwell had to make his withdrawal graceful and honourable. 'Count Cromwell out of it. The day I'll feed your mouth with sand, I'll need no helper.'

Before Obu returned to the class, he hid the bottle where he could find it after school. That bottle of ukwa and aku okukoro had developed tremendous emotional value for him. It carried special memories of the pleasant world he had left behind at Umuchukwu.

Chapter Sixteen

Obu had hardly retired for the night before Margaret's petroleum jelly jar developed wings which transported him from Teacher's house to his mother's kitchen at Umuchukwu. Mama Obu was cooking bitterleaf soup.

'Open your mouth.'

Obu looked at his mother's fingers and opened his eyes as well as his mouth, each as wide as it could go. She plugged the mouth with a generous piece of smoked fish – soft, nearer white than brown, deliciously tasty.

'That is for those who have mothers!' groaned his sister, Ogechukwu, lifting herself from the Ekwulobia stool on which she sat and holding her hands over a medium-sized earthenware bowl containing the bitterleaf she was washing. She had not put in the usual drop or two of palm oil so her hands were thickly covered with the greenish foam from the bitterleaf.

'Akpili ntuko, ntuko, n'enu oji!' Obu shouted at Ogechukwu. It was the usual taunt at Umuchukwu for any greedy child who could not bridle his long throat. Obu accompanied the taunt with a circular movement of his hand in front of his Adam's apple, ending with the finger pointing towards the sky, suggesting that Ogechukwu's long throat could elongate further until it hit the top of the iroko tree for all he cared.

'Whom are you taunting?' retorted Ogechukwu as if it could have been for someone else. The tiny bubbles on her dripping hands blew up in rapid succession, anxious to escape the impending wrath.

'd.s.d. What a question!' Obu sang in reply.

'Are you singing that for me?' shouted Ogechukwu angrily.

'd.r.m. You want a reply?' Obu sang on.

Ogechukwu would not wait for Obu to proceed any further. Although she sang the same song for others, she hated hearing Obu play it back at her. She flung the bitterleaf foam which still clung to her hands into the bowl, sprinkling some on her mother, and sprang at Obu with the fury of a ram. Obu had anticipated the charge, but he gave the impression that he had taken no notice of the charging ram until Ogechukwu came within arm's length when he cleverly hopped to the side. By the time his assailant could apply the brakes and alter her direction, he had taken up a vantage position behind a water drum recently acquired for boiling palm fruits. The two of them went round and round the drum, sometimes rapidly, sometimes slowly. When Ogechukwu thought it would help, she suddenly changed direction, but it was as futile as baiting the amalocha fish. Yet she would not give up.

'Ogechukwu!'

'Ma!' Ogechukwu was still after her prey, both of them panting heavily.

'Will you give me the bitterleaf after the soup is cooked?'

Ogechukwu would not give up while some fury remained bottled up inside her.

'Ogechukwu!' This time Mama Obu plunged the head of the fish she was cleaning into the bowl of hot water and went after Ogechukwu. Ogechukwu dodged her and sulked back to the kitchen. By the time she settled on her stool the tears were already dripping down her cheeks.

'Yes ... Ogechukwu is always wrong while Obu is always right .. .' She used her lower arm to wipe off the tears; her palms right up to her wrists would have hurt the eyes, with bits of

bitterleaf sticking to her skin. 'When there's work, it's Ogechukwu ... when it's food, Ogechukwu is tied at the back of the yam barn .. .' She inhaled rather loudly, to check the liquid about to rush down both nostrils.

Mama Obu held a piece of fish towards her: 'Take some fish, Ogechukwu, and let's have peace! You never seem to remember that you are older than Obu.' The fish dropped on the kitchen floor as Ogechukwu tried to receive it with the tips of her fingers to minimise the contact with the bitter liquid.

'Mama, I know you'll throw mine ...' Ogechukwu had no time to complete her protest. She dived for the fish before Obu reached it, promptly plunging it into her mouth, bitterness and all.

Then the wings swept Obu away from his mother's kitchen, away from Ogechukwu, and landed him at Oti's father's compound, still in Umuchukwu. His father had presented him with a toy gun, the like of which had not been seen at Umuchukwu and he was anxious to show it to Oti. The only toy gun at Umuchukwu before then was the 'Sukwu sukwu gun' which the children made from local bamboo, about a foot long. The small, round inflorescence of a herb resembling the miniature of a sunflower served as bullets. You fed in two bullets one after the other with a round rod thinner than a dipstick, firing the first with a pop as you pushed in the second.

Obu's precious acquisition was something entirely different. It was the replica of Egwu na amu's dane gun, only much much smaller. The bullets were made of paper; you tore them off one at a time as you needed them. A hammer struck the 'bullet' when you pulled the tiny trigger, producing a sound somewhat deeper than the clapping of the hands and releasing a scanty but visible trail of smoke. You could also fire the gun without bullets, producing a sound as loud as that of the 'Sukwu sukwu gun' in inexperienced hands. David had brought home an imported toy

pistol the previous Christmas but that was different from Obu's. You plugged the mouth with a rubber cork and then pulled the trigger, praying that the cork did not stay put. With Obu's you could not be disappointed. Once safely outside the compound, a regal smile illuminated his face as he held the gun ready to fire. Should he fire one shot immediately, to satisfy himself that no evil spirits, especially Samuel's, had tampered with the gun in the night? He loaded a bullet. Ready? No. He resisted the compelling urge. The number of bullets was limited, and he could not afford to waste any of them where none of his companions would see him. He had earmarked two bullets for that morning – one he would fire before Oti to demonstrate how the gun worked, and the other he would allow Oti to fire as a special friend. No more for that morning.

Oti sprang up from his mud bed as soon as he heard Obu's voice. He had been awake for the past hour, but had been too lazy to get up. Obu fired one shot as proudly as one who had just acquired an imported double-barrelled shotgun, and graciously handed the gun over to Oti. Oti took a cool aim at a hawk flying past and pulled the trigger with the concentration of a man who expected the hawk to crash down to his feet.

It was a mystery how the bully Samuel suddenly materialised, but he usually materialised whenever Obu and Oti were beginning to have a thrilling time. He grabbed the gun and while Obu and Oti pleaded with him not to damage it, he plunged his hand into the patch pocket in which he reckoned Obu concealed the bullets. For fear that the pocket would be torn from his green, physical-training shorts, Obu relaxed the grip on Samuel's hand. Samuel took advantage of this and was quickly withdrawing the hand in which he clutched the bullets when thunder struck.

Obu struck Samuel's lower arm so suddenly and ferociously that the bullets as well as the gun he held in the other hand fell immediately to the ground, and for a brief moment Samuel felt paralysed and nonplussed. A mad fury seized Obu, the type that would make a weaver bird forget the hazards in an open confrontation with the murderous woodpecker. In the twinkling of an eye he had charged at Samuel.

'Leave us alone!' Obu shouted as an anxious Oti tried to separate the combatants, afraid that the affray would not end in Obu's favour, nor in his, knowing what a victorious and vicious Samuel could inflict on Oti as well.

For a while the two seemed evenly matched, each maintaining his grip on the other. Then for a while, Samuel dictated the pace, compelling Obu to take a few steps backwards. In the ensuing scuffle, Samuel disentangled himself from Obu's vicious grip.

'I'll spare you this time.' Relieved and sweating, Samuel assumed the role of a magnanimous conqueror. 'Next time you attempt running into my eyes, I'll teach you how water got into the pumpkin.'

Obu hardly allowed him the time to complete the empty threat. This time the charge was perfect. The bully fell with a thud on a nearby yam mound, and Obu decided to make it a once-for-all victory. With remarkable agility, he mounted the fallen Goliath and went on to stuff his mouth with earth from the mound until the vanquished dragon, spewing sand instead of fire, gave a solemn and humiliating pledge that he would never again cross Obu's path. On Oti's insistence, the pledge embraced Oti as well.

'Say that your mother's soup is sour,' demanded Obu, determined to humiliate Samuel completely. Samuel spewed moist earth as a dibia sprays masticated alligator pepper on a patient.

'Say that your mother's soup ...' Obu felt a tickle on the sole of his foot, pleasant, as if someone was blowing gently on it. He moved the foot away spontaneously, the way you retract from a stimulus before you have had the chance to reflect on its pleasantness.

'It's a snake!' shouted Samuel, without seeing any snake. It was his chance to escape further humiliation.

Mama m'O!' Obu shouted, hopping off his victim.

'Obu won't let anybody sleep!' grunted Silence, yawning loudly, stretching, and turning from one side to the other on the sleeping mat. 'The only person who has a mother!'

Whose voice was that? Silence? No. It could not be Silence. Not at Umuchukwu. Obu opened his eyes but his world of fantasy had vanished. It was Silence! Obu was not in the enviable world of a pampered only son. He was a miserable domestic servant to Teacher and Madam. As though the sudden descent from grace to grass was not sufficiently disturbing, Obu soon discovered that the pleasant sensation which terminated his dream was a ruse by a crafty and elusive rat feasting on his toes. The clever rat had discovered that Obu had forgotten to wear a jute sack over his legs before retiring for the night, and had nibbled away at his toes and the sides of his feet as the boy flourished in his dream world. Craftily blowing on each toe as he nibbled at it the rat had reduced the pain. But when he rose to his feet Obu felt like a man who had worn shoes all his life and was now walking for the first time on a path made of gravel or palm kernel shells.

The flashback to Umuchukwu made life under Teacher and Madam complete hell. Obu wept without restraint, shrugging off any attempts to console him.

'My friend ...' Teacher's voice was mellow, feminine, harmless; 'do I hear you say you will not go to the stream?' The tear ducts spontaneously dried up at the sound of Teacher's voice. Obu hurriedly rose from the kitchen floor on which he had rolled and rolled, picking up red dust and ash.

'If you don't run off to the stream before I blink my eyelids, I'll give you the pot without a base.'

Obu picked up his battered aluminium bucket, forgot the pad for carrying it on the head, and ran towards the stream as if his feet and toes had not been visited by rats. Teacher did not issue empty threats, and the pot without a base could be worse punishment than copying Psalm 119, especially as you could not predict the number of trips to the stream it would entail in your case.

Chapter Seventeen

Obu's teeth closed in on the palm kernel shell, and his muscles tensed as he attempted, rather timorously, to crack it. The teeth made no impression on the shell. He tried again. This time he half shut his right eye and bared all his teeth in the effort. Hardly any scratch on the kernel. He transferred it to the left side of his mouth, only to remember that that half was there only for symmetry.

'You want it?' Obu asked, offering the unshelled kernel to Bright.

'Bowl it up,' replied Bright. 'Yours are still milk teeth. It's not today that I began to eat sand for garri!'

Bright lodged the kernel in place. With seemingly no effort, he split the shell in two making it appear as common place as breaking the shell of an egg with a hammer.

'You can keep half of the nut and give the remaining half to me,' offered Obu, afraid that his kernel might fly into Bright's mouth.

'Since my mother bore me I have never shared one palm kernel with another person,' Bright replied, using his nail to remove bits of the shell from the kernel.

'So I who own the kernel should go without?'

'If you bring another kernel, I can shell it for you before I throw this one into my mouth.'

As Obu went across to the other side of the kitchen to pick another kernel, Madam saw the moving figure from her observatory and shouted at him.

'Have you sifted all the fermented cassava?' she asked.

'It remains a little.'

'Where then are you going?'

'To blow my nose.'

'If you let your nose run like a child's, make sure none of it gets into the cassava intended for me and Teacher. The crawl-crawl on your hands is enough pollution already.'

'Yes, Ma.'

Obu made a show of blowing his nose, picked up a medium-sized kernel with his toes, and walked back to Bright.

'Please pour water on my hands. I want to wash them clean!'

Obu made the request loud enough to ensure that Madam heard it. He and Bright exchanged meaningful glances and smiled. Obu was learning the ropes. The ability to hoodwink Teacher or Madam constituted the greatest asset of any servant finding himself in their service. The spontaneity with which he had told a plausible lie, the dexterity with which he had conveyed a kernel past Madam's observatory indicated that he was picking up fast from his more experienced comrades. There was no alternative, you either licked your lips or the harmattan licked them for you.

'It appears that chicken doesn't want us to eat its meat,' Obu observed despondently and in a subdued voice, afraid that the wind might blow his words to Madam's very highly sensitive ears.

'We thought it would die before yesterday.'

'I know what I'll do to it, and it will die before tomorrow!' Bright picked up the cup, filled it with the highly acidic liquid from the pot in which the cassava had been fermented and poured it on the ailing chicken. The chicken rejected the liquid with a flutter of the wings, but the rejection was not complete. The head and neck, already resembling a vulture's in their untidy and irregular spread of feathers, were soaked in the cassava liquid. The chicken sauntered forward as if it had been kicked from behind, and greeted the earth with its beak after running a few yards. Obu smiled approvingly at Bright. A dead chicken would give them their next opportunity to eat meat.

'Bright!' Madam shouted. 'What is happening to that chicken?'

'Nothing, Madam.'

'Isn't that water on its feathers?'

'It is,' Bright replied. 'It fell into some cassava water while running after an earthworm. I rescued it immediately.' Obu concentrated on the basket of fermented cassava he was sifting, afraid of Madam's penetrating eyes even though a wall shut them off from him.

'Make sure you put it near the fire as soon as one is made in the kitchen,' ordered Madam.

'Yes, Ma,' Bright replied, hardly waiting for her to end her order. Then, turning to Obu, he whispered, 'Thank God the time has come when she does not leave the house.'

'It is true – O! The onset of a new moon!'

Teacher and Madam had been married for fifteen years, during which Madam had had neither a child nor even a miscarriage. For fear that his name would be forgotten after his death if he had no issue, Teacher had recently allowed himself to be persuaded to marry an illiterate wife for the

sake of his aged mother in the village. This wife had already borne him a daughter, which had shown that the hitch did not come from Teacher and strengthened the verdict of Madam's many detractors that God had created her a man but somewhere down the production line some sleepy or mischievous apprentices had given her the female parts. It was a verdict she did not wish to accept, even after fifteen years, hence the anxiety which preceded and the frustration which followed the onset of her monthly periods.

Every servant in Teacher's house knew when the period of expectation began. She cut down on her movements, which the servants took advantage of as it meant that she could not spring on them in the most unexpected places and moments. She gave up her habit of smacking, flogging or trampling upon her servants, to minimise all physical exertion.

She did not, however, allow the servants full rein. She positioned herself on a cloth chair strategically located on the verandah-cum-dining room immediately behind the living room, from where she could observe most of what went on in the kitchen. Reluctant to take any chances, especially as her eyes could not cover the four corners of the kitchen from her observatory, she had instructed the servants to boil and pound the foofoo on one side of the kitchen – while the soup was prepared on the opposite side. That way any servant who tried to eat part of the foofoo would have to take it across the kitchen to the soup pot, making it easy for her to catch him.

The day the menses came was hell for everybody in Teacher's house. Her eyes red with weeping at the realisation that yet another fruitless month had gone by, Madam took offence at everybody and everything. The energy she had saved up during the preceding week erupted without provocation, and she readily converted kitchen stools and buckets into chastising rods.

'Do you think God will ever give her a child?' Obu whispered.

'I don't think so,' replied Bright. 'She is too wicked.'

After a brief pause, Obu continued. 'I don't know why Papa sent me here to suffer this way. No meat for us until a chick either dies or is killed by a mouse, even though Teacher and Madam eat good meat every day. You go to school without breakfast, and yet what you are given for lunch and supper is just enough to incite hunger. Work, work, all the time, no matter how tired and hungry you are. Mama will be amazed at the quantity of cassava I am asked to sift, when before I came here nobody had even asked me to sift one cassava tuber. I am tired of this kind of life, O.'

'Does your father owe Teacher any money?' Bright asked.

'No.'

'Oh! How I wish I were you!' 'In what way?' Obu appeared puzzled.

'I mean that I wish my living here were not tied up with the money my father took from Teacher.'

'What would you have done?'

'I would have left here long ago.'

Bright spoke with such confidence and finality that it made Obu wonder whether he had not unwittingly allowed himself to suffer unnecessarily for so long. He tried to catch a fly which had settled on an open sore on his ankle, but only succeeded in splashing more cassava liquid on a leg that was already almost completely whitewashed. 'How?' Obu asked, straightening himself and dropping the basket into the large earthen bowl.

'You want me to teach you how to escape, leaving me to sift all the cassava to be eaten in this house every day, to wash all the plates and to count the chickens every night? You think I am the daughter of a sheep?' 'Please, Bright, I beg you,' Obu pleaded.

'Don't waste your time begging ...'

'Please, Bright. I'll give you my share of leftover food for one week ...'

'I'm not telling you anything, even if you promise me your two meals a day.'

'You bush rats,' Madam shouted, her voice jolting Obu and Bright back to reality; 'in case you mistakenly think you will do nothing other than sift that small quantity of cassava all day, let me warn you that you must each fetch two buckets of water from the stream before killing and cleaning up that cock which Teacher brought home last week. If you like, go to sleep then.'

Obu and Bright exchanged glances. No smiles this time. Madam's decision to slaughter the cock brought home by Teacher the preceding week meant serious trouble for each of them, and they knew it. The cock had not been seen for some days. The piece of wood which had been tied to its left foot – to limit its movement until it had grown familiar with its new environment – had been found in the vegetable garden behind the kitchen, complete with the twine. The noose which had been fastened immediately above its uppermost claw was found loose, which the boys took to mean that the cock must have slipped its claws free from the noose and liberated itself.

Madam had assigned to Obu and Bright, the youngest of the servants, the responsibility for counting the chickens every night and for ensuring that no chick disappeared. Obu had not forgotten her words the day he received the assignment: 'The day any chicken gets lost from here, you too will get lost!' And from her reaction the first day she made a surprise check and

found one chick missing from a brood of ten, it was not intended as an empty threat. She had flung one of her slippers at him, and when he bent down unsuspectingly to pick it up she knocked him down on the hard laterite floor, bruising his forehead, then she kicked his ribs until he writhed away in pain. Obu had been ordered out of the house that night, not to come back until he found the missing chick.

Should they kill another cock in place of the missing one, they wondered? The odds were in their favour. They could avoid Madam's magic eyes by organising the slaughtering in a far corner of the compound where her eyes could not reach from her chosen place. As soon as the cock was cleaned up in steaming water, it would be impossible to differentiate it from any other cock. They could then take it into the kitchen to be cut up – an operation that must be performed within her view. No. It would be safer to clean the cock over a fire rather than in steaming water. The feathers and downs would be burnt to ashes, therefore making it impossible for Madam to identify the chicken through the feathers.

'Bright!'

'Ma.'

'I want to see that cock before you kill it.'

'Yes, Ma.'

Madam must be a witch! Obu saw no other explanation for the sudden request to see the cock live. Only a witch could read their minds or eavesdrop on their conversation that way. It was pointless trying to trick a witch. They had better own up that the cock was lost. Perhaps this was the ideal time to do so since Madam dared not kick anybody during her period of expectation.

'Obu. Go and catch the chicken while I scoop the sifted cassava into the drying sack.'

Bright spoke loud enough to ensure that Madam heard. The cock had disappeared on Obu's chicken-counting night. The 'sudden' discovery of its disappearance should therefore be made by Obu.

Madam fumed at the news that the cock which had been given food and water that morning had disappeared. Obu darted backwards as she drew her legs back from the reclining position in which they had been, afraid that she was reaching for her usual missile.

'You know what is pursuing you,' she said in a tone that was both relaxed and threatening. 'Nobody spans a child the day he spills palm oil. You make sure that you find that cock soon if you do not want Teacher to flay you alive!'

'May Madam's monthly ailment never leave her!' Obu beamed with happiness as soon as he rejoined Bright and knew that he was outside Madam's line of vision. He had never got off so lightly. Madam could strike with extra vengeance when next he crossed her path, but the future could take care of itself.

Luck continued on Obu's side for hours after. Silence, whose turn it was to cook and pound the cassava foofoo for that night had succeeded in smuggling in enough cassava to fill both palms over and above the quantity measured out to him by Madam. To be more accurate, Silence had mapped out the strategy and Obu had executed it on his directions. He had requested Obu, loudly enough to be heard by Madam, to fetch him a little water from the drum behind the kitchen. Obu had gone for the water, scooped water up noisily from the drum (which he noiselessly emptied on the ground), and returned with the cassava which Silence had hidden behind the drum. Everything had worked well. Even Madam could be outwitted.

It was Mary's turn to cook the soup that day. She was a soft-bodied, soft-mannered, soft-hearted teenager from well-to-do parents who, like Obu, had had no experience of suffering and starvation before coming to Teacher's house. A young promising trader from Ududonka had paid the bride price on her head and sent her to Madam for one year – for training in housewifery. Her fiancé had also reasoned that she needed a spell under Teacher and Madam to make a good custodian of his wealth. Having been pampered all along, the exposure to hardship would knock common sense into her head. Like Obu, she had been slow in falling into step with the other servants. Slow, until the instinct of self-preservation taught her that honesty does not fill a hungry stomach with food.

Mary had agreed to collaborate with Silence. Silence would provide the half-boiled foofoo, and she the soup for eating it. Silence had solved the major problem of getting foofoo and soup to meet without being intercepted by Madam's eyes. A ball of foofoo, half the size of a tennis ball, could be smuggled from one side of the kitchen to the other in the armpit!

Silence was the first to gulp down his share, followed by Mary whose share he had smuggled across in the second armpit. Mary had a hard time stifling a near choke without attracting Madam's attention. Her eyes overflowed with tears as she returned to her stool by the fire, creating doubt as to whether she had eaten the foofoo or the foofoo had eaten her! Madam promptly queried her about her fiery, watery eyes. Silence had spontaneously replied that she unknowingly rubbed pepper into her eyes, unwilling to take chances with Mary, in case the spirit moved her to tell the truth!

Obu was the last to go. Although he looked in front of his nose as he walked across the kitchen, his share of foofoo in his armpit, he could observe Madam with the tail of his eye. She took a

disinterested glance at him and continued knitting her sweater.

'Obu!' called Teacher.

Obu could not answer without letting the cat out of the bag: the second ball of foofoo was at the early stages of its winding journey down his throat! He looked pleadingly at Silence who had moved into a corner from where he could signal instructions without being nabbed by Madam. Obu obeyed the signals as faithfully as an ojionu masquarade obeys the sounds of his drummer. He answered as soon as the ball of foofoo had made enough progress to allow him to do so. The remaining three balls of foofoo (they came to no more than five balls in all, but one ball of foofoo meant a great deal to a servant in Teacher's house) went down in rapid succession after that, like bagatelle balls in the hands of an inexperienced player. Meanwhile Teacher had ordered him to appear before him at once. At Mary's signal, he wiped his mouth with the inside of his khaki jumper.

'Enyim,' Teacher began, Obu standing innocently a safe distance away. Only a foolish servant stood within arm's length of Teacher or Madam when summoned by them. 'It seems you are learning fast from Silence. That's why you take a whole day to answer me, eh?'

The two pairs of eyes met, one pair fierce and penetrating, the second pair glittering timidly. Obu dipped his respectfully, but had to switch them to another direction when he found that he was staring at Teacher's pubic area which he generally exposed whenever he tied his wrapper, especially the white woven material he received as a sendoff present shortly before he left Cable-Point, Asaba, ten years previously. Madam had given up trying to make him tie the wrapper less embarrassingly.

'Keep learning fast from Silence. Only remember that the rat which accompanies the lizard to the stream for a swim should ensure that it leaves the river with a dry skin like the lizard!'

Obu's mind was not on rats and lizards. He thought he knew why Teacher summoned him, and prayed that his attempt had worked.

'Obu!'

Obu came to with a start.

'I received a letter from your mother today. Do you know anything about it?'

'No, Sir.'

'Look me in the eyes when you reply,' Teacher ordered. 'When the cricket knows the crime it has committed, it dabs whitewash round its eyes.'

Obu looked at Teacher's eyes, a glow-worm in front of a Tilley lamp.

'Your mother says you should come home to look after your youngest sister. Do you want to go?'

Obu was uncertain how to reply. How genuine was Teacher's offer? Did he know the facts? No matter whether he knew or he didn't, he had no alternative but to reply in the affirmative.

'Okay, go and pack your things. You can leave tomorrow morning.'

This time Teacher sounded genuine, sincere, convincing. Obu could hardly believe his ears. How strange that he had not thought of such a plan much earlier; he could have been freed long ago.

'Thanks, Sir.'

'Thank your chi that I do not feel like giving you my usual dose on this occasion.'

Obu felt as if he had just been woken from one of his dreams of home.

'By the way, who wrote this letter for you? Silence?' 'No, Sir.'

'I do not flog a child the day he spills palm oil. If you try any more such tricks on me, I'll teach you that before Abraham, I was!' Teacher flung the letter at Obu's face.

'You didn't tell us that you were planning to leave us alone to eat kernels here,' Silence teased Obu.

Obu made no reply. The idea to write to Teacher as though the letter came from his mother had been with him for some time, but he had lacked the courage to carry it out. He had been unable to think of any other method of liberating himself from the clutches of Teacher and his terrible wife. The plan seemed so foolproof. Since his parents had begged Teacher to have him, and since it was his mother who brought him to Teacher, it seemed straight forward that Teacher would release him if his mother requested it. Obu could not remember whether that point had been made by Ada or by Mary, but it had sounded very convincing. The problem at the time had been how to reach his mother, to ask her to request his release. The idea of writing in the guise of his mother came a week or so later. It appeared the fastest and most reliable thing to do. He decided not to sound anybody, not even Ada or Mary, whoever first put the idea of an intervention by his mother into his head. He deliberately camouflaged his handwriting, wrote a short letter to Teacher in Igbo and appended his mother's name at the end of it. He secretly deposited the enveloped letter on Teacher's classroom table during morning prayers. Teacher had been called off to a meeting of the Aka School Committee, and so could not read the letter until his return in the late afternoon.

'That boy needs to be watched,' Teacher confided in his wife when Obu entered the kitchen, out of earshot. 'His teacher has been talking of his hot brain; I am now convinced about it. At no time did I expect a child of his age to plan such a thing.'

'Every parent dumps his headaches on me,' Madam replied disgustedly. 'Each of those rats eating my food here has a hot brain for becoming a rogue!'

'I don't know.' Teacher sounded as if he was thinking aloud. 'This boy nearly bowled me over. I just didn't suspect anything ... until I saw the date on the letter. That showed he was still a child. But for today's date on the letter, I would not have imagined the letter came from him. Even when I called him to question him, I wasn't certain. The date could have been a mistake. His reaction revealed his guilt. But I did not flog him as I should. I like to recognise cleverness when I see it.'

Chapter Eighteen

It was a bright Monday morning in the second week of the second term. Teacher had left the house to join in the morning inspection and school assembly, while Madam had gone to a meeting of the Women's Guild at the C.M.S. Church premises. Silence was rushing through his homework in arithmetic which he had, as usual, kept to the last minute. Ada trimmed her hardly existent nails with a penknife whose blade had worn halfway through. Since Madam would not let her plait her hair, powder her face or darken her eyebrows and lashes, her nails were the only things left to her to attend to every morning, and she clipped them short even when there was nothing to clip.

Mary ran the charcoal iron (otherwise called the Beatrice iron) over her white blouse, and later her khaki skirt. The iron had been heavily booked all through the weekend, and she hated using the other type of pressing iron which you had first to roast on the fire; by the time you rubbed off all the soot from the iron, you had rubbed off all the heat as well! Monday had gone off to the mechanic's garage for his training.

As Obu's teeth were no whiter than chicken droppings, he always took advantage of being a teacher's boy to cut morning inspections. On this occasion, Bright coaxed him into a riddle contest, beginning as usual with an easy riddle: 'Riddle expert, tell me what sounds kporotokpoto on a wealthy man's pear tree.'

'The rope for tethering a cow, Obu replied with ease, and then fired his own shot: 'Riddle expert, tell me what sounds kporotokpoto on a poor man's pear tree.'

'The rope for tethering a sheep. Riddle expert, tell me what dog was seen running down Eke Ngodo.' Obu racked his brain.

'A ball of foofoo travelling down your gullet,' volunteered Silence.

'Silence, don't invite trouble,' Bright protested.

'From whom?' asked Silence without looking up, making Bright feel like a housefly challenging a cow to a show of strength.

'Leave the children alone, Silence,' Ada chided. 'If you want a riddle contest, why not look for your age grade?'

Bright ignored Silence and pulled Obu to a distant corner. 'Riddle expert. Tell me, what is it that God fills with water in the sky?'

Obu took the full time allowed for a reply before admitting defeat.

'The coconut,' Bright supplied the answer.

'Oh concobility!' shouted Obu. 'I knew that. Why did I forget it? All right, riddle expert, what is it that goes on four legs in the morning, on two legs in the afternoon, and on three legs at night?'

'A human being,' Bright answered effortlessly. Riddle expert. Tell me what can climb an iroko tree without any contrivance.

'I don't know why my mind isn't on what we're doing,' Obu replied, scratching his scanty hair.

'A snake,' bright answered. He knew Obu was beginning to lose interest, and hastened to press ahead in order to ensure that he scored the three points for a victory before Obu pulled out.

'Riddle expert. Tell me what maiden claps her hands loudly as she jumps into the forest.'

'It is not your turn,' shouted Obu. 'You've spoilt the contest by speaking out of turn.'

'All right. I withdraw my riddle. Give me your own.'

'Let's change over to proverbs,' Obu proposed. He was the expert of the two in proverbs. As Mary once remarked, to challenge Obu to a contest in proverbs is to throw him on soft ground.

'I'm not afraid of proverbs, but let us first conclude our riddles. My ears are itching for your riddle.'

Obu scratched his scanty hair impatiently. 'All right, riddle expert. Tell me what maiden claps her hands ...'

'But that's the riddle I've just given you,' interrupted Bright.

'Did I beg you for it?' Obu enquired.

'Never mind. We shall not quarrel over that.' Bright knew victory was his if only he could be patient. 'The answer to your riddle is the exploding oil bean pod. Now, riddle expert. Tell me what goes into the earth single and comes out with offspring.'

'I don't know.'

'So, I've won!' shouted Bright gleefully. 'The answer is the cocoyam.'

'You have beaten me in riddles,' Obu conceded. 'Let me see you beat me in proverbs too. Here's mine. The rat says it has no objection to being killed. What it requests is that it should be killed in the same decent manner as its fellow animals are killed. Give yours.'

'The breadfruit which chooses to fall on the day of festivity has not fallen early enough.'

'I see, you keep giving me the proverbs you pinched from me,' Obu teased Bright. 'Anyway let me see how many of them you can still remember. Here's another: You need to see what to cut with the matchet before you moisten your hand with saliva.'

'Che – i!' shouted Silence. 'Who has fouled the sweet morning air?'

Each of the servants sniffed the air and joined Silence in denouncing whoever perpetrated that atrocity.

'Tufia!' Mary spat without spitting out anything. 'Whoever did that should take a whole packet of Epsom salts or senna leaves. Tufia!' She compressed her two nostrils and went in quest of fresh air.

'Everybody is shouting tufia as if it was a spirit who fouled the air,' said Silence. 'Let none of you run away. We must find out who did it.'

Silence immediately secured a broomstick, broke a piece nearly a foot long, stuck one end of it to his jaw and began the song which invokes Tutuntu, the invisible detective, to identify the culprit:

Tutuntu choba onye nyulu aro,

Choba!

Tutuntu choba onye nyulu aro, Choba!

He sang the song past each servant, crouching low like an aged woman, his jaw sticking out in front of him with the broomstick dangling below. He covered all the servants, and the

broomstick still stuck to his jaw in spite of the fact that he moved rather more energetically than was customary to ensure that the broomstick dropped.

The verdict was there for all who had eyes to see. None of Silence's fellow servants was pronounced guilty by the broomstick. The only person yet to be put to the test was Silence himself.

'Silence, you had better count your teeth with your tongue,' Ada shouted.

'Give me the broomstick!' Mary attempted to snatch the broomstick from Silence. Artful dodger that he was, Silence glided away.

Ada joined Mary in the chase. Silence quickly snatched his arithmetic books and his metal school box and escaped from the kitchen.

'It's Silence who did it!' Mary shouted, dashing out of the kitchen in pursuit. Ada, Bright, Obu – all went after Silence.

Margaret interrupted the chase. The headmaster has just announced that an Education Officer will visit our school today.'

The servants stood as if electrocuted; only momentarily, though. Excitement immediately followed. Then apprehension, fear, dread. An Education Officer was the most powerful person in the school system. He was the one man who could make headmasters and their teachers wet their pants, and he generally swooped down on a school without warning. The headmaster of Aka C.M.S. Central School had had the singular stroke of good fortune to have received advance information from unofficial sources that an Education Officer would visit his school any day that week.

Nervousness was inscribed all over 'We shall see', Obu's teacher, as he entered the class that morning. He had rushed back to his house after an impromptu staff meeting on the impending visit, to close up his 'I don't care' hair parting, lest the visiting Education Officer was the conservative type who had an allergy to contemporary hairstyles. He had also changed into his bottom-box white poplin shirt and poured dusting powder liberally at the appropriate places to arrest excessive perspiration. His white shorts were wide-rimmed as usual.

'Good morning, class,' he muttered as he came in. 'Good morning, Sir,' chanted the class in unison.

'We shall see' hardly waited for the class to sit before flipping open the attendance register for the morning roll call.

'Ebenezer Kanu,' he called in the sing-song voice normally used for roll calls.

'Present, Sir.'

'Joshua Ogbanufe.'

'Present, Sir.'

'Phanny Okolo.' No reply.

'Phanny Okolo.'

No reply. 'We shall see' lifted his face in the direction in which the missing girl usually sat. She was not there.

'So I mark Phanny Okolo absent.' He marked an x at the appropriate column against her name.

'Lily Nwankwo.'

'Present, Sir.'

'We shall see' went down the roll. 'Now you, you, you ... he pointed at five pupils, who immediately rose to their feet. This class has more pupils than the number allowed by government. We exceeded the number in order to help all of you. The headmaster does not want the Education Officer to see more than the required number in the class. As soon as we see him entering the premises, the headmaster will blow two blasts on his whistle. You should immediately disappear into the bush. You must not run into the school farm, lest the Education Officer decides to visit the farm.

'Josephine and Edmund, I'll not ask you to join them today, even though your names are not on the register. That is because Phanny and Eliezar whose names are on the register are absent. Josephine, you will answer Phanny Okolo, and Edmund, you will answer Eliezar Okereke. Any day they return to the class, you join the rest in the bush. Is that clear?'

'Yes, Sir.'

'Where are we?' the teacher asked, after carefully drying the red ink he had used to mark the register with a long strip of blotting paper cut the right size for the register. The pupils in front were taken aback by the manner in which he suddenly jumped off his stool as if he had just discovered that he had been sitting on a scorpion. He tugged at the creases of his white shorts which he had forgotten to arrange properly before taking his seat. A sigh of irritation dropped from him as he discovered that the shorts had become badly creased.

What could he do about it? Nothing unfortunately. No time to take them off and have them ironed, and no spare pair. It was a shame that such a mishap should befall him on such a day.

'No stupid questions from you when the Education

Officer is here, do you understand?'

'Yes, Sir.'

'In fact no questions at all; is that clear.'

'Yes, Sir.'

'If I ask you "Do you understand?" what will you reply?'

'Yes, Sir.'

'All right. If any of you brings shame to Aka C.M.S. Central School, he will see pepper with his eyes.'

'We shall see' was so nervous that he even forgot the mannerism that earned him his nickname. This would be his first exposure to an Education Officer, and he dreaded the prospect of such a learned and extremely vigilant wizard sitting in his class while he taught a lesson. He had heard dreadful stories about these Education Officers who could find fault with almost everything – your notes of lessons, your teaching method, the reaction of your pupils, your diction, even the pictures you displayed on the classroom walls.

'We shall see' bit his nail, noticed the sweat on his hairy hand, and wiped both hands and face. Then he beckoned to Cromwell, and took him to the corridor.

'How is it this morning?'

'We take what we see,' Cromwell replied philosophically.

'Call at my house after school so that I can give you the 2B exercise book I bought for you for arithmetic. Is that all right?' 'Yes, Sir.'

'That's all.'

'We shall see' was not certain whether he should dismiss Cromwell at that point or he should come out hoha and tell him the purpose of the gift. But Cromwell was not a baby. He could tell the tree on which the bird would finally perch from the angle at which the bird inclined its wing in flight. He knew the exercise book was intended to bribe him so as not to embarrass the teacher during the visit of the Education Officer, and decided to take maximum advantage of the offer.

'Esukuzu anyi.' Cromwell had not only produced an Igbo corruption of the word 'excuse', but had also turned it into a synonym for teacher, hence 'our teacher' became esukuzu anyi'.

'Yes.'

'The chicken is cooked except for the legs.'

'What is it?' enquired 'We shall see', anxious to know what additional item Cromwell required.

'My nib is broken, Sir.'

'I shall buy you a new one.'

'Thanks, Sir. And my pen holder too ...'

'I think I have one I can give you. You better return to the class before the Education ...'

'If Esukuzu anyi could also buy me a packet of ink powder,' interrupted Cromwell, knowing that this was his best opportunity of getting as much as he dared to ask from 'We shall see'.

'All right. You'll get the exercise book after school today, and the rest when I've been able to buy them, even if it is after the visit of the Education Officer. Provided, of course, that you don't ask or attempt to answer any questions not specifically directed at you, that you don't sleep in class, and that you look attentive.'

A conference at the headmaster's house grappled with the knotty problem of providing adequate entertainment for the Education Officer. Nobody who listened to the discussion could have imagined that the Education Officer was Igbo; it could have been a discussion on how to entertain a European spending his first day in Africa. Palm wine would give him diarrhoea, so the headmaster sent his houseboy to Nogidi in quest of Tennent's Beer and any decent hot drink. Two members of the School Committee took charge of the things to go into the Education Officer's car boot, one goat, one dozen eggs, oranges, bananas, pineapples, pawpaw ... Rice was, by common consent, the meal to cook for him; yam foofoo would give him dysentery. But who was qualified to cook the rice the proper style, and from whom could the school loan good enough cutlery and crockery?

The headmaster's heart nearly popped out of his mouth as a black Morris Minor drove into the school premises. He had not expected the Education Officer so soon, not before he had tied up the innumerable loose ends. Although he saw the car clearly as it made its way slowly up the long narrow entrance into the school, lined on both sides with lemon grass, he pretended not to know whose car it was and made straight for his office. On this emergency occasion, he broke his own rules against walking across a grass lawn. He had not tidied up his office and must do so

before receiving the Education Officer. Fortunately his whistle was in his pocket. He gave two sharp blasts. Heads promptly popped up from the distant classrooms whose inhabitants had not already spotted the car, and several pupils made for the bush nearest to their classrooms.

Teacher was tidying up the headmaster's office when the latter came in, panting.

'Thank you ... That wizard won't allow us the time to get ready ...'

'Is he the person driving in?' Teacher enquired.

'He must be. Who else will drive a car to the school like that?'

The headmaster dabbed the sweat off his brow. 'Since you are here looking after the office,' he continued, 'I'd better go and receive him... He should not accuse us of discourtesy ... Moreover, I don't want him to start wandering all over the school premises all by himself. You know what that means ... Make sure the teachers are doing the correct things.'

It was the Education Officer. He had stepped out of his car and was lighting his pipe when the headmaster stepped up to him. In his stiff-necked, striped shirt, his navy-blue University blazer and tie, and his dark grey flannel trousers, he stood in sharp contrast to the headmaster in his white shirt, khaki shorts and khaki brown half hose.

'Good morning, Sir. I am the headmaster, Sir.'

The Education Officer was too preoccupied with his pipe to take any notice of the humble headmaster. After taking four loud puffs, it appeared the light had caught on. He took a further puff, blew the smoke into the air in front of him and watched it ascend into the sky. It was after that that he showed an awareness that someone stood near him.

'Yes,' he said, absent-mindedly.

'Good morning, Sir,' the headmaster repeated. 'I am the headmaster of this school, Sir.'

'I see. And what's the name of your school?'

'Aka C.M.S. Central School, Sir.'

'I beg your pardon!' The Education Officer consulted his official diary. 'Where on earth then is Uka C.M.S. Central School?' he asked, laying emphasis on Uka which he pronounced YUKA as though he were an Englishman.

The headmaster described the road to him. The school was a good six miles away.

'Bless my soul!' the Education Officer exclaimed. 'I've been given the wrong direction.'

He zipped the tobacco pouch, threw it on top of his briefcase on the rear seat and started his engine.

'Are you coming to visit us later?' the headmaster asked, without wanting to expose his feeling of relief, nor wanting to sound as if he were issuing an invitation.

'I shouldn't imagine so,' the Education Officer replied in a highly affected tone. 'Not this tour.' He gave the headmaster the condescending, colonial grin and drove off.

Chapter Nineteen

'Silence!' Teacher called from his piazza.

'Number one.' Silence was busy behind the kitchen squeezing the water out of a sack of grated cassava for frying akara balls, Madam's significant source of income.

'Silence!' Teacher shouted a second time, his voice one pitch higher.

'Number two,' counted Silence. Mary who was assisting him pleaded with him to desist from toying with the lion's tail, but to no avail. If Silence gave up truancy he would cease to be Silence.

'Silence!'

'Number three, Sir!'

Silence nearly pushed Mary down as he stampeded through to Teacher, cleaning his hands briskly as he ran and doing all he could to convey the impression that he promptly dropped everything he was doing as soon as he heard his name.

'Sir,' he again answered as he stood more than an arm's length away from Teacher.

'Have you gone deaf?'

'No, Sir,' he replied as would an innocent unscheming child of two.

'What you want to tell me is that you did not hear me call you two good times before?'

'God forbid that I should hear Master or Madam call me and not answer immediately! Mary was grating cassava nearby and singing as well; that must be why I did not hear you, Sir.'

Mary was neither grating cassava nor singing, but Silence knew Teacher would not take the trouble to investigate; not when he had a guest.

'What do you say you are doing?'

'I am squeezing water out of the grated cassava for frying Madam's ...'

'That can wait,' ordered Teacher. 'Or I can find somebody else to do it. You run to Dinah's shop and buy me three bottles of beer immediately ...'

'Teacher, why worry yourself so much?' interrupted Teacher's guest, the up and coming businessman to whom Mary was betrothed. 'You have already served me with a large kola nut, which is the king of all entertainment.'

'Don't say anything so offensive,' replied Teacher. 'If not that the rain has made the strong man's drum sound so lifeless, I would not be offering you bottled bitterleaf water. Was there anything I did not drink in your house the last time I was there, even though you gave me oji ugo, the best variety of kola? Silence, how many bottles did I say?'

'Three, Sir.'

'You must not let my spittle dry before you return.'

'Yessir.'

Silence read Teacher's secret sign and dashed off to Dinah's shop. Madam was describing to their guest the tremendous progress his fiancée, Mary, had made during her stay with them when Silence returned as he went – empty-handed.

Where are the bottles of beer?' enquired Teacher anxiously, sounding like someone who would not take no for an answer.

'They say the man who sells beer for Dinah has been conscripted into the army, and she has not found another person to take his place. The shop is locked, and there is nobody to open it for me.'

'You see my trouble?' Teacher exclaimed. 'The day I go hunting antelopes learn to climb trees! And to think that I don't have even overnight palm wine!'

'I told you not to worry. If the corpse does not fill the grave, we cover whatever is left with the earth.'

Silence knew at what time to withdraw, and he did so. He had done his bit. Teacher's secret sign had requested him not to buy any beer at all.

Soon after, Mary's fiancé rose to leave. It was past 5 o'clock and he had nearly ten miles to cycle home. Mary was allowed to see him off, at his request. Madam, however, warned her not to go beyond the school premises. On the pretext that she was retiring from the piazza, Madam sneaked into the guest room and positioned herself beside a window overlooking the access road to the school compound, from where she could keep the couple under surveillance.

Mary did most of the talking, gesticulating a good deal of the time. Madam wondered what she could be describing with so much feeling. How much she was suffering in her house? It would not pull a hair from her body if that was what made Mary talk almost non-stop. Soon she would be a housewife and have her own servants. Then she would come to appreciate how much she owed to Madam. She would come to see that what she and the other servants regard as wickedness in Madam is no wickedness at all but love.

That is if she gets married. Unless she can exercise greater control over her desires, she may have a baby from another man while her husband is still training her for marriage. The incident beside the sour sop tree near the football field had confirmed Madam's fears that Mary was the type of girl who would hardly say no to a man. She had been so pampered as a child that her physical development appeared to have outstripped her mental development. Send her to plant a cassava cutting and she would plant it upside down. She could neither cook soup nor pound foofoo when she arrived. Madam would have rubbed pepper into her private part that day she and Monday were caught beside the sour sop tree, but for the fact that Monday was her cousin and she could not punish Mary and leave him out.

Mary and her fiancé stopped beside the large mango tree which stood at one end of the netball field. The huge trunk obscured them from Madam's view, no matter how hard she tried to see them. She went back to the piazza just as Mary's fiancé mounted his shining, new Raleigh bicycle equipped with gear and headlight, and Mary turned round to return to the house. Like a millipede bumping into an obstacle, Madam changed course and returned to the guest room from where she could observe Mary without being observed.

Mary went past, carrying nothing, nothing that Madam could see. Her fiancé had handed over to Madam the presents he brought for her, in accordance with Madam's directives. Madam had feared that he might be keeping something for Mary which he might not wish to pass through her. When she decided to observe them, it was mainly to check on this.

'Mary,' Madam called from the living room where she had retired from the guest room.

'Ma!' Mary was surprised that Madam could not let her step into the house before summoning her.

'Where is the thing your husband gave you?' Madam flashed her fiery and penetrating eyes all over Mary.

'I thought he gave them to you.'

'Didn't he give you anything now?'

'No, Ma.'

Mary joined Ada in the kitchen, where she had begun cooking ora soup.

'Sometimes,' Mary spoke to Ada in low tones 'I feel that woman is a witch.' 'Why?' Ada asked.

'The way she seems to know certain things ...' Like what has just happened ... She wanted my husband to hand over the presents he brought for me to her. He did so, but kept something which I will show you later, which he handed over to me when I went to see him off just now. Madam was nowhere in sight, but as soon as I got back she called me – you must have heard her – to ask me to show her what my husband gave me.'

'Did you show her?'

'No. I told her that he gave nothing to me.' 'Did she find out the truth?' Ada asked.

'I can't say. I left her and came straight here.'

'If she is a witch, then she ought to find out without asking you.'

'That is true,' Mary agreed. 'That is true. Many things about her make me fear she is a witch. The way she flies in noiselessly just when you are doing what you don't want her to see or know about ...'

'One thing I've decided,' Ada cut in, 'is that I'll teach her not to spring on me like a ghost in future. I've given her as much respect as she deserves. After all there is nothing she carries which you and I do not carry. You will soon become...'

'Sh!' warned Mary. 'I saw a shadow like hers.'

Ada pulled Mary out of the way, lifted a bowl of dirty water containing cocoyam peels, discarded ora leaves, and a coating of palm oil from the cooking utensils she had washed in the bowl. She flung the dirty water through the kitchen entrance just as Madam sailed in barefoot. No computer could have timed the impact more accurately. Madam's face and head, neck, blouse, hands, wrapper – none escaped the messy splash. She shook her head vigorously, like a swimmer bursting out on the surface of the water after a spell underneath.

Meanwhile, Mary shouted ewo! promptly shut her mouth and moved to a cooler corner of the kitchen. Silence dropped the sack of grated cassava, tied like an armed robber awaiting a firing squad, and tiptoed to the back of the kitchen to enjoy himself as clownishly as he fancied. Ada stood facing Madam, bowl in hand, unrepentant in spirit, waiting for the avalanche.

Ada did not wait for long. Madam made for the bowl, to smash Ada's head with it. Ada held firmly to it. Madam abandoned the bowl and swung both arms one after the other, one missing the target and the other hitting square on one shoulder blade.

'I used to think you were a power pack,' mocked Ada. 'Is that the hardest you can hit?'

The words stung Madam more than a scorpion's tail. She rose in fury. Ada swung round in time to receive the two blows on her back.

'Thanks, Ma, for scratching me there,' she continued mockingly. 'That place has been itching since morning.' Madam flashed a terrific smack on Ada's right cheek, the type that sends sparks jumping from the victim's eyes. No sparks flew out of Ada's eyes. Rather she maintained the bluff.

'Didn't the Bible talk about turning the other cheek? Don't forget this cheek!'

Ada turned the left cheek, and Madam struck as viciously as ever. Ada thanked her for the favour, although she remarked that the blow was not as pungent as the others and expressed the hope that Madam was not getting worn out so early in the game.

'Shar-rap!' Teacher's voice startled assailant as well as the assailed. The contest had been so heated and absorbing that neither party had heard Teacher's short legs pounding towards them. 'Who gave you the palm wine that has gone into your head? I will teach you that it is not proper to insult your Madam ... What is this?' he asked, when he saw the mess on his wife.

'Don't ask me,' Madam retorted. 'Ask your sister. You heap sand round her waist all the time. That's why she thinks she is the Madam and I am her servant ...'

'Mary,' Teacher cut in. 'Fetch bath water for Madam at once.' Turning to his wife, he said: 'Missus, go and clean up. Leave the rest to me.'

'You'll know whom to deceive.'

'Missus. Go into the house.'

Even tough Madam knew when Teacher spoke with the voice that must be obeyed. Teacher was no respecter of persons, wives included, and she knew that only too well.

Madam's blows gave Ada the pains associated with bronchitis for a whole week after. As if that was not enough punishment, Teacher gave her the punishment every schoolgirl dreaded most – scrubbing the school latrine every day for one whole week. But she emerged from the whole incident with a feeling of liberation. Madam never again attempted to strike her.

All the servants except Monday rejoiced over Ada's conquest of Madam, as they termed it. Obu and Bright who had gone to the stream at the time cursed their stars for being absent when their tormentor was humiliated. Silence made them feel they had lost the opportunity of watching a wrestling contest between Adolf Hitler and the King of England. Ada's victory was a victory for all of them, and all (except Monday) gladly took turns at scrubbing the school latrine on her behalf.

Chapter Twenty

Teacher's house was steaming all morning. Somebody had desecrated the soup pot. Madam herself discovered it. A mysterious twitch of the eye while Teacher was in the lavatory shortly before leaving for morning prayers had warned her that something was in the offing somewhere. She rose spontaneously, grabbed the hurricane lamp at her bedside, and allowed an unseen hand to guide her until her toe hit the soup pot in the pantry. As soon as she opened the pot she knew something had happened. The coat of oil which had covered the top of the soup after it had been warmed the previous night had been penetrated; the point of penetration was clearly visible. The odour which immediately hit her nostrils showed that the soup had gone sour. Someone had plunged his fingers into the soup during the night.

She used the long wooden ladle to count the pieces of beef in the pot. She always knew how many pieces of meat should be in the soup pot at any time; that was the only way to escape being eaten out of the house by the rogues who congregated in her house in the guise of servants. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven – seven only. She counted them over again, and arrived at the same number. She counted them a third time. Seven. There should have been eight. One whole piece of meat had been stolen. It was at that point that she went into near hysterics. 'What's the matter?' Teacher asked as he washed his hands with soap, before washing his face.

'These thieves you assembled in this house want to kill me, O,' Madam replied, dropping the hurricane lamp on the floor so as to prevent the only wrapper she had on from slipping off.

'What!' shouted Teacher, dropping the slice of bar soap into the plate held out by Bright. 'What have they stolen?'

'They have eaten all the meat in the pot. All of them! And yet it is not up to one week since I left them one whole dead chicken for their own soup!'

Before Teacher left for morning prayers, he had ordered the servants to ensure that the culprit was identified before he came back to the house. Madam talked about thieving servants all the time he was away. She heaped the entire blame on Teacher for accepting every problem child whose parents were no longer capable of keeping it under control. If she had her own children, the situation might have been more tolerable. Here she was, going nearly mental because of other women's children who would forget that she pulled their tail feathers in the rainy season as soon as any of them became somebody.

'Has the culprit been identified?' Teacher asked as soon as he came back from prayers.

'Does any of them speak the truth?' Madam asked disgustedly. .

'All right!' Teacher's tone left no doubt that the situation was far from being all right. He maintained absolute silence on the matter until after he had gone through his breakfast. A tiny piece of potash had been put into the soup when it was warmed for breakfast, to eliminate the sour odour. After he had rinsed his mouth three times, he pulled up his short brown hose and summoned all six servants. As they arrived, all dressed in their school uniforms except Monday who wore a blue shirt over green khaki shorts, he lined them up as he would line up his pupils for his very painful 'love tap' on their knuckles with his one-foot ruler.

'Are you now ready to say who stole the meat?' he asked, lifting his loosely fastened shorts by applying pressure on his sides with his elbows. He could easily have kept his shorts in place by fastening the belt he always left unbuckled even when the shorts were virtually slipping down, but it was a part of Teacher to lift his shorts by pressing his elbows to his sides!

Nobody spoke in reply.

'A ghost must have come here to steal the meat,' Madam put in sarcastically.

'All right.' Teacher examined the dining table, satisfied himself that it was clean, and then sat on it. The expression on his face showed that he had not come to preside over a fun fair. 'If the culprit will not own up, I shall expose him. He should, however, know that the punishment will be much greater if he leaves me to expose him.'

Nobody owned up, so he went on: 'I know who went to the soup pot, and I will now tell you who he is. He did not take the trouble to wash off the soot which his large toe collected from the outside of the pot; the soot is still on that toe.'

Teacher had hardly come to the end of his sentence before Obu began to brush one big toe against the other.

'Obu.' Teacher rose from the table and stood in front of Obu. There was little difference between both of them in height. 'Why did you steal the meat?'

'Please, Sir, pardon me, Sir!' pleaded Obu, beating a hasty retreat in fear that Teacher would strike him.

'You give yourself unnecessary trouble running,' Teacher replied. 'It's time for school, and I will not go late because of an imp like you.'

'Is it you, you fat-headed good-for-nothing ogbanje?' Madam asked, facing Obu. 'And that's the boy whose mother swore by Ngenenyikilinyikili that he will not touch anything not belonging to him or not given to him! I shan't be surprised if his illiterate parents turn round to say that I taught him to steal! Is there anything the ear does not hear?'

Obu hardly followed any of the lessons in class that morning, as his mind went over the soup episode and he conjectured what terrific punishment lay in wait for him. It was not his first dip into the soup pot, and he was not the first servant to commit the offence. Bright had done it before him; in fact the idea had come to him after he had caught Bright in the act on one occasion. Although Bright had reacted guiltily like an inexperienced thief that day, he had maintained that the crime was common to all the servants. The older servants did it more brazenly than the kids; they took turns at cooking, unlike Bright and Obu, and took as much liberty as they fancied with the soup pot when it came under their control.

It was because no sensible toad could call a brother toad names for its ugly skin that Mary had silenced Silence when, soon after the servants had left Teacher, Silence had attempted to denounce Obu. As Mary put it, Obu was like the dog condemned for eating faeces only because some of the faeces showed on its mouth; dogs with clean mouths and immaculate white teeth were as guilty, if dogs eating faeces could be regarded a crime!

Obu did not feel sorry that he had stolen the piece of meat. It was his only chance of eating decent meat. It was incredible that he, who used to be given the choicest part of any meat at Umuchukwu, he who enjoyed the privilege of eating eggs when most children were brought up to take their eyes off eggs, it was inconceivable that he, Obu, would see meat being eaten every day in the house in which he lived and not be allowed to partake of it, except the meat of animals that had died naturally or the unwanted parts of a chicken. One lesson he had picked up in his two terms in Teacher's house was that he should not leave his lips for the harmattan to lick for him.

Why had he moved his toes when Teacher spoke about soot from the soup pot? That was what betrayed him. No one could have found him out, if he had not moved those toes. Teacher could have punished all six of them, if he so desired. Obu had been punished for the sins of others on previous occasions. What irritated him most was that there was in fact no soot whatsoever on any of his toes, or any other part of his body. He blamed himself for not examining his toes before owning up.

What punishment would he receive? No meals for one whole day? None of the dead meat for a term? Psalm 119 two times? The pot without a base ...

'What's wrong?' Margaret had enquired uneasily, taken aback by Obu's sourness which had even made him reject the fried ukwa she had offered him. Although Obu had never been half as warm to her as she was to him, he had never been that sour to her. She had been drawn to him by his intelligence. Obu's accounts of the home he left behind and the horrors of serving Teacher and Madam had evoked her sympathy and turned him into her hero. She brought him presents regularly – dry garri, palm kernels, ground nuts, fried ukwa; it was with the greatest restraint that she did not give him a portion of each of her meals. She expected nothing in return; it made her feel good just to know that her little presents helped to alleviate his sufferings. Obu's unusual sourness made her sure that something had gone amiss. Obu avoided any further confrontation with her, when he noticed how red her eyes had turned. At the end of the school day, he found himself enjoying the fat, rounded soft-fried and delicious ukwa as he and Margaret drifted to Block A for the end of day assembly.

The benches and desks had been pushed to the wall to create standing room for the pupils from the junior primary section of the school. The weaver bird chatter came to an abrupt end with the jingling of the headmaster's bell. It was a grave offence to be caught chattering after that bell had been jingled to command attention.

'Each pupil must bring one bundle of firewood when coming to school tomorrow,' announced the headmaster. 'When I say one bundle of firewood, I mean one bundle, the size of bundle you take home to your mother, not the thing you take to a child suffering from measles.'

The pupils burst out laughing, until the serious-faced headmaster jingled the bell again.

'In addition, the girls must bring charcoal and cassava leaves for blackening the blackboards, while the boys bring strong ropes for fencing round the lavatory.'

Obu and his fellow teachers' boys rarely took in much of such announcements. As teachers' boys, they were exempted from such orders.

The bell jingled, this time without provocation, as the hall was already quiet.

'Now to something very serious,' the headmaster announced. 'Where is Obuechina Maduabuchi?'

Obu's heart flew off. Something in the headmaster's tone warned him that he was in for trouble, and he felt like sinking into the ground.

'Obuechina Maduabuchi?' shouted the headmaster.

'Sir!'

'Come here, you thief!'

Obu knew the game was up. Teacher had undoubtedly told the headmaster about the missing piece of meat; he had not been caught stealing anything else. As he cut his way through his fellow pupils, he prayed he might be proved wrong. Teacher was absent from the assembly and it was out of character for him to delegate any punishment even to the headmaster. Nobody could trounce an erring pupil to Teacher's satisfaction.

'Mount that table!' ordered the headmaster, pointing at the Elementary 4 teacher's table as Obu finally stood before him like a lamb before a leopard. Obu clambered up the table, his heart in his mouth.

'Tell the school what you did last night!'

Drops of hot urine trickled down Obu's legs. Many pupils observed the trickles, in spite of his efforts to imprison them between his calves. Fear of the fierce looking headmaster stopped them from poking fun at Obu.

A stroke of the cane across Obu's backside warned him that he was not on the village playground. The cane broke in two. The headmaster broke the remainder into bits and commissioned Cromwell to fetch him six more dependable canes in no time. Cromwell could not have welcomed any assignment with greater enthusiasm.

'Tell the school what you did last night!' roared the headmaster again, as he received the six canes from Cromwell, cut from the wiry herb known as apani udo.

Obu muttered something, for which he received a stinging stroke across both legs. The pitcher smashed on the ground. The tears flowed freely down each cheek as Obu sobbed bitterly.

'Sharrrrrap!' the headmaster thundered. Obu shut up at once.

'If he will not tell you what he did, I will tell you,' announced the headmaster. 'This big-headed monster you see standing in front of you – can all of you see him clearly?'

'Yes, Sir,' the school shouted back.

'This fat-headed monster in front of you is a thief. A thief!'

Some of the pupils covered their faces in shame. The headmaster went on:

'When other children are asleep at night, he crawls round the house in search of the pot of soup ...' 'Ji-nede-me-h!' exclaimed Cromwell.

'Last night he ate up all the pieces of meat in his Madam's soup pot. A-ll of them, kpam kpam! A boy who is fed on meat every day! Cromwell!'

'Sir!

'Pick him up.'

'Yessir!'

Obu stripped off his shirt in compliance with the headmaster's orders. The headmaster tested the toughness of each cane by bending it over his knee. Cromwell stooped down. Obu climbed on to his back. Cromwell rose gleefully, securely holding Obu's legs in a manner that would prevent Obu from jumping or slipping down. He swung round, presenting Obu's bared back to the headmaster.

'Will you steal meat another day?' The first stroke landed across Obu's bare back. A loud sob pierced through the silence down the hall. Margaret recoiled as if the cane had landed on her.

'Will you go near a soup pot another day?' Stroke number two landed on Obu's back.

The headmaster went on that way, till he had delivered twelve solid strokes and discarded three of the six canes. You could identify each stroke on Obu's back when Cromwell lowered him to the ground; each stroke resembled the path left by an earthworm burrowing through wet ground.

'Ndo!' Margaret sobbed, trying to take over Obu's satchel from him.

Obu shrugged her off as he cut his path angrily through the mass of fellow pupils who had congregated round him to express silent wet-eyed sympathy with him. He would not accept any sympathy from his fellow servants when he got to the house; not even the attempts by Ada and

Mary to console him. He merely walked into the room in which the servants kept their personal effects and began throwing anything of his he could lay hands on into his box. He failed to recognise Madam as he walked past her, to her utter consternation.

'Did they teach you not to salute me when you return from school today?' Madam queried him. He sent her to market with silence, and continued throwing his belongings into his box.

'Can it be that you didn't hear me, you ogbanje?' This time she stood her full masculine length in front of him. He straightened up from his packing as if to take a full look at the person rudely interrupting him. The defiant look on his face reminded Madam of her experience with Ada. The way Obu took a lightning glance round the room left her guessing whether he was looking for a defensive object.

'All right. If you have suddenly gone deaf and dumb, you will stay here until you recover.' She locked the door into the room, tucked the key into her wrapper and retired to the chair from which she oversees what goes on in the kitchen.

Obu shook the door as if to force it open but to no avail. He looked at the only window in the room. The expanded metal resisted his grip; Teacher had discarded the ineffective burglar proofing previously installed on all the windows in the house, and replaced them with something which stood a chance of keeping off thieves. When Obu saw that he was really locked in, he slumped down flat on the floor and did the only thing within his power – weep, and weep, and weep.

The tears gathered strength, soon becoming a fast current which swept Obu from the world of heartlessness and misery, the world of Teacher and Madam, to the world of never-ending

jubilant at Umuchukwu. His age grade was presenting the atilogwu dance as the highlight of Nwohuruanu's wedding ceremony.

Nwohuruanu was Oti's sister and so very close to the group. She had always been a darling elder sister to the kids, collecting dry banana leaves for making their masquerades, and helping in other ways. A beautiful sixteen-year-old girl, tender-looking like a yam tendril before it develops leaves, she had been born on a festive occasion – a Christmas eve – hence her father had named her Nwohuruuputa, the child who emerged at the sight of meat. Coincidentally, her wedding also fell on a festive occasion – 26 December. David and the other boys decided to launch their epoch-making dance at the wedding reception, preparatory to taking it round Umuchukwu the day after.

The spectators closed in on the dancers, ignoring the cloud of dust raised by the dancers' feet as they struck the ground, sometimes with the force of an elephant and sometimes with the sympathetic gentleness of the chameleon treading as if it could otherwise crush the earth beneath. Only the swing of Robinson's indiscriminating cane ensured uninterrupted vision for the wedding couple and the chairman's table. Atilogwu was a breathtaking combination of artistic excellence and physical fitness, and it left the spectator wondering whether the dancers are under the spell of juju.

Mama Obu exuded happiness and pride as she ran into the dancers to stick one whole shilling on Obu's wet forehead, just below the head-gear. As if the current had waited for this climax, it swept Obu and his fellow atilogwu dancers off the scene. It swept bashful Nwohuruanu, her teacher husband, Mama Obu and the entire wedding reception off the scene. In their place emerged Obu the masquerade. Not the childish masquerade, in dry banana leaves, with the

fingers and toes showing, but the adult masquerade, the pure ancestral spirit emerging from the bowels of the earth through the ant hole. Nothing of the human form was visible; he had become the Odo masquerade which struck instant fear even among men fully initiated into the secrets of the spirit world.

Obu, now the fearful Odo masquerade, crowed proudly as women flung away their water pitchers or market baskets and dived into the bush at his approach. The sight of Samuel diverted his attention from the sprawling women. Samuel the bully! The sight of Odo turned Samuel into a weak -kneed coward with no sense of direction. Obu had no difficulty catching up with him.

'Samuel du-me!' he shouted in his spirit-voice as he landed a crackling stroke on Samuel's back.

How many more did the bully deserve? As if by magic, the current swept Samuel aside, replacing him with Teacher and Madam. Obu could hardly believe his eyes. Teacher and Madam, completely at his mercy! Death had struck as if it were acting under precise instructions. He raised the whip he had just used on Samuel and struck at Madam. Teacher moved with amazing agility and received the stroke on his back side.

'Leopard, my master,' protested Teacher, 'how come that you are trying to flog a woman who has sought my protection?'

'Is it not Teacher that I salute?'

'Leopard, my master!'

'The skeleton which cannot be tied into a parcel!'

'I salute you, Spider. I anticipated that I would run into you, hence I left my hat in the house ...'

'Hold this for me!' Obu gave Teacher the kind of stroke for which Teacher was dreaded by his pupils, expecting to see him cower like Samuel. Teacher took it with incredible equanimity, retaining even the smile on his face. The Odo masquerade could not let even Teacher get away too lightly. Otherwise everybody would henceforth regard Odo as a child's plaything.

'Teacher, du-me!' he shouted, carefully selecting the cane which inflicted instant leprosy.

'Get up at once, you ogbanje!' shouted Madam as she unlocked the door and found Obu fast asleep on the floor. 'Get up before I kick you to death.'

Obu opened his eyes without at first taking in much. Then the current swept away the leprosy-inflicting Odo masquerade, leaving domestic servant Obuechina Maduabuchi at the mercy of terror-striking Mrs Zaccheus Kanu, his Madam. As he scrambled to his feet fearfully, smarting pain from his back obliterated any remaining illusions. He could not suppress a groan.

Chapter Twenty-One

K.C.M.G.,

Sir Bourdillon.

K.C.M.G.,

Sir Bourdillon.

Bernard – U – Bourdillon, Bernard – U – Bourdillon.

We pray, we pray,

We pray, we pray, We pray for love.

British Empire will never perish!

Obu and his schoolmates sang the popular song lustily, to the beat of Aka C.M.S. Central School brass band, as their school marched towards the dais. It was Empire Day. Teachers and pupils joined in the march past, the teachers behind the pupils, every one in white – or some shade of white. The teachers wore shoes as well; most pupils did not own shoes, and the few who did were not allowed to wear them.

The Aka Central School band, as in the past, soon became the cynosure of all eyes, being the only genuine brass band in the district. The other school bands were bold attempts by Onitsha tinkers to turn local cowhide on flattened-out zinc roofing-sheets into brass bands. They performed well until the onset of the harmattan or the rains. The Aka instruments, including their six cornets, highly polished the day before, dazzled the eyes as they reflected the bright rays of the morning sun. The band boys were, like the rest of the school, in white, except that each wore

a white Nehru type cap with a red double tail dangling down his back to his waist, and a pair of trousers but without shoes. Each also wore a red sash, coming down diagonally from the left shoulder to the right side where both ends were fastened with a safety pin. The boys who played the side drum and the bass drum each wore special leather belts and straps to which their drums were securely hooked.

'Eyes right!' shouted the bandmaster as soon as he came directly opposite the dais. The cornets and the singing stopped immediately, the cornets were respectfully lowered as all eyes turned sharply right except the bandmaster's. He had suddenly swung round, his back to his destination marking time on one spot as he turned his eyes and head sharply to the left. You could not tell that he was 'We shall see', Obu's teacher. This was his day, and he intended to make the most of it. He wore two sashes, one from each shoulder, the two forming an X in front and another behind. His red and yellow epaulettes and the colourful ceremonial cords which surrounded each shoulder and ended in a breast pocket always caught the eyes of female teachers and pupils. Each leg of his white trousers had a broad band of scarlet material down its outer side. He swung his heavy staff of office so dexterously that he drew continuous applause from spectators and constituted a major distraction to the pupils who were expected to focus all their attention on His Majesty's Representative standing on the dais.

There on a dais specially constructed for the Empire Day celebrations stood the Resident, giving the salute. Few people ever knew his name. He was simply called Resident and nobody bothered to know much more about him. There he stood on the dais, tall – like all white men; serious – like all white men; awe-inspiring – like all white men. He, too, was in white, pure white, Yaba white, impeccably laundered – a white long sleeve Chinese-type tunic over a pair of white trousers. He wore a pair of white buck-skin shoes, and a helmet with a tassel resembling a bunch

of bananas. A pair of white gloves hid his hands and fingers from view, as a pair of dark glasses hid his eyeballs. (He was reported to have boasted that it was inconceivable for the eyes of a native to behold the eye- balls of the King's Resident Representative!) The King's sword, the visible symbol of justice, dangled by his side as he took the salute. Even the air about him suggested imperial authority.

'Eyes front!' shouted the bandmaster, negotiating a right about turn and doubling up to catch up with his band several yards ahead. The pupils obeyed promptly. The leading cornet rent the air with the bandmaster's favourite piece, joined by the other cornets and the pupils:

Home again – again!

Home again – again!

When shall I see my home? (Darling, darling, darling)

When shall I see my native land? I'll never forget my home!

The Resident took his seat beside his wife and their awe-inspiring Alsatian, waiting until the next school drew near enough to pay obeisance to His Majesty the King. The warm blood of patriotism surged through his veins as the tune rendered by the local bamboo flutes of Arogya school band became clearly identifiable. The tune? – Rule, Britannia!

Britannia rule the waves.

Britons never, never, never shall – be – slaves!

Sports competitions took up the greater part of the day following the Resident's Empire Day Address. Few people cared to listen to the address; the white man's language is not meant to be

understood except by his fellow whites and their interpreters. Unfortunately the popular interpreter in the Resident's Office had lost his voice the night before, and his substitute was no good at all, his big megaphone notwithstanding. Many of the pupils found greater reward in counting the number of times the huge Resident used the word 'MPIRE – referring to the British Empire. Obu lost interest after counting twenty.

Silence was easily the leading quarter-miler in the school and the only teachers' servant to take part in any of the competitions. Madam gave him no minute to train, but it turned out that running to and from the stream gave him all the practice he needed. He came away with a medium-sized, colourful bath towel and a split pair of shorts which the towel later helped him to conceal.

One thick-set, short-legged boy nicknamed 'Bullet', from Ujali school, had posed a serious threat to Silence right from the sound of the starting whistle. They ran shoulder to shoulder for nearly a hundred yards, each struggling to take what would have been the inside lane had the track been divided into lanes. Then Silence shot ahead.

'Keep it up, Silence!' shouted Obu and every pupil from Aka Central, breaking through the cordon mounted by Boy Scouts and dashing across the field to spur their hero to victory.

'Wake up! "Bullet"!' the Ujali pupils shouted in reply. It was as if Silence and 'Bullet' were the only competitors; the remaining twelve runners were more than twenty yards behind 'Bullet'.

Silence sped on in his characteristic manner – head inclined to the left, mouth tightly shut with arms parallel to the body and swinging rapidly front to back and back to front. 'Bullet' followed closely, head erect, his short arms bent, with his clenched fists rubbing against his breast like those of a boxer about to dispense blows at close range.

The gap began to widen. 'Bullet' saw the first prize eluding him. He decided it would not go to Silence either. He mustered all available energy in pursuit. Silence heard the footsteps and the panting, took a quick glance behind, and increased his own pace. The applause mounted. Suddenly 'Bullet' dived forward. He caught hold of Silence's right foot. Silence broke free but not without losing his balance. He staggered for a brief second and then crashed down.

'Get up, Silence!' shouted his supporters. 'Get up! There's nobody behind you. "Bullet" has collapsed!'

Silence was certain he heard Madam's voice in that chorus. Madam, concerned about him, spurring him on to victory. That was more than he ever expected. In a trice he was on his feet and running as if 'Bullet' had not tripped him. The applause was unprecedented. The leader of the twelve trailing competitors who had gained extra strength with the unexpected collapse of the two giants lost hope and speed.

The cheers became intermingled with laughter as fingers pointed at something peeping out between Silence's legs. Silence was already coasting home when he became conscious of the object of curiosity: his white shorts had split between the legs when 'Bullet' tripped him, and he was not wearing pants. Self-consciously he tried to hold the split shorts together as he ran.

'Leave that thing!' Teacher shouted, worried that Silence might lose his place and he, Teacher, the reflected glory.

Silence came first, for which he received a medal, a colourful bath towel, and – most significant of all – a congratulatory smile from Madam and a promise of another pair of shorts from Teacher.

The 440-yards race was followed immediately after by the Court Messengers' race. The Empire Day celebrations provided not only for pupils but also for the different categories of employees in the Resident's office. The Court Messengers' race was one of half a dozen funpacked events which were carefully interspersed within the programme to spread the fun from start to finish.

'When a child receives a hair cut, the size of his head becomes obvious,' a spectator observed as he jocosely pointed at a Court Messenger popularly known as Zorro. In his dirty-brown pants, loose-hanging and tattered, he looked more like a drenched fowl than the swaggering 'Courtma' who, in his black flannel uniform, always caused a stampede whenever he was spied approaching the market. Zorro could always find some offence for which to charge you and send you to court, for as long as his ever present haversack remained empty or half-full.

Twelve Court Messengers took part in the race. Each appeared in underwear; parts of their uniforms having been placed at different points on the track. The competitor who donned his complete outfit and reached the finish before the rest, won the race. The Chief Court Messenger scrutinised each competitor at the finish to ensure that all buttons were fastened, the waist band properly tied, etc.

One competitor kept struggling with his pair of shorts till the end of the race. First he wore them back to front. When he realised his error his nervousness doubled as he saw the Resident's favourite Court Messenger, John, already racing to the next stage of the race. He withdrew his right foot, swung the shorts round, inserted his right foot again, pulled up the shorts to fasten the buttons, only to discover that they were again at the back. In his nervousness he stumbled as he pulled off the shorts. When he was ready to resume he found he had turned the shorts inside out. At that point he flung the shorts down in disgust; he was the only competitor still at that stage of

the competition. John, the Resident's favourite, had neatly tucked in and buttoned his shirt, and was already spinning round and round as he wound the black waistband about his waist before fastening his belt on top of it.

Another, a fat competitor, felt dizzy while spinning round with his waistband and crashed down. When, however, some Boy Scouts rushed in to administer first aid to him he shoved them off, scrambled to his feet, and picked up the waistband where it lay. He tried to tie it round his waist then he remembered that he had first of all to roll it like a giant bandage before attempting to get it firmly round him.

Obu found Margaret by his side before the Court Messengers' race was over. It was as if she knew that he carried a parcel for her, a parcel which, with the excitement, he had forgotten he carried in his pocket. He took a quick look round to make sure no one was watching him, and unobtrusively dropped the tiny packet into one of Margaret's large patch pockets.

'What is it?' enquired Margaret, uncertain whether Obu was playing a prank on her.

'd.s.d. What a question!' Obu sang teasingly, reluctant to answer the question direct.

Margaret was too curious to bother. She quickly picked up the tiny packet and proceeded to open it. 'Must you open it now?' Obu protested.

'How can I be sure that it isn't a scorpion?'

Her large eyes glistened with joy when she saw the contents of the packet. Six appetising termites, expertly fried and sprinkled with salt. Without first thanking Obu for the gift, she promptly threw two of the juicy termites into her mouth.

Obu was pleased that she liked his parcel. Margaret had always brought him one thing or another and he had been unable to reciprocate, except with occasional palm nuts or bottles of water on days when she felt thirsty after the weekly period of compound work. The termites had dropped from the clouds on his way to the stream early that morning. If he had not been in a great hurry, he could have collected two bucketful of them. He had collected two handfuls, and, in accordance with the houseboy code, had to share them with his fellow servants. Silence would not even wait for them to be fried; he detached the wings where they were not already detached, and threw the insects into his mouth.

'I wish it would never finish,' Margaret remarked as she rolled the wrapping paper into a ball. 'The sweetness has penetrated deep into my marrow.'

'Aren't you running the bottle race?' Obu asked her.

'No.'

'Does it mean you can't run?'

'What about you?'

'I'm a teacher's boy,' Obu replied. 'We have no time.'

'Of course Silence is not a teacher's boy?'

'Look. Nmagwu is leading ...' Obu trotted off towards the race-course, to join many other pupils of Aka Central who were already keeping pace with their champion Nmagwu, a slim, stately, pretty girl in her final year. What she lacked in intellectual ability she made up on the sports field and in her looks. The rumour at Aka Central was that it was on her account – to win and sustain

her love – that 'We shall see' had developed the expensive habit of wearing white- and-white to school.

'Keep it up, Nmagwu!' echoed down the track. Nmagwu ran as if the empty beer bottle on her head were held in place by magic. She looked straight in front of her aquiline nose, her neck erect and almost as long as that of a giraffe. She moved her arms gracefully as she ran, using them as stabilisers rather than as propellers.

'Someone is behind you!' shouted her supporters. 'Don't allow her to pass you.'

Nmagwu had heard the approaching footsteps and so had quickened her pace. The finishing line was quite close and she did not want to finish second. The footsteps came nearer. Pupils from Ujali school cheered Nwobiara, their own idol.

Nmagwu could now see Nwobiara with the tail of her left eye. Nwobiara came into full vision. She was beginning to gain distance, and a few yards remained. It became clear that Nmagwu could do nothing to stop her.

Nwobiara was so excited at the prospect of beating Nmagwu that she misjudged the finishing line and jumped to victory a little too soon, catching her bottle in her left hand and dancing about wildly. Nmagwu went on to the finishing line seconds later and was declared the winner.

'We shall see' could hardly contain his joy. He ordered his band to strike another of his favourites, a song in which the singer announces that a happy ending is in sight in his adventures with his lady love:

Love nwantinti!

Love nwantinti! Imago ije mu na love Ofodulu nwantinti!

Imago ije mu na love

N'ofodulu nwantinti!

Nmagwu was carried shoulder-high by her school- mates as they danced to the tune of their brass band.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Kpuluchichi, danda!

Kpuluchichi-O, danda!

Anu n'ada aja nabia-O, danda!

Anu n'ada aja nabia-O, danda! Igbutu nke kara aka mu na gi ata, Igbutu nke akagh aka ita nnaa gi!

Moses clasped his palms tightly over John's eyes as he sang the popular moonlight song, announcing the appearance of the wall scaling leopard, thereby giving the prey the opportunity to go into hiding. At the same time, he charged the leopard in a hushed tone to go for the mature rather than the immature prey.

Obu hastily ducked, to avoid being knocked down by John as the latter, somewhat dazed, went off in quest of his prey. John was playing the leopard and Moses, his keeper, had shut his eyes too tightly at the time the other servants who played the leopard's prey went into hiding. A more cooperative keeper would pretend to shut the leopard's eyes firmly but would in fact merely hold

his fingers loosely over them to enable the leopard to note where his prey hid. After all, as the song says, the keeper hoped to share in the booty only if the leopard made a good catch.

John ran past Obu as he made for the nearest tree to see if any prey hid behind it. Obu stood by to watch the hunt to an end before deciding whether to join that group or to move further to the netball field from which he could hear the voices of other teachers' boys enjoying the cool starry night. It was a Saturday night, the one night in the long week when teachers' servants could relax within the school premises after ministering to the needs of their masters, madams and misses, as the single female teachers were called.

This Saturday night was special for Obu. He had received warm commendation from Teacher and Madam for the cassava foofoo he had prepared from beginning to end. A warm commendation, particularly by Madam's standards, for she was as stingy in her commendations as she was in giving food to her servants.

Madam had not lifted the ban preventing Obu from attempting to cook any food meant for Teacher and her. Although Obu had been itching to demonstrate what he had learnt over the months, none of the servants would take the chance, knowing that the consequences of any failure would fall squarely on him, not only for serving badly cooked food but also for disobeying Madam's orders. The farthest they had gone was to allow Obu to pound the foofoo for the servants. Madam did not care how well that was done.

'Ada!' Teacher had called.

'She's not in,' Obuechina had replied.

'Did she go out after cooking the food?' Madam spoke from her bed: it was her period of expectation.

'No, Ma.' The servants never gave out more information than was absolutely called for, especially when it might implicate their fellow servants.

'What time did she go out?' Madam continued. 'I don't know, Ma.'

'Go,' ordered Teacher. 'I only wanted Ada to see what good foofoo looks like when it is pounded. That's all. Who pounded it?'

'I did,' Obu muttered, retreating to a safe distance.

'Who?' shouted Madam. 'Who permitted you to touch my food? Is it because I can't move ...'

'If he can pound foofoo so well, he should pound my foofoo every day,' Teacher cut in.

'That is if this doesn't swell his fat head.' Madam's tone was more relaxed. 'Those bush animals with whom I live in this house, you can never take them for granted. He has pounded the foofoo well today. Give him the cassava tomorrow and he will serve you foofoo you cannot swallow even with both eyes shut tight.'

Teacher belched and ordered more drinking water. Obu caught some of Madam's words as he returned with the water. She would take the chance; she would put Obu on the roster for cooking meals for Teacher and Madam, but first on trial.

Kpuluchichi, danda!

Kpuluchichi-O, danda!

Anu n'ada aja, nabia-O! danda ...

John had made no catch, so he was playing the role of leopard a second time and would continue to do so until he caught a prey who would then take over from him as leopard. Moses, who sang the song, relaxed the pressure on John's face this time, to give him a chance of observing some of his prey as they went into hiding.

Obu avoided John, but instead of running to the home base where all the animals were required to congregate for safety, he ran towards the distant voices. Silence was more likely to be in that other group, and Obu was anxious to let him know that he had achieved the distinction of being certified fit to pound foofoo for Teacher and Madam.

Obu whistled gleefully as he made for the voices. Occasionally he would smack his right arm against his ribs as he had seen many wrestlers do when warming up for a contest, but without being able to produce that crack-of-the-whip sound which the experts produced so easily.

As Obu approached one of the several soursop trees lining the edge of the football field, he was startled by sudden movement. He spontaneously leapt into the air and screamed as if he had roused a real leopard.

A girl wriggled free from something and fled as if she was pursued by a mad dog. A man ran after her until he remembered that his wrapper remained behind. Obu remained dazed as he stared at the man walking back towards him, wearing only a sleeveless vest.

'Shut your mouth!

Obu recognised Monday's voice – hushed but firm and angry, and felt relieved that he had not walked into a live leopard. He could not tell what game the couple had been playing, but he

decided to play mischief by singing the familiar song of a child threatening to reveal a secret unless something was done to appease him.

Nwakukom akonakwa Ma nw'udum awanakwa, Mgbe mg'ako, mgbe mg'ako Onye ebenekwa akwa!

'I've warned you to shut up,' Monday threatened as he quickly shook the dust and grass off his wrapper and secured it round his waist. 'Otherwise if you draw people here you will tell them why you did so.'

'Of course I'll tell them,' Obu replied confidently.

'What will you tell them?'

'What you were doing when I caught you, you and that girl.'

'Which girl?'

'The girl who ran away just now.'

'What is her name?'

'Stop asking me all those questions!' Obu sounded irritated.

Obu could not tell who the girl was. She fled before he could collect his senses.

'You think you are the only person who can say something?' Monday asked.

'What can you say about me?'

'I see the way you shape your mouth when talking to me, as if I don't know about you and Margaret.'

'Me!' Obu shouted, ready to prove his innocence beyond any shadow of doubt.

'Have you not been eating Margaret's ukwa and palm kernels?'

'Aha! If that is what you mean, yes, Margaret brings me ukwa, palm kernels and garri, and I help her with her arithmetic.'

'Do you not know that Margaret is an osu.'

Obu jumped to his feet as if an eel had been thrust into his hand without warning. Margaret an outcast!

Impossible.

'By sharing her food with her and helping her with her arithmetic, you have become an osu.'

'That is not true,' protested Obu, the tears immediately gathering.

'That is what the custom says and once you become an osu you will always remain osu, with your children and your children's children.'

'It is a lie!' The sound of Obu's voice revealed that he was breaking down. Monday knew his chance had come.

'It is a terrible thing to be an osu, an outcast, rejected by society,' Monday plugged in. 'It's worse than leprosy.'

It's worse than yaws. It's worse than cholera ...' 'Stop it,' Obu shouted, sobbing.

'All right, I'll stop it, but only on one condition.

'What is it?' Obu asked anxiously.

'It does not seem that people realise that you have been eating ukwa and so on with an osu. Unless I make it known to them nobody will declare you an osu. And you do not become an osu until you are publicly declared one. So if I keep my mouth shut you will not become an osu.'

'Please, Monday, will you keep your mouth shut?' Obu implored.

'Well, I must say I may find it difficult.'

'I beg you, please, I beg you. I don't want to be an osu.'

'All right.'

'Do you say you will not talk about it?'

'Yes.'

Obu rushed at Monday and clung to his side in warm appreciation.

'On one important condition, though,' put in Monday. Obu waited anxiously for the condition, hoping it would not be an impossible one.

'And that condition is that you never utter one word to anybody about what you saw here just now. Not that we did anything, but you shouldn't even say that you saw me at all.'

'I promise not to say one word about it to anybody.'

Obu retired for the night, forgetting that he had not yet reported to Silence and others his graduation into foofoo pounding for Teacher and Madam. The thought that he was on the brink of becoming an osu, an outcast, without knowing it nearly sucked the life out of him. How Silence would tease him! How could he face his parents? How could he live the life of an osu,

especially at Umuchukwu where the white-skinned leper enjoyed a higher social status than the osu?

Chapter Twenty-Three

'Silence!' Madam shouted as she heard a bicycle bell in front of the house. She had dozed off on Teacher's cloth chair after the Catechist's wife had left her shortly before 5 p.m.

'Number one!' counted Silence as usual.

'Silence!'

'Number two!'

'Obuechina!' Madam assumed that Silence was not within hearing.

Before Obuechina could answer, Silence had cut in loudly, trying to catch Madam's ear!

'Obuechina, why keep quiet when Madam is calling you?'

'Shut up!' countered an enraged Obuechina. 'Didn't you hear your own name ...'

'May the wolves tear all of you to bits there if you think you can use Onuekwucha as your football. Wait for me there! Silence!'

'Number three! Ma!' Silence shouted the 'Ma' as if he were shouting at a blacksmith noisily hammering out a stubborn piece of steel. He knocked down a bucket as well as a kitchen stool in his ostensible rush to answer Madam's call. Madam flung one of her slippers at him. As usual, like the artful dodger, he avoided the tyre rubber missile which landed on the chest of a man

rolling his bicycle into the compound, the man who had failed to attract attention in front of the house.

As Silence stooped to pick up the spent missile, Madam launched the second. It would have scored a bull's eye, but for the fact that Silence's chi never took even a quick nap. The front wheel hub of the visitor's Eagle bicycle stood between the missile and its target. The velocity was so high that the yet unannounced visitor had a hard time saving the bicycle from crashing to the floor.

'Bring those slippers here at once!' ordered Madam.

Silence knew Madam inside out. He was certain that the massive load of anger still hung on her chest. If he dared go up to her with her pair of slippers, she would descend on him with hands and feet, whichever proved most convenient. And yet he dared not disobey her, especially in the presence of a third party, as that would be adding a faggot to the fire.

'I'm coming, Ma,' Silence answered, his mind working rapidly as it did on such occasions.

He quickly took over the bicycle from the unknown visitor, handing him Madam's pair of slippers in return.

'Should I untie the bundle?' he asked the stranger. Silence's strategy was to switch Madam's attention to the stranger.

'Yes,' the visitor replied.

'Do you want to untie his bundle before you know who he is, you Gboko beast?' Madam reprimanded Silence. Animals from Gboko, a town in Northern Nigeria, were hardly different from other animals, yet for Madam 'Gboko beast' symbolised the height of stupidity.

'Please, Madam', if I have broken any rules, I have done so in ignorance and ask for forgiveness,' the unannounced visitor pleaded. 'No man knows what he does not know. I clapped and clapped in front of the house, but nobody said a word to me so I came in to see if any person was inside.'

'I heard your clapping and that was why I shouted to this wild beast here, but he decided to go deaf. Go back to the front of the house.'

'Oh,' replied the visitor.

'Slippers,' whispered Silence, using signs to tell the man to take the slippers to Madam. Unwilling to spark off any further incident, the visitor took the slippers to Madam and went back the way he came. He had not met Madam before, but from this initial encounter he agreed completely with the singer who predicted that the man who would marry Deborah would shrug the shoulders kponkwem.

'Who is that sitting so comfortably in my house?' asked Teacher as he alighted from his bicycle.

'What debt does teacher owe you that should make you take over my house in my absence?

'Teacher, good evening Sir,' the visitor responded. 'If you owe me any debt, I do not know about it and it is not what has brought me here.'

'Thanks be to God even if only for that. Bright!

Obuechina!'

'Sir,' answered Bright, dashing at top speed.

'You boys want to pretend that you didn't know I had returned, eh? Take the bicycle.'

Bright rolled the bicycle away, but had not passed through the door leading into the compound before Teacher called him again. 'Give Missus that bag. She will know how to handle what is inside it. Give me that doublebarrelled gun so that I can empty the cartridges before you return the gun to its place. One does not tickle the eyes with something intended for tickling the ears.'

Teacher moved into the piazza where the visitor had risen to greet him.

'Mazi Laza sent me to see you,' the visitor began after the handshake.

'Do you mean Lazarus Maduabuchi?' enquired Teacher.

'Yes, Sir. His first son – his only son – is a servant in your house.'

'Yes,' replied Teacher, 'I hope all is well.'

'Yes, Sir. He sent me to see how all of you are and to deliver a little message to you, which I shall deliver when you ask me to do so.'

'Are you returning to Umuchukwu straightaway?'

The visitor was not quite certain how to react to the question, except that he knew he did not want to set off immediately on the sixty-mile journey. 'Do you consider it safe for me to set off on the long journey to Umuchukwu at this time of the evening?' he asked.

'No time is unsafe for me, morning or night.'

'But who can compare himself with you, Sir? Do you know that even the most notorious highway robber who comes face to face with you will drop whatever weapon he is carrying and flee for life?'

Teacher welcomed the compliment. 'Danger or no danger, it is inconceivable that you should turn right back to return to Umuchukwu. After all you have come to somebody's house. I asked you whether you were returning to Umuchukwu straightaway because you seemed so anxious to deliver your message that you would not even let me sit down or wash the dust off my body after my bicycle journey from Ndiowu. I wanted to ask you whether you have forgotten that when a man stands up to give his wife a baby the offspring is bound to run mad! A bath first, then food, before we talk.'

Bright took the news to the kitchen. 'Obu,' he whispered to the hearing of everybody else in the kitchen, 'the visitor is from your father.'

Obu's spirit seemed to jump out without warning. 'Did he say why he was sent?' Obu enquired.

'No,' replied Bright. 'He was about to do so but Teacher said he should wait until after they bath and eat.'

'My chi has killed me – O!' Obu exclaimed in a suppressed tone. 'I hope nothing has happened to Papa, Mama and my sisters, O!' He abandoned the cassava he was grating for garri and smacked his chest with both palms.

'Shut up,' Ada chided him. 'Why should anything happen to them?'

'That man has a strong chest,' Silence observed mischievously. 'If it were Obu's chest that Madam's rubber tyre slippers hit like that I'm sure by now we would be singing for him: "We'll meet on the other side of the river!"'

'You and your pranks,' Obu remarked. 'Cunny man die, cunny man go bury am!'

'Obu, don't abuse me, O! I am older than your immediate elder sister!'

'Obuechina!' Madam called.

'Ma!'

Obuechina ran to answer Madam, full of anxiety.

'Have you had a bath today?' Madam asked him in a surprisingly mellow tone. It was so out of character for Madam to address a servant in such a manner, especially when seeking to find fault.

'Yes, Ma, in the morning before I went to school.'

'Go and have another bath at once, and wear that jumper we made for you. Do you hear?' 'Yes, Ma,' replied a puzzled Obu.

'If anybody asks you questions about your stay with us, you should be sure of what answers you give. I have a means of listening to every thing you say in reply. Do you hear?'

'Yes, Ma.'

'And any present you receive from anybody today or tomorrow, you must take the whole of it to my room and leave it there until I tell you what you should do with it. I have a means of knowing everything inside any parcel without seeing the parcel, so you can't fool me. Do you understand?'

'Yes, Ma.'

'You can go!'

As Obu turned to go, Madam noticed an open sore on his left calf. 'What happened to you there?' she asked.

Obu looked at her for a brief moment and said nothing.

'Didn't you hear me?'

'That was where Madam threw a broken earthenware pot at me.'

'Wait, let me get you lint and bandage to tie it up after you have had your bath. If anybody asks you what happened to you there say that you sustained the injury at a football game. Understand?'

'Yes, Ma.'

'All right. Wait for the lint and bandage, and remember to behave like the good boy you are.'

The visitor, whose name turned out to be Madu, brought gifts and greetings from Mazi Laza and his wife – a gallon of palm oil, a stick of smoked fish and a whole dried nchi. The parcel for Obuechina was tied separately in a small jute bag.

'Mazi Laza and especially his missus are so anxious to know how Obu is. If the boy's mother could exchange my eyes with hers, she would have done so, just to set her own eyes on the boy. You know he is their only son. The rest are girls and girls ...'

'That's why they spoilt him completely before throwing him over to me,' Madam interrupted. 'He was no better than a bush pig when he came here last January.'

'They want to know whether he still wets his bed.'

'Not after I forced him to go to sleep with a snake tied round his waist,' Teacher replied, smiling.

'It is an experience he can never forget; he fears more than women. Since that night he has not let go a drop of urine in his sleep!'

'Is that true?' Madu was visibly pleased. 'Thank you very much. Mazi Laza and his missus also wanted me to find out whether he still takes first position in his class.' 'His brain is hot. Very hot,' Teacher replied.

'Thanks to God,' Madu exclaimed.

'The trouble isn't from there,' put in Madam. 'Although I cannot say that I am learned, in my opinion, learning without common sense is nonsense. A learned man who is a thief is useless in my eyes.'

'Does he steal?' Madu asked with concern.

'If we had let him, he would have learnt to steal in broad daylight without being detected ...' 'God forbid,' cut in Madu.

'In his first few months here,' Madam went on, 'meat left in my soup pot hardly survived the night.'

Madu could hardly believe his ears. 'But everybody at Umuchukwu kept stressing the fact that Obu would not touch anything that did not belong to him.'

'Would anybody own up that soup made by his mother could ever go sour?' Madam replied.

'You say he doesn't steal any more?'

'We have successfully checked that, too,' Madam answered with pride.

'I'm sure Mazi Laza and his missus would be overjoyed to hear all that.'

Madam soon did most of the talking, considering no detail too minute in her effort to show what a marvellous job she (and – to a limited extent – Teacher) had done to transform the pampered and spoilt Obu into a wellbehaved, honest and responsible child who could pound excellent foofoo and assist in innumerable other ways in the running of the house. The climax came when Madam summoned Obu to appear before the visitor.

Obu looked presentable in his well-laundered Sunday jumper which he buttoned to the neck to obscure his conspicuous neck bones. His hair was well groomed as he respectfully gave the evening salutation to Teacher, Madam and the visitor.

'Obu, this visitor was sent by your parents to find out how you are,' Madam announced, beaming a smile at him.

'Welcome,' Obu replied, looking shyly at the visitor.

Madu took over. 'Your father, mother, and sisters all send greetings. They want to know how you are.'

'I am well.'

'They hope you will come home for Christmas,' the visitor went on.

Obu dipped his eyes and made no comment, realising that it would be indiscreet to reveal his delight at the thought of going home soon. When Madam asked him to wash and dress up, he had nursed the faint hope that the visitor may have come to take him home straightaway.

'That is a matter for us to discuss, Madu, not for Obu,' Teacher put in in a tone that left Madu in no doubt that he should not have broached the topic in Obu's presence.

Reluctant to take any other false step, Madu whispered into Teacher's ear for advice on whether he should deliver Obu's parcel to him there and then. On receiving an affirmative reply, he handed the parcel over to Obu: 'That's for you.'

Obu looked at Teacher and Madam as if for instructions on how to respond.

'Take it,' Teacher directed. 'It's for you, not for us.'

'Thank Sirs. Thank Ma.' Obu received the parcel gratefully. He concealed his eagerness to check the contents of the parcel as he waited for a signal from Teacher or Madam to withdraw.

'Your father and mother say you should write them a letter telling them how you are,' added Madu.

'Since the visitor leaves by the first cockcrow,' Madam advised, 'you should complete whatever you are writing and show it to me before I retire for the night. I want to ensure that you thank them for what they have sent you. You may go.'

As soon as Obu withdrew, Madu apologised for raising the request that Obu should come home for Christmas in Obu's presence.

Madam opposed the request. 'What they want is to take him home, undo everything I have laboured to do for one whole year, and then send me back once more a bush pig to start washing and polishing all over again. If he must go home, let him not return to my house after that. I have no children of my own yet, and I allow other people's children to drive me crazy. God forbid!'

Silence offered a hand to Obu: 'You're on top of the elephant!'

'Have you seen anything like that before?' Ada asked.

'It is wonderful,' observed Obu, both hands spread out in amazement.

'Our teacher would call that two-derful! Look at the plaster on Obu's bony leg.' Silence pointed at the plaster as he continued: 'Put there by Madam, with her own hands, in the presence of the visitor!'

'Don't mind that witch,' observed Ada. 'Didn't I hear her asking Obu to tell the visitor whether anybody illtreated him here?'

'She did,' Obu confirmed.

'And what was your reply?' asked Silence.

'What did you expect me to say?'

'You know,' Ada resumed, 'the more she went on play-acting, I just felt like pulling out that her wicked tongue and cutting it into ngwo ngwo ...'

'Tufia!' shouted Bright. 'My mouth will not taste that kind of ngwo ngwo!'

Ada continued: '... Especially when she said to the visitor: "Tell Obu's people not to worry about him. He is very happy living with us. I'm sure if you ask him to choose between staying with us and going home, he will prefer to stay on here ..."'

'And what did Obu say?' enquired Silence.

'What could I say? I just found my tongue tied.'

'The breadfruit falls for those who do not know how to eat the ukwa dish,' Silence spoke angrily.

'Why doesn't she eat such fodder in my presence?'

'If you want her to do so, tell your people to send someone to come and enquire how you are faring,' Bright suggested.

Obu displayed the gifts from home: a small mouth organ, a feather-weight fountain pen (Made in Japan) with a tiny, nervous mariner's compass adorning its cap, and a small packet of black ink powder. In addition the parcel included edibles – two coconuts, a quantity of dried cassava slices, a roll of Obu's favourite delicacy prepared from ground melon seeds, and giant-sized fried and shelled ukwa wrapped in banana leaves browned over a mild flame.

By unanimous consent, the mouth organ and the fountain pen went to Obu, though not before Silence had snatched the mouth organ from him to be the first mouth to touch it. The ink powder was to be dissolved in water and then each servant would have a little poured into his ink bottle. Bright shared the consumable items. Obu was given the privilege of picking first, the others following in the usual order of seniority.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Mama Obu jumped down from her bed and made for the gate into the compound. She was perfectly sure she heard the familiar grrrrrr sound of Mazi Laza's bicycle bell, one of those bells operated by the front wheel spokes in motion. It was not like the two previous occasions when she mistakenly thought she heard the Egwu na amu horn; this time she was perfectly certain.

She withdrew the iron bar which secured the carved wooden door at night. The door opened without difficulty and she stared into the thick mass of darkness in front of her. No cyclist, no bicycle, no bell, nothing but a mass of darkness. She shut the door and bolted it rather rapidly as

the fear which had been dispelled by hope began to surge back. She heard the chirruping of a cricket. That could not have been what deceived her. How could she confuse the chirrup of a cricket with the sound of Mazi Laza's bicycle bell? She had heard the bell clearly, and hoped it had not come from the land of the dead...! 'Tufia!' she spat dryly. 'God forbid!'

'What is it?' Mazi Laza's voice broke the silence.

'Didn't you hear your bicycle bell?' his wife replied, clearly seeking corroboration of the sound she had heard.

'Can't you sleep?' Mazi Laza asked in reply.

'Did I tell you so?'

'If you are not feeling sleepy, some other people want to sleep. Jumping out of the house every twinkling of an eye does not allow others even to shut their eyes. The first cock will soon crow and you are still expecting Madu tonight!'

'I know it's me you'll pounce on now. You won't say any thing to yourself for picking Madu of all people to go on such an errand for you. Because his name means "human being", you take him for a human being. How can a human being told to come back from an errand before dark, and who has not returned by now say he is a human being?'

'You think he has forgotten himself over a bowl of afulu soup?' Mazi Laza asked.

'How do I know?'

'Go and sleep, woman. Something must be keeping Madu from returning home as scheduled.'

'Why do you think I'm worried? It is for fear of that something, and I pray to God that nothing has happened to my Obiano.'

'You begin to talk like a woman. Does it not occur to you that Teacher may not be in the house, in which case Madu will have to wait for him if he must bring me a reply?'

'Why should Teacher choose to travel to a distant place the day you send somebody to him?'

'That's why I say you talk like a woman. If you don't want to sleep, please don't wake up our neighbours with your talking. Go inside the house. If Madu does not return today, he will return tomorrow or the day after tomorrow ...'

'You will wait as long as that?' cut in Mama Obu, 'If by tomorrow night I do not see him here, I am going to Aka myself to find out whether my son is still there.' Mazi Laza gave his cynical smile, even though it was lost to the person for whom it was intended. 'Tortoise was thrown into the cesspool for a period of one week. He did not complain of the putrefaction around him until he saw someone coming to release him. "Hurry!" Tortoise shouted. "The stench down here is unbearable."'

Mazi Laza had slept very little himself, and was surprised that his wife had not taken him up on that, especially as she could always tell when he was asleep from his snoring. He was perturbed that Madu had not come back, but not through fear that any evil might have befallen Obuechina; if any such thing had happened, Madu would have sped back post-haste to notify him. His anxiety came from the uncertainty whether Teacher would give the necessary consent for Obu to spend Christmas at home. Although Teacher had consented at the time they discussed sending Obu to live with him, nobody could take Teacher for granted. Mazi Laza knew there would be no peace in his house and no Christmas unless Obu spent it with them at Umuchukwu.

'Good morning, Ma,' greeted Oti.

'Mornny, my son,' Mama Obu replied without knowing from whom the greeting came. She was busy tying a green bundle of fresh fodder for one of her goats which had produced two healthy-looking kids.

'The person who went to see Obu,' Oti continued rather timidly, 'has he returned?'

Mama Obu emerged from the temporary pen which had been erected for the young mother goat to enable her to eat at her own pace, away from the greedy he-goat and the brown-and-white she-goat. The brown-and-white she-goat ate more voraciously than a nursing mother even though it had been exposed to no less than three virile he-goats in the preceding eighteen months with nothing to show in return. Mazi Laza had already earmarked it as the 'Christmas goat' if by Christmas its body showed no welcome change.

'Oh, is it Oti?' Mama Obu asked.

'Yes, Ma.'

'Have you come out from sleep?'

'Yes, Ma.'

'What of Mama Oti?'

'She is well.'

'And your father?'

'He is well.'

'And all your brothers and sisters?'

'They are well.'

'Aren't you going to school today?'

'I'm on my way to school, but I wanted to find out about the person who went to see Obu.'

'My son,' Mama Obu replied as she picked up the matchet she had stuck into the ground before she went in to fasten the fodder for the goat. 'Madu has not returned.'

'I thought he was to have returned yesterday?' Oti enquired.

'Yes. But he did not return, and I do not know why.'

'I will come again in the evening. Did Polycarp come here this morning?'

'If he came, nobody told me.'

Oti ran away, hoping to return late in the evening, as late as his mother would let him venture out of the house unaccompanied, to give the man who went to see Obu ample time to return. How he longed to see somebody who had set eyes on Obu, and to ascertain whether Obu would spend the Christmas holiday at home. If anybody had told him that he and Obu could live for one whole year without seeing each other, he would have dismissed that person as a liar. Now nearly a whole year had passed without his seeing Obu.

How would Obu look? Very much like David, the township boy, no doubt – speaking pidgin English and the township brand of Igbo; wearing fashionable clothes, with a hair cut from a famous barber. What brand of magic could he not perform on a bicycle? As for football, Obu's feet must have become sharper than the razor.

The envy notwithstanding, Oti longed for Obu. They had so many things to talk about. Obu would be surprised to learn that he, Oti, had at last decided to take school seriously. The possibility of joining Obu at Teacher's the following year had been largely responsible for this; his mother had warned him that Teacher would not accept him unless he was at school, and doing well. He had a four wheeled truck he had made which he was sure would make Obu's eyes glisten with admiration. Each wheel was lined on the outside with rubber from discarded bicycle tyres. The truck had a steering wheel – a real steering wheel, salvaged from a discarded wreck of a lorry. It had brakes, and could carry the driver and three or four baskets of yams or cassava when rolling downhill.

As Mama Obu picked up her key from the place where her daughters generally hid it before leaving for school, she remembered that the she-goat for which she had just cut the fodder belonged to Obu. Mazi Laza had asked her to buy the goat with Obu's share of Mgbedike money and the money realised before he left home from the sale to Government of rubber seedlings and palm kernels for the war effort. Yes, it was Obu's goat, Obiano's goat!

Chapter Twenty-Five

'Is there anyone in this house?' Mama Obu enquired, after trying unsuccessfully to attract attention by clapping both hands at regular intervals.

She was certain that someone was around, otherwise the gate would have been locked. Papa Oti and Mama Oti were not the people to take chances with thieves. Papa Oti had known suffering as a child whose parents had died before he had been able to know them. He had been a pauper in the actual sense – the pauper with the ashen mouth, as Umuchukwu people would say. He had lifted himself from the ashes through hard work – tapping palm wine, fishing in the deepest rivers, even making and selling dugout canoes from tree trunks. Nobody would call him a rich man in Umuchukwu, yet nobody could dismiss his words as those of a man of no substance. He never quite shed the skin he had developed during those years of hardship.

She went through the gate and moved towards Mama Oti's house at the far end of the compound. When clearing her throat again failed to attract attention, she called out despairingly: 'Is there no one in this house?'

'Who speaks?'

'Mama Oti, it would seem that I have developed a new voice, eh?'

'Ewo!' Mama Oti shouted. 'The mother of the friend of my son! Agu nwanyi, please I'm on my knees.'

'Ije nwata, please arise,' Mama Obu replied. 'I clapped and clapped and clapped. No answer. I came inside and called. No answer. I cleared my throat loudly. No answer. If not that I had something important, I would have gone away.'

'Ewo! was Oti not there?'

'I saw nobody.'

'Where could that boy have gone without telling me?' asked Mama Oti. 'I'm grinding beans for akara, and you know that when you grind on my grinding stone you cannot hear even the thunder. That was why I asked Oti to stay around in case anybody asked about me or his father. But that boy can hardly allow his bottom to stick to one place for the twinkling of an eye.'

'Of course, tomorrow is Nkwo. Do I know which market falls on what day!'

Mama Oti came nearer and lowered her tone. 'The way you speak, I hope nothing has happened.'

'I don't know what to say. Do you know that the man my master sent to Aka has not returned up till now?'

'Please wait, let me wash my hands.' Some of the ground beans had stuck to Mama Oti's hands. Mama Obu appropriated an Ekwulobia stool and sat down.

Mama Oti emerged from the backyard with arms wet up to the elbow. She shook off some of the water and dried off the rest with an old wrapper used as a pad for carrying pots and other loads. She disappeared into her room, emerging soon after with a small kola nut and some alligator pepper. When she failed to find the wooden container for serving kola, she handed the kola to Mama Obu to break.

'Who asked you to go in quest of kola for me?' Mama

Obu asked her. 'Am I a stranger?'

'Did two of us eat kola together yesterday?'

Mama Obu broke the kola nut, threw one of the four small lobes into her mouth and passed the remaining three to Mama Oti. She cleared her throat and asked for water.

'Ije nwata! I see you have work on your hand ...'

'Not work that I cannot abandon when Agu nwanyi wants me,' interrupted Mama Oti. 'Hard work is a good thing, but there are times when it becomes necessary to forget work and relax. Please go on.'

'Anyway,' Mama Obu continued, 'what brought me here is not something that should take up any time at all. What I've come to tell you is that if that man Mazi Laza sent to Teacher to enquire about Obiano does not return tonight, dawn will not meet me here tomorrow morning.

Please, keep an eye on the house for me.'

'You mean you will travel to Aka?'

'What else do you say I should do?'

Mama Oti gave no reply, so Mama Obu went on: 'That man who answers Madu but hardly behaves like one should have returned yesterday. Nobody saw him ...'

'Oti told me that he did not return,' Mama Oti cut in, 'and I had said I would check this evening to see whether he had returned. I am certain that Oti has already sneaked off to go to your house and find out whether Madu has returned.'

'If only that Madu would return, I would know the position about Obiano,' continued Mama Obu.

'You think Teacher and that wicked wife of his will let him come home for Christmas?'

'Obiano must return for Christmas, unless I was not the person who carried him in the womb for nine months!'

Mama Oti broke the brief silence which ensued. 'Agu nwanyi ...' you have always taken me as your own, and so have I taken you. So has your master taken my master. As for Oti and Obu, any person who does not know their parents would say they are twin brothers of the same father and mother. Rather than give you advice which does not come from my soul, let that grinding stone crush me ...' 'God forbid!' Mama Obu exclaimed.

'If I tell you that I am happy about this journey you want to undertake, I shall not be telling you the truth.'

'What do you say I should do?'

'I don't know. I agree that it is necessary to find out what has held up Madu, and the only way to do this is to send somebody to Aka. But that person should not be you.'

Mama Oti's words made sense. 'Will you go for me?' Mama Obu asked.

'It should not be me either. Don't worry. When Papa Oti returns, I shall discuss the matter with him. He will meet Mazi Laza tonight to discuss the matter. If it becomes necessary .. '

'Mama! ... Mama! ...'

Mama Obu discerned the voice of her daughter, Ogechukwu. She and Mama Oti jumped up and rushed towards the door.

'Ogechukwu!' Mama Obu shouted in reply. 'What has gone wrong?'

Ogechukwu rushed in panting heavily, and nearly pushed her mother down in her excitement.

'Mama I've searched for you everywhere. Obu has just returned ...' 'What!' exclaimed Mama

Obu. 'What did you say?

That Obiano is back?'

'Yes, Ma!'

'Where is he?'

'In our house!'

'Is your father there?'

'Yes, Ma.'

'You say Obiano, my son, is there now?'

'Yes, Ma. He is so tall and thin. He has kumba-drawback hairstyle. He came first in his class ...'

Mama Obu did not wait to hear the rest. She pushed Ogechukwu aside and rushed off to her house, forgetting to hold her flapping breasts. Mama Oti followed her, then remembered the beans on the grinding stone. She rushed back to the house, covered up the beans and the grinding stone, locked up the house and the outer gate and made for Mazi Laza's compound.

'Njide!' Mazi Laza hailed, turning his mouth in the direction of the kitchen for greater effect.

'Sir!' Njide replied.

'Where do you say your mother is?'

'She said she was going to Mama Oti's house.'

'Go and tell her that Onyibo has returned.'

'Ogechukwu has already gone to tell her.'

Mazi Laza lifted his son and made him sit on his left thigh, sizing him up all over again. Obu was only head and legs, evidence that he was not well fed in Teacher's house. He had grown several inches.

'You say your journey went well?' Mazi Laza asked his son.

'Yes, sir,' Obu replied, getting down on his feet. 'Except that sitting on the bar of that bicycle was very painful. Each time I dismounted so that we could climb a hill, it seemed as if my legs belonged to somebody else.' 'I know how it is,' Mazi Laza concurred.

'There was a town we passed through called Isiekenesi in which the children kept shouting: "is the passenger for sale?" They stopped when Madu abused their mothers.'

Madu blew off the froth from the cup of palm wine which he had just replenished. 'Those boys had no home training,' he commented. 'Howbeit, I taught them one lesson they will never forget!'

'Ono nikpo egbu agu!' shouted Mazi Laza in commendation.

'My master,' Madu acknowledged his title which portrayed him as a man who could kill leopards with ease.

'Where's Obiano! Obiano! Where are you?' Mama Obu began shouting even before entering the compound.

Obu answered excitedly. Mama Obu rushed into the obi where her son was, and swept him off his feet into a warm embrace. Then she let him go, and rushed out into the open air where she

danced with abandon. Mama Oti joined in the dancing as soon as she came in. Mama Polycarp soon joined them.

'Madu!' Mama Obu went down on one knee and placed an arm round Madu's neck in the tradition of a dancer. 'You have today behaved like the human being for which your name stands! Your coming home with Obiano my son wipes off any other anger I have carried for you.'

'Agu nwanyi,' began Madu, 'do you carry anger for me before you know my story? Mazi Laza sent me to enquire whether Teacher and his wife would permit Obu to come home for Christmas, and if so when somebody should go for him. Teacher said I could take Obu away if I waited for one day to enable him to obtain the boy's examination result from his teacher. Would I have acted like a mature man if I had insisted on coming home yesterday as we agreed before I left?'

'Ono nikpo egbu agu!' Mazi Laza hailed Madu by his title. 'Take the cup of wine I offer to you and leave the women alone.'

Madu did not need any persuasion. It was Nwagba's palm wine, which meant that it was first-rate. He was thirsty after the sixty-mile ride on Mazi Laza's boneshaking Eagle bicycle, and he knew he had done an immeasurable good turn to Mazi Laza and his wife for which no reward could be considered excessive.

Ebele Jesu erika,

Onwelu onye Jesu n'emeralu ebele!

Ebele Jesu erika,

Onwelu onye Jesu n'emeralu ebele!

Mama Obu, Mama Oti, Mama Polycarp, Mama John, Mama Moses, Mama Emma, Unoaku the perpetual spinster ... the number grew as the strong village wind swept the news of Obuechina's return through Umuchukwu, and as passers-by heard the singing and merriment in Mazi Laza's compound and came to check what was happening. The women sang in praise of Jesus Christ the all-merciful whose saving grace was readily available to all and sundry. Even stone-hearted Mama Samuel joined in the merriment, clapping from where she leaned against the compound mud wall for the women who danced.

'Hallelu –' shouted Mama Oti.

'Halleluiah!' the women responded in unison.

That was the call for a change of tune. Mama Polycarp did not allow Mama Oti the opportunity to begin the song she had in mind when she shouted Halleluiah. She gave the dancers no time to drain the sweat off their brows before raising a well-known chorus from the dance of the torch:

s.s.s./d.d.a./m.r.d.m.r./– hm! Ukwe ndi uka!

s.s.s./d.d.d./m.r.d.m.r/ – hm! Ukwe ndi uka!

s.s.s/m.r.m./s.s.s/m.r.m.

Missisi pata oche,

Missisi pata oche, na ndi uka abia!

Mama Polycarp undoubtedly knew Mazi Laza's fondness for that chorus – a mimicry of church hymns which, in the opening lines, presents them as no more than a juggling of the tonic sol-fa, intelligible only to church members. Mazi Laza was particularly fascinated by the latter part of

the chorus which interprets s.s.s./m.r.m. as 'Missus bring some chairs, Missus bring some chairs, the church members are here!'

Mazi Laza nipped into his room, emerged soon after and made for the dancing women. He brandished one bottle of lemonade in the air to indicate that it was intended for all the dancers before handing it over to Mama Polycarp. He also donated two shillings. The dancing stopped spontaneously.

'Okoroakwukwo!' Mama Oti shouted. Any gathering of women in Umuchukwu was addressed that way.

'Have you seen what my eyes have seen?' continued Mama Oti. 'One big bottle of the whiteman's sweet wine and two solid shillings, from Mazi Laza. Hip! Hip! Hip! ... 'Hurrah!' the women shouted.

'Egwu na amu!' Mama Oti gave Mazi Laza his salutatory name. The other women did likewise as they struggled to shake hands with him, some also calling him. 'Omenukoaku' – he who extends generosity in a time of scarcity.

'You should have waited for me to give them kola first,' Mama Obu shouted, breaking away from the group and making for her bedroom as if she had just realised that the dancers were in her house.

Mazi Laza took hold of Obu's hand. They had been watching the jubilating women: 'Leave the women alone,' he said as the two of them joined Madu in the obi.

'Women can be exasperating,' Madu observed. 'And noisy!'

'The answer to their noise is to build them their own house at the back of your compound. Our ancestors who conceived the idea knew what they were doing. Onyibo, has anybody prepared for you where you will sleep?' 'I don't know, Sir,' replied Obu.

'Ogechukwu!' Mazi Laza shouted. 'Ogechukwu!'

'With those women there, how can anyone hear your voice?' Madu asked caustically. 'It is like hailing someone inside Afo Ufuma market when it is in session!' 'Let me go and call her,' Obu offered.

Mazi Laza grinned admiringly as Obu ran smartly out of the obi and disappeared behind the house. 'Teacher may be an Nri dwarf, but if my opinion is sought, I would say he deserves every cup of palm wine extended to him.'

'I support that,' Madu endorsed, 'even if only for living in the same house with that tigress he married as wife. She has no comparison!'

'Do you mean that age has not tempered her?' 'Not from what I saw these two nights I spent there.

Obuechina and the other servants living with them see red pepper with their eyes. God forbid.'

'But it seems to have good effect on them,' Mazi Laza contended. 'Onyibo has not been here one day yet, but I can already see changes ...' Mazi Laza stopped abruptly as Obu returned with Ogechukwu.

'Ogechukwu, where is that bamboo bed I bought the other time?'

'Mama kept it in her room.'

'Go and bring it. Sweep the second bedroom inside this house and put the bed inside it.'

Ogechukwu turned to Obu with a look of envy easy to read. It dawned on her that her father had extended the kitchen to provide a bedroom for their mother and two for the girls, so as to vacate the only other bedroom in the main house for Obu alone.

'Are you still standing here?' Mazi Laza shouted. Ogechukwu disappeared behind the house.

'You are gradually becoming a man, you know,' Mazi Laza spoke to Obu, 'and you are the only son God has sent me. You must break loose from those women. I have bought a bamboo bed for you. When the war is over, I'll make you a proper bed ...'

'Ogechukwu!' shouted Mama Obu. 'Ma!'

'What are you doing with that bed?'

'Papa said I should take it to his house where it will be used by Obu.'

'Take that bed back at once to the place where you found it, before a leopard tears your jaw apart!'

Ogechukwu put the bed down on the sand in anger.

'What is this I hear about Obiano's bed?' Mama Obu asked her husband angrily.

'Onyibo sleeps alone in this house from now on,' Mazi Laza replied firmly.

'He will not!' countered Mama Obu. 'I have said that he will.'

'Yes, that is what you will say! You want him to sleep near you, yet you sent him away for one whole year to live with an Nri dwarf and his stone-hearted wife. Even when I pressed and pressed that he should come home, you behaved as if I was bleating.'

'Mama Obu,' intervened Madu. 'Don't forget that

Obu is a boy and should ...'

'Please keep your mouth out of a matter that does not concern you,' she retorted.

'Obiano, come let's see the people who have come to welcome you home.' She led Obu away to see her house.

'Were you not talking about Teacher's wife just now?'

Mazi Laza remarked. 'What would you say of this one?'

'Tufia!' Madu shouted. 'God forbid that such a woman should enter this house. She has no comparison!'

Chapter Twenty-Six

'Obu!' hailed Madam.

'Ma!'

'Where's the pot containing the corned beef jolloff rice cooked for the Pastor?'

'Was it not Madam who asked Ada to leave the leftover in the pantry immediately the Pastor had been served?

'May the hyena tear you to bits if you think you can fire your own question at me instead of answering my question! Of course I have been washing and scrubbing you for one year, so you can now tread on my eyeballs without fear! Bastard!'

Obu knew that any altercation would produce stars from his eyes, so he shut his mouth. Whoever is greater than you is automatically greater than your chi!

'Go and put two spoons of that rice into one of those round enamel plates you servants use for your soup, and bring it here for Evans.'

'Yes, Ma.'

'Mark you, I said two spoons. Two kitchen spoons. I know how many cups of rice went into that pot. I know what remained in it after the Pastor and Teacher had eaten. I know what should remain in it after you have served Evans.' 'Yes, Ma.'

Evans understood from the instructions that he should be given some rice. He did not eat rice often in his father's house. His father, an 'Arch A.T.' – as the chronic uncertificated teacher was nicknamed – had ten children and Evans was soon to become elder brother to the eleventh.

Teacher and Madam had consented to be Evans' god parents. Madam was fond of the plump, handsome two- year-old boy, and Evans and his parents knew it. The parents saw to it that he went across to his godparents very often.

Evans trotted after Obu to the kitchen to get the round enamel bowl and then to the pantry to receive the rice. Madam had supervised the preparation of the rice so closely that none of the boys – not even Silence – could eat out of it in the kitchen. Obu's mouth watered as he inhaled the flavour which gushed out of the pot as soon as he opened it.

'Hei!' Obu exclaimed in a subdued voice, staring at Evans as if he was terrified. 'Look at that red-headed lizard up there!'

As Evans unsuspectingly strained his eyes searching for a non-existing lizard, Obu transferred a generous helping of jolloff rice into his mouth.

'Spit it out!'

'Chei!' shouted Obu, swallowing as much of the rice as he could, even at the risk of being choked to death, while at the same time holding tight to his chest as if to prevent his soul from flying off. Madam had appeared at the door, as mysteriously as a witch, just as the spoon emptied its contents into Obu's mouth.

With the speed of lightning she had landed a staggering blow across Obu's face with one of her tyre rubber slippers. Obu was enveloped in pitch darkness, except for the glittering stars dancing all over the place. Madam struck again – on the same spot and with the same weapon.

'Ewo! My chi – O! I'm dead – O! Obu shouted as Madam thrust him with terrific force away from the controversial pot of jolloff rice and, in his momentary blindness, he bashed his head on the door frame.

'Oh! My mother! My father! I'm dead – O! I am ...'

'Onyibo! Onyibo! Obuechina!' Mazi Laza bent over his son and shook him. 'What's the matter? What is it? Did anybody touch you?'

Obu opened his eyes which he had shut tight. He was sweating all over.

'What was the matter?' Mazi Laza asked again. Obu looked dazed. 'Oti,' Mazi Laza turned to Obu's lifetime friend, Oti, who had come to spend Obu's first night at home with him. 'What happened to your friend?'

Oti stared at Mazi Laza, ignorant of what he was talking about. He had been sleeping peacefully.

'Papa, I was dreaming,' Obu said as he regained consciousness. 'I dreamt of that wicked woman, that witch ...'

'Who?'

'Madam. Teacher's wife. She is too wicked. I will not go back to her house.'

'All right.' Mazi Laza was considerably relieved. 'Go back to sleep.'

'I don't want to return to Teacher's house,' Obu reiterated.

Mazi Laza was evasive in his reply. 'Who is talking of going back when you have only just returned? Go back to sleep.'

Obu was so happy it had been a dream, that he was several miles from Aka, well beyond Madam's reach. He did not wish to go back to sleep, lest Madam appeared again to him in his dream.

'If I tell you stories about that woman, you will not believe any of them,' he began, turning to Oti.

'You know she does not give us breakfast?'

Oti could not believe him. 'How can you go to school on an empty stomach?'

'We do that every day .. '

Obu talked till the cackle of the chickens announced a new day.

'This child is not stepping out of my house again to live with anybody,' Mama Obu announced, for the benefit of her husband, as they harvested their seed yams, assisted by three Agbenu labourers.

'This feels like the harmattan breeze,' Mazi Laza said to Udo, one of the labourers, pretending not to hear his wife.

'It could be nothing else,' Udo replied.

'The harmattan is here already,' Afoka, the second man affirmed. 'You know it appears first in our town before coming down to Umuchukwu.'

'Has it set in already at Nketaku?' Mazi Laza asked. 'Ohoi! It doesn't ring a bell to proclaim its arrival,' Afoka replied. 'I could not put my hands into cold water before setting off this morning.'

'You talk as if Agbenu people ever have water to wash their hands,' teased Mazi Laza. 'Tell me whether it isn't the wash you have when you come down here that you carry with you until you come down here again? You know I know your place very well. I have carried my cloth to ...'

'I don't think you heard what I said about Obiano,' Mama Obu interrupted.

'Were you talking to me?' asked Mazi Laza impatiently.

'You will know which other person I could have been addressing. I didn't come into your house yesterday. It is your habit to smear shea butter over your ears whenever anybody is saying what you don't want to hear.'

'All right, what were you saying?'

'If this will enter your ears, what I said is that my son will not return to Teacher's house or to any other person's house for that matter.'

'I have heard.'

'If you like, hear; if you don't like to hear, don't hear. What I know is that Obiano is not returning to that witch any more. I won't have another woman roast my only son for me ...'

'Has she roasted him the whole year he has lived there?' asked Mazi Laza.

'Hasn't she? Remember what he was before he left here? See what she has left for me. Large head, that's all, and sinews and scars all over the body. They have turned him into a broomstick. But how could a woman who cannot get a child of her own take good care of another person's child?'

'Onyibo looks all right to me,' Mazi Laza replied. 'Or doesn't he to you, Udo?'

'You know children become thin when they are growing,' Udo replied cautiously. 'Growth stretches them.'

'Yes,' Mama Obu cut in, 'growth stretches them. That's why a little child should be denied breakfast every day.'

'Missus, don't you see what change Onyibo has undergone?' asked Mazi Laza. 'Do you see how he has been going on errands cheerfully? Did you notice that nobody told him to join his sisters in carrying yams this morning, and yet he joined them happily?'

'I don't know what you are talking about. My only son will not eat dead chicks. My only son will not be trampled upon by a barren witch.'

'Let it end there, Missus.' Mazi Laza was firm. 'Gather some firewood and roast some yams. We have been working on empty stomachs!'

Obu was sweating profusely when he came home. It was barely a week before Christmas, and his dance group had been practising hard at Oti's house. Their musical instruments had been transferred there following Obu's departure to Aka. Obu's mother had observed that the mischievous rats were beginning to nibble away at the samba as well as the seeds of the shekere, and since Obu was not around to make periodic checks she advised the children to find another depository for their instruments.

A rival group had sprung up, led by Samuel, hence the intensive practice by Obu's group. Obu had come home with several hits which no ears at Umuchukwu had ever heard. He had also become a wizard on the onu ugbugba, the bass samba. David was expected home in a day or two,

and he was bound to bring home several new songs. Samuel and his group were doomed to fail shamefully.

'Obiano, my son. How come that you are enveloped in sweat?' Mama Obu spoke with the tender affection of a doting mother.

'We have been practising our samba.'

'Oh, I nearly forgot. You must have a bath while I prepare some abacha ncha for you. You must be dying of hunger, and I am sure your sisters have not begun washing the bitterleaf for tonight's soup. Ogechukwu!'

No reply.

'Nkechi!'

'Ma!'

'Put water out for Obu's bath,' directed Mama Obu. 'There is no water in the house,' Nkechi replied.

'What have all of you been doing in the house that there should be no water in the house?'

'We have been cutting firewood for Christmas.'

'That's true. But you must all run to the stream and draw some water. Where are Ogechukwu and the others?'

'Mama,' cut in Obu. 'I'm going to the stream to have a bath and fetch some water.'

'Stay where you are,' Mama Obu rejected the offer. 'When you return to Aka, will you come from there to fetch water for them?'

'Mama, am I returning to Teacher's house?' It was as if the scaffolding of hope which had been built up over several days had suddenly collapsed.

'Ask your father,' Mama Obu replied curtly.

'Mama, I'm not going back there.'

'I've told you to talk to your father. It is his idea. I don't want another woman to scrape my son's mouth on the ground. It is not that we have no school at Umuchukwu or that we cannot feed you. But anything I say on this matter, he dismisses as woman's talk. So you go and ask him. You are not a woman!'

'Let him go back and leave us alone.'

'Is that Ogechukwu's voice I hear?' asked Mama Obu.

'Yes, mine is the voice that must never be heard,' whispered Ogechukwu.

'So you were in, Ogechukwu, when I called you?' Mama Obu shouted.

'Mama,' Obu interrupted, 'do you say I should ask

Papa about it?'

'Yes.'

'Mama, it would be better if you speak to him about it.'

'You should do so yourself and see if he will listen to you. No day has passed since your return that I have not told him about it, but he regards all I say as woman's talk! There are times I've wondered whether that witch Teacher married has put juju for him or eaten his heart!'

Obu scratched his big head in disgust. 'Let me go to the stream first. What I know is that I must not return to that house at Aka Central School!'

'Go and have your bath. If carrying a bucket will give you headache, don't try to bring any water back. When you return, I shall tell you the best manner in which to raise the matter with your father.'

'Yes, Ma.'

As Obu hooked the handle of the locally made bucket into his elbow, he smiled at his mother's anxiety that carrying a bucket of water on his head might give him headache! Obu, whose head was almost going bald in the centre because of the load he carried several times a day at Aka – to develop headache because of carrying a bucket of water!

Mazi Laza was relaxing on his stretcher, fresh from a hot bath. It was not quite long that he came back from a journey that covered twenty to thirty miles on his Eagle bicycle, to supply some customers the cloth he had promised to sell to them for Christmas.

'Good evening, Sir,' Obu saluted his father.

'D'even, my son. Why haven't you come to greet me since I returned?'

'You were having a bath when I returned from the stream, hence I could not come earlier to greet you.'

'That's all right,' Mazi Laza replied. 'I knew you were not in when I returned, otherwise you would have been the first person to greet me and take over my bicycle. Take a piece of my corn.'

Mazi Laza was about to break the cob he was eating into two when Obu dissuaded him, saying the corn was too dry for him.

'Has the tailor completed your Christmas outfit?'

'No, Sir. It remains making the button holes. He said

I would collect it tomorrow.'

'Good.'

Obu's courage had deserted him on previous occasions when he wanted to broach the topic which brought him to his father's obi. When he observed that his father was gradually dozing off, he decided to strike the nail on the head.

'Papa.'

'Yes.' Mazi Laza rubbed his eyes. 'Missus!' he shouted. 'You should not let sleep catch me before I have had my supper! Ekeh! Onyibo, I think you called me?'

'Yes, Sir. I left a few of my things in Teacher's house. They are not much. My school bag mainly. Will you send Madu to collect it or buy me a new box for going to school here?'

Obu had taken several days to arrive at this strategy. Having fired his shot he wished he did not have to wait for the reply, for fear of what it might turn out to be. 'Do I take it that you have decided not to return to Teacher's house?'

'I don't want to return there.'

'It won't cause any quarrel between us. You were never sold in slavery to Teacher, so why should anybody compel you to continue living there?'

Obu could hardly believe his ears. He was amazed that his father could be won over so easily, and regretted that he had not confronted him on the matter before then. He rose hastily to leave before his father changed his stand.

'Where are you going?' Mazi Laza asked. 'You want to leave me alone?'

'I am feeling sleepy,' Obu lied.

'Of course I forgot that you have worked so hard all day,' Mazi Laza teased him. 'All right, go and join your mother and the girls in the kitchen!'

Obu decided to remain impervious to the chilly winds of scorn. His concern was to hasten away before his father changed his stand. He had begun to move away when his father called him back.

'Do you know Edmund Okechukwu?'

'Yes, Sir.'

'Where is he?'

'He was at Government College, Umuahia from where he went to King's College, Lagos at the outbreak of the war.'

'Where he drinks tea with the white man,' added Mazi Laza. 'And that's not all. I heard this afternoon when I stopped at Eke Awgbu that the white men say Edmund has now reached the level where no school in the black man's land can teach anything new to him, and yet his brain is still hot. So they are to send him to their own country for further studies.'

Obu had not heard the bit about Edmund proceeding to England.

'Do you know Caleb Okeke?' Mazi Laza went on.

'Yes, Sir.'

'You may not know it, but Caleb and Edmund were born the same day in this village. Their mothers were in labour almost at the same time. Unoaku delivered Caleb's mother first before running over to Edmund's mother to deliver her. So if any two people are the same age, it's Caleb and Edmund. Where's Caleb now?' 'He's a truck pusher at Onitsha,' Obu replied.

'Right. He's a truck pusher and people say he occasionally takes things that are not his. If not for the leg he broke when he fell from a lorry he was trying to board, I'm sure he would have been carried away to Burma to fight Hitler. Caleb's father is a farmer. Edmund's father is a farmer. Are Caleb and Edmund the same thing today?'

'No, Sir.'

'Do you know the reason for the great difference?'

Obu did not reply; it was not the first time he had been told the story of Edmund and Caleb, or Edmund and some other unsuccessful boy.

'Mazi Ekeneme bought a lorry and had inscribed on it NOTHING WITHOUT LABOUR. That is the reason. Nobody who does not suffer can succeed in life. Edmund is what he is because his father forgot yams, forgot cocoyams, forgot meat and sent him to suffer in Teacher's hands. It was Teacher who made him. Teacher tells me your brain is even hotter than Edmund's. So there's no reason why you should not drink tea with the white man and study in the white man's land. But if you want to be like Caleb, you should come home and live with your mother, eating goat meat, drinking palm wine and dancing with masquerades. But when the time comes, don't say that I did not warn you. You can go.'

On 14 January 1944, Obuechina Maduabuchi returned to Teacher's house at Aka C.M.S. Central School, unaccompanied by his mother.