In the beginning, there was the ocean. My life's narrative is tied to the tides of this symphony of salt and water. At the age of five, a fishing expedition with my parents and uncle took an unexpected turn as our boat capsized during a sudden sea storm. One of my earliest childhood memories was that of my father hoisting me back into that boat. His head bobbing in and out of the water. He was saying something to me – words I can't remember, sentences swallowed forever by the sea. I was the only survivor. Hours later, villagers from Ngwelle, my hometown, discovered me sitting on the boat, a look of enchantment on my face, as if I had glimpsed something invisible to all others. It was whispered among them that I had caught sight of the creatures dwelling in the ocean's abyss.

I was brought back to the shore, waterlogged and dazed, and there, in the salt-scented embrace of Igweego, my grandmother, I began a life shaped by the dance of the ocean. She bestowed upon me a new name, "nwa nwere oke osimiri n'anya ya," which translates to "the child with the ocean in his eyes." Igweego, in her own right, was akin to the ocean—a woman of profound depths, shrouded in mystery and wonder. She was blind but saw supernatural visions. She was simple but held deep bowls of wisdom in the cradle of her heart. Men and women from nearby towns and distant kingdoms sought her counsel and guidance, drawn to the wisdom that flowed from her like a river.

Igweego had not always been blind. She was born with sight, but on her tenth birthday, she fell ill. A fever coursed through her veins, causing violent convulsions that left her gasping for breath. At one point, a local medicine man declared her dead, only for her to recover from her illness in the middle of the night. Though she regained her health, her sight never returned. She often remarked that her life began after she lost her sight. Her other senses heightened, and she developed a profound understanding of the world. During this time, she ventured into the forest, learning the language of birds, the healing properties of herbs, and, most importantly, she developed the guiding principle of her life—a principle she instilled in everyone: to starve their fears, for if not, their fears would starve them of life's bounties, experiences, and wisdom.

She would share a parable of two men, Aku and Emeka, who ventured deep into a forest. Aku emerged after many moons, proclaiming it an evil forest, recounting tales of savage beasts, treacherous flora, and perpetual darkness even in daylight. His words were embraced by his people, and they perpetuated the narrative, labelling anyone who questioned it as crazy. Fear became ingrained in their culture.

Emeka also emerged from the forest, but he named it the mystical forest. He spoke of wild animals, but also of their potential to be tamed. He shared ways to decipher the language of the untamed, and the medicinal properties hidden within even the most poisonous plants. He marvelled at the sheltering embrace of the towering trees, providing shade even on the sunniest days. His people listened, internalised his wisdom, ventured into the forest, and uncovered new wonders—fresh food, potent medicine, and marvels beyond imagination. They acquired knowledge that elevated them above other kingdoms. They remained unconquerable, for they had conquered the greatest foe: fear, which lurks in the shadows of the human heart.

Despite listening to Igweego's profound teachings, a hidden fear of the ocean lingered within me. All my nightmares revolved around the ocean —a fear that would intensify a few days after my fifteenth birthday, when Igweego summoned me to her sacred grove deep within the forest. Igweego retreated to this place several times a year, accompanied by Obiageli, her devoted aide. It was here that she rekindled the embers of her spirit and sought out special visions. Whenever these visions came to her, she sent Obiageli into the town to call forth the individual destined to receive her message, guiding them to her sanctuary within the heart of the forest.

On the day she received a vision about me, I had gone to the farm, my purpose being to harvest ripe mangoes that I would sell at Oye market the following day. It was harvesting season in Ngwelle and the sun was at its most golden, casting the sky in the deepest shade of blue I had seen in quite some time. As I made my way to the farm, I greeted the elderly folks seated in front of their homes and exchanged pleasantries with fellow villagers heading to their respective farms. I paused for a few moments at the doorstep of my friend Okoye, who was preparing to harvest corn and pears—produce he also intended to sell at the market the next day.

As I reached the farm, a sudden downpour, unprecedented in our village, drenched the landscape in torrents of rain. Rain in our village typically arrived with a precursor—a heralding wind, the looming presence of dark clouds casting shadows over our rooftops, the distant rumble of thunder, and the sweet fragrance that permeated the air as the initial raindrops graced the earth. However, on this morning, there was no such warning; even the sun seemed caught off guard. Seeking refuge beneath the welcoming shelter of a tree, I awaited the rainfall's abatement. In the neighbouring field, a young girl's voice rang out, singing a traditional talk-song, and I couldn't resist joining in:

‘Mmili na-ezo

Anwu na-amu,

Agu no na owele akwo nnwa!’

‘Rain is falling,

Sun is shining,

Back in the yard, a lioness is in labour!’

As I sang along, my curiosity stirred, and I resolved to inquire about its origins from Igweego upon her return. Who was there to witness the lioness in labour on the day the sun and rain held the sky? Lost in these contemplations, I was startled when Obiageli materialised before me, drenched from head to toe. I couldn't help but joke that it seemed like a day for unexpected appearances. However, she didn't respond with a laugh but rather conveyed that Igweego wished to meet me in the forest. I froze in place. Throughout the ten years of living with Igweego, I had never been beckoned to the forest or received any visions from her.

"I...I'll need to return home to change into dry clothes," I stammered.

"No need for that. Your clothes will dry as we make our way there. Look, the rain has ceased," she reassured me.

Indeed, she was correct. The rain had abated as swiftly as it had begun. The sky now sported its full, serene blue, while the sounds of people toiling in their fields filled the air around us. We embarked on our journey to the forest, walking through the farms that marked the forest's entrance and then entering the lush green canopy within. The air was saturated with a rich aroma, a blend of damp soil, untamed vegetation, and smouldering wood. It teemed with more life than I had imagined. Birds, concealed beneath the protective embrace of tree leaves, sang out songs, and creatures of all kinds responded in kind. The earth beneath our feet was damp and yielding, and as we progressed, squirrels, rabbits, and tropical lizards scurried away at our approach. I winced as I accidentally stepped on a snail, its slimy residue adhering to the sole of my right foot as I continued to walk.

As we ventured deeper, the forest grew dimmer until we reached a clearing, where I beheld a sight that would remain etched in my memory for the rest of my days. Darkness surrounded us but light was filtering through one spot under the trees. Igweego was standing under the light, her face turned up to the sun. Her grey hair which was usually plaited in neat rows billowed across her face. Her iris which had a faint brown colour had taken the light of the sun and was more alive than I'd ever seen them. She was standing straight, her hands open by her side. I don't know how much time passed while I stood transfixed by the sight before me, but Igweego broke out from her trance, looked directly at me and started speaking.

"Osimiri, my beloved child," Igweego began, her voice filled with a depth of emotion that resonated through the forest, "I ventured into this forest, seeking visions for others, yet it is you whom the sun has persistently illuminated in my heart. I bestowed upon you the name 'nwa nwere oke osimiri n'anya ya,' the child with the ocean in his eyes, and it has become evident that the kingdoms beyond the ocean are your destined path. Visions of you in faraway lands, standing before kings and queens, captivating them with your wisdom and wit, keep flashing on the face of the sun. I see you trading with people whose skin bears the hue of milk, strangers whose shadows have yet to grace our shores. You will master their language and customs, and in turn, they shall learn from you our traditions, the indomitable spirit of our people, the potency of our herbal remedies, and the wisdom of our proverbs. Through these endeavours, you will amass wealth and ascend to a position of great eminence. But first, my child, you must embark upon a journey to the sea. There will be storms, and trials that will test your very core, but in those moments, you will finally recollect the words your father imparted to you on that fateful day when the sea claimed him. If you conquer fear, you will conquer the sea and all its storms, emerging triumphant."

Igweego's words hung in the air, carrying with them a sense of profound destiny and the challenge that awaited me on the horizon. The experience was a pivotal moment in my life because, three days after meeting her in the forest, Igweego passed away in her sleep. I happened to be the last person she shared one of her visions with. She was laid to rest in our home, and the entire village mourned her loss for weeks.

Following her burial, my nightmares intensified, and this time, she became a recurring figure in them. I would find myself on a boat, adrift on the sea, only for a sudden storm to materialise on the horizon. My father and Igweego would appear on the left side of the boat, gesturing for me to paddle on. On the other side, a large green creature, its back turned to me, boasted the longest tail I

had ever seen on any living being. I'd be immobilised, unable to move forward or retreat, and then I'd awaken, drenched in sweat.

Only two men had ever undertaken a journey to the ocean, and neither had returned, leaving me with no one to consult regarding their experiences. Most of Ngwellee's men and women who ventured near the sea engaged in fishing in the shallower waters or combed the sands for seashells. Countless tales circulated about what awaited on the other side of the sea. Some believed it marked the world's end, and if one paddled far enough, they would cascade over an eternal waterfall. Others spoke of distant cities governed by sea gods and Mami Wata. Those who held these beliefs often offered produce from their farms as offerings, casting them into the ocean waves. Then, some held the belief that the ocean served as a bottomless basket, collecting the teardrops of humanity's sorrow and releasing the tears into the sky, a symbol of both our collective pain and the potential for healing. These tales gained ground through the strange objects that washed ashore in our village - lifeless bodies, peculiar fish, strange shells, messages in bottles written in a foreign language, and even once, a large bag of gold.

Igweego's parable about Aku and Emeka continued to haunt my thoughts. I contemplated becoming the 'Emeka' who would venture across the ocean and return with the true account that would dispel the myths surrounding it. However, fear always presented the path of least resistance, and I chose that easier route. I relocated deep into the hinterland, far removed from the ocean, and initiated a trade in ivory and animal hides. Yet, it seemed that no matter which direction I took, I was always drawn back to the ocean's edge.

Some of my ivory customers resided along the coast, and my business trips inevitably led me back to the shores I had once fled. Determined to put distance between myself and the ocean, I ventured even further inland. It was there that I encountered a woman whom I fell in love with. Everything appeared to be progressing smoothly until she confided that she suffered from fainting spells, and a medicine man had advised her to dwell near a seaside town, as the ocean breeze would be beneficial for her health. Once again, I decided to leave her behind, torn between love and the relentless pull of my unresolved fears.

For many decades, I built a life that was as far from the ocean as possible. I married another woman, fathered five children, and established a trade in the hinterlands. I ensured that my life was fortified against the ocean's allure, with all my necessities readily available within arm's reach. Then, just a few days before my seventieth birthday, a tragic fall left me with multiple fractures. My family desperately sought out a bone doctor, but none could be found nearby. After several days of searching further, they located one. It was a doctor from Ngwelle, my hometown. I could not avoid taking this trip. I could barely walk, let alone run away. So, with broken bones and a broken heart, I returned to my hometown.

Ngwelle had changed in many ways since the last time I was there. People had ventured across the ocean and discovered lands on the other side. Trade had become a significant part of life there, and the town had prospered. Schools had sprung up, offering education on various subjects, including life, health, and commerce. The myths about the ocean had dwindled; people now travelled over it daily and built their homes along its shores.

The hospital where I was to receive treatment overlooked the ocean, and every day, its ceaseless roar filled my ears. It seemed to remind me that I could have transitioned from being the child with the ocean in his eyes to the man who conquered the ocean. One night, I had a dream I hadn't

experienced in decades. In the dream, I was out at sea, and once again, Igweego and my father stood by my left side. But there was a stark difference; this time, they didn't gesture for me to move as usual. On the other side was the large green creature with the massive tail that had always frightened me. It turned to look at me, and where its face should have been, there was nothing.