

KENNETH IGIRI

**OSIMIRI
& OTHER
STORIES**

A Collection of Short Stories from Africa

Osimiri & Other Stories

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To Jesus, the mediator of a New Covenant

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Osimiri, Dawn and the Girls

Sunrise. It was the most beautiful experience in Amaiyi. The orange glow lined the horizon like the marks on a ripening pawpaw fruit. Its soft warmth in the early hours of the morning was just beginning to set in. Thatch roofed huts littered the landscape, silhouettes of the huts, trees and everything else with significant height stood between one and the horizon. Music from the trees greeted the rising sun - from the Olive Pigeon to the Wood Dove all the way down to the lowly Crow, the loud deep-throated singer who woke everyone up three or four times each morning. Mgborie Agu woke up at the second crow but her daughters Mmecha and Anuli would not rise from their mats till the third or fourth crow. Their little twelve-foot-square hut would then be filled with yawns, moans and a little bit of stretching. None of these came from

Mgborie herself. She was a tough woman, a widow of twelve years playing father and mother to her teenage daughters, hidden away on the outskirts of a remote Igbo village. Poor and burdened but happy.

Memories of Ikenna Agu filled her thoughts every other day since he died. He was her man. A farmer, a hunter, a Palm Wine tapper. He made every other able-bodied man in the village look extremely laid back. A few more years and he would have been rich enough to earn a chieftaincy title. He had organized the young men of his Age Grade to cut the path to Osimiri, the large river that gave the entire village and many surrounding villages life - Umuisi, Ezeama, Onu-Ibina, Okafia, Umuhu and many others. The drinking water, the rice fields, the farms all depended on Osimiri. The

villagers were happy with Ikenna Agu, at least most of them. Everyone had said Ikenna had not died naturally. His body had been found floating on Osirimi late one night after a frantic search. Someone must have drowned him.

“Mmecha, Anuli, shake laziness off your body. Stand up and go to the river...”

“Mama I am tired o. I am tired...” said Mmecha. She was older but less enthusiastic about her morning chores. Her little sister naturally followed her but was not as vocal about her own feelings. She just kept that precocious little face like an innocent toddler making it very difficult to tell what could be going on in her fourteen-year-old mind.

“Stand up!” Mgborie snapped, giving Mmecha that look that made her upset but

obedient. Mother was all they had and no matter how uncomfortable it was, they had to obey her. Mmecha stepped out to the door of the hut, tying her worn out wrapper from behind then across her burst till she made a knot with the ends behind her neck. She looked at the sunrise: One of the wonders of Amaiyi. The lands elevation and their hut's position made it a grand experience just watching it. Osimiri was in the other direction, westward. The view was even better from there. Going downhill made it look like the sun rose several times each morning.

Anuli had grabbed two twenty-litre clay water pots. She mumbled a greeting to her mother and lightly bumped into her elder sister "You are standing in the way..." she murmured. Mmecha was upset. She stared at her sister with disdain. Anuli had broken

into her morning fantasies. When would the young, strong man come to take her and make all those stories her Mother had told them about their father happen for her? Anuli simply ignored her and stepped back into the hut briefly to pick up two large pieces of cloth. They looked dull and dirty, not obviously dirty because of the dark colours but any keen observer could tell neither had been washed in quite a while. Anuli threw one in Mmecha's direction and carefully rolled the other up into something that looked like a wheel whose diameter was small enough to sit on her head - a head pad for carrying water pots. It did not bother her that the head pad she had just constructed would make a mess of her plaits done with rubber threads. They were coming loose already anyway. Mmecha had similar plaits. It was common fashion for

young girls of Igbo descent throughout Eastern Nigeria.

Before long the pair had left their mother in the compound cooking and started on the downhill path to Osimiri. Everyone had told them their father was known to have gathered the young men of the village to create this path but after years of poverty they had stopped being proud of that... it just did not matter anymore. Several girls and young boys were on the path too. A lot of chatter was not uncommon on this path early in the mornings. Normal practice for almost everyone in the village was to set out early in the morning to get water for cooking and drinking. Often they would bathe in the river before returning. The path was rough, undulating and about a meter and half wide. It was restrained by something that could pass for a short wall

as if some erosion had dug through the path elevating the sides that we still preserved by bush and shrubs. Massive trees were spotted every few meters, even fruit trees.

Along the way the quiet morning chatter was swallowed up by the of a pair of ranting boys who were fighting over some *udara* fruit they had been plucking from a sixty-foot tree! They could not have been more than eight or nine years old each. Anuli dropped her pot and quickly ran over to stop them.

“Stop it! Stop it!” She scolded. She dragged them apart and stood between them, ordering one to move along towards the river which was their intended destination in the first place.

“Stupid children. Your mother sent you to fetch water and you decide to stop by and

pluck *udara*. Are you not planning to eat this morning? Will *udara* fill your tummies?" Mmecha hissed from a few blocks away. She had stopped briefly to wait for her sister. This fight would be something they would talk about for the rest of their ten-minute walk to the river. And why would they stop to dissuade children they may not have known personally from fighting? Well, everyone cared about everyone in this part of the world.

Okorie and Okafor had caught up with them while they were playing the Good Samaritan. They kept their distance though and simply eavesdropped on the 'fight conversation'. They were well known twins in the village, a rarity in this part of the world. They were twins, but there was some mystery about their birth: they had been

born hours apart, on different market days. The old men of the village who were born in the previous century often discussed what would have happened to them if they have been born in their time. The simply would not exist. The twins did not carry any water pots. The young men who had been initiated in the *Oboni* cult never carried water pots. That was left to women and children. *Oboni* was mandatory for every adolescent boy, it was a shame not to sail through the initiation rites. The twins were members. They knew the secrets....

Mmecha and Anuli arrived at a point along the path where it broke into three. One path led to the source of the river. The water was sparkling clean here and good enough for drinking. Good enough for drinking in Amaiyi and surrounding villages. They had neither the facilities nor the knowledge to

do any other kind of testing on the water so their taste buds were sufficient. It was good enough for drinking according to their test buds of everyone in Amaiyi. It could even be labelled 'sweet', and it was just the right temperature too, no need for a refrigerator, a dispenser or any of those fancy White Man's stuff some of which had not even been invented. There was a saying in this part of the world: *what one does not know cannot kill one*. It seemed to be working! The third path led to the end of the river. There they could have their baths hidden behind tall bushes along with other stark naked women, young and old. The men's 'bathroom' was further down the river. All the soap left by the women seemed to disperse after a few minutes ride down Osimiri and it looked clean enough to bathe in again. The wonder of flowing water!

Anuli's eyes brightened. She stopped and stared into Mmecha's face. Mmecha knew that look. It came over her little sister whenever she wanted to say something silly. It was like some familiar spirit.

"What is it now?"

"Let's go and bathe first!" Anuli blurted, smiling from ear to ear, wide eyed.

Mmecha hissed and started going down the first path. Anuli's face fell. She stood a few second and yelled, "I am going to have my bath first!" and started in the opposite direction.

"Oh God!" Mmecha whined, dragging the 'Oh' and stamping her feet now and again on the moist floor in quick succession out of frustration. She could not leave her sister. Her mother would strangle her, raise her from the dead and strangle her again.

Neither could she make her change her mind. That was an impossible venture where Anuli was concerned. She could try to persuade her, beg, cajole, plead or any of the other less intrusive methods. *Making* Anuli do something was completely out of the question. She played big sister to those who were younger than she was but she would not accept being the younger one and taking instructions so easily herself. Anuli ignored her elder sister and started walking northward. The river was in view just behind the mix of elephant grass, ferns, and variety of tropical shrubs that grew along Osimiri. "Ohhhh God" Mmecha cried out again and started walking briskly after Anuli. Her explanation fell on deaf ears, "Don't you know that if you bathe first you are going to get dirty again when we go to get cooking water? "

“I want to bathe first, Mmecha. If you want to go the other way, please go. I can take care of myself. I will join you later”

“Anuli you are acting like a child! Listen to reason!”

Anuli turned around and faced her elder sister. She hesitated as she balanced the empty water pot on her head. “I am not a child!” She snapped, “I can take care of myself. Please go if you want to! “

This part of the river was teeming with young children swimming, diving, having water fights and laughing hysterically. It was noisy but looked like a whole lot of fun. There was always something enchanting about Osimiri. The sparkle, the gentleness of the ripples, the perfect temperature, the scent of natural moist green. A child could stay here till twilight when his mother

would come looking for him. The adults who wanted to bathe in the river came much earlier. Some came here about midday after working in the farm for hours. But no one came to the river or even stayed there at night.

Arriving at the part of the riverbank which had been prepared for bathing was like emerging suddenly out of the bush, a narrow path suddenly widening just a few feet from the river. The riverbed sloped very gently. The children whose cackling noises filled the air must have been quite safe as they played and often went very far into the river. No one was afraid. One could clearly see the riverbed along with tiny fish and other interesting creatures that strayed this far out from safety. Anuli dropped her pot in a hurry almost cracking it. That would have been the news of day the. She

hardly noticed how hard she had dropped it. Mmecha took care of things as usual, putting together both pots and their head pads. Anuli's rush into the river made Mmecha giggle about that statement she had heard a few minutes previously 'I am not a child'. She certainly acted like one. Her wrapper had been left flying off her naked body as she rushed in, her pair of slippers too. Mmecha picked them up and put them together with their water pots then she gently unclothed herself too and walked in bare feet, testing the water with her toes first.

The children paid absolutely no attention to the girls and said nothing to other another either. All one could hear was the giggles and occasional screams, the splashes of water, the ripples and all. All the children, almost twenty of them were naked but

Mmecha noticed there was only one pair of shorts on the riverbank. Their own wrappers were the only other pieces of clothing there. Had the children come to the river stark naked. That was not farfetched, but it was definitely unusual these days. Children had become more conscious of themselves since their own days.

“Anuli,” she almost whispered. A sudden deathly fear had come over her. Something in the atmosphere had changed but Anuli did not notice. The riverbed suddenly seemed dull. The giggling died down and one of the children stood upright, knee deep in the water and turned her head in Mmecha’s direction fixing her gaze directly on Mmecha. Mmecha looked back and the tales of the Village Wise man all rushed back into her memory. Tales about the children of Osimiri and their yearly

sacrifices. They never spoke to anyone and they appeared and disappeared at will and for specific purposes.

“Anuli, Anuli, they are not children. They are not children” by now she was shouting at the top of her voice. Her voice was so loud the young men heard her and shuddered. They also had noticed the change in the atmosphere. It was as if Osimiri had woken up and was looking for something, or someone.

“Anuli!” Mmecha shrieked. She was overcome with fear. Anuli raised her head and looked around wondering what had come over her sister. Then she noticed something very unusual. All the children were gone! All, except one. She must have been about six years old. Her skin colour had changed, whitish. Her belly looked like a little hill blocking Anuli’s view of her face.

She was lifeless, floating on the water. Anuli noticed the movement under the surface of the water. The ripples that resembled arrows seemed to point in her direction, approaching steadily. She heard Mmecha's call. She knew this must have been the fourth or fifth time her sister called her, standing outside the river, frantic. "Anuli, come out! Come out!"

In the confusion a few young men had run towards them, shouting back, "What is it? Are you alright?" Among the young men were Okorie and Okafor, the twins. Anuli had started running out of the river. There was no time for graceful swimming, she just struggled frantically with all parts of her body, making her way to the riverbank. Inches away from the bank, she felt the touch of a pair of fangs. She could not have guessed what it was but it was very painful,

more painful than the sting of a wasp. Mmeche watched her dropped on the floor; the lower part of her body sent splashes of water up in the air. Mmecha shrilled, frozen with fear. Okafor ran towards Anuli and picked up both arms dragging her out of the water, naked. Her toes drew a set of parallel lines on the riverbank. Okorie covered her up with her wrapper. He had been keen enough to notice her colours when they were on the way to the river earlier that morning.

Okorie and Okafor knew the secrets of Osimiri and always came prepared. In Okafor's pouch was a short knife, some bitter kola nuts, known to drive snakes away, a few scent leaves and other medicinal leaves. He quickly tore a strip off Anuli's wrapper and tied it just above her knee making a very tight knot. He glanced

at her face and noticed she had getting pale. Her eyes bulged slightly and were staring into nothing. She could be dead in seconds. He chewed a combination of leaves and squeezed the resulting fluid on her ankle where the fang marks were. He and his brother were surrounded by up to five others who just watched solemnly. Mmecha was now sitting at a distance, carrying both palms on her head, her elbows pointing sideways, tears running down her cheeks.

Some of the men began making comments:

“What kind of foolishness is this? How could she have gone into Osimiri to bath at this time of the morning even when she heard the sound of children? She is not a stranger, is she? *Does a toad run about at noon for nothing?*”

“I passed by them when her sister warned her not to come this way. Our people say *whoever does not here with his or her ears will hear with his or her body*. It serves her right!”

“How can you say that, do you not have any compassion? How could she have known they voices were the voices of Osimiri’s children? She is a woman. Women know nothing!”

“All of you, keep quiet and let us hear!” yelled Okafor.

The river was still, sparkling again. The child’s body was now ashore, as if Osimiri had spat it out. Someone went close to identify the body. He would have to send word to *Oti Ekwo*, the village newsman so the child’s parents would come and make the appropriate sacrifices required to claim the body. The sun was rising higher,

knocking its light off the surface of Osimiri though Mmecha was no longer interested in admiring its beauty this morning. Okafor lifted Anuli across his left shoulder. Her head and arms dangled down his back. Okorie took Mmecha by the hand while she sobbed. Her left hand was in Okorie's, her right carrying her pot and head pad. Okorie carried Anuli's water pot. They made their way back up the narrow, sloped path to the village. Along the way Okafor and Okorie switched positions, one carrying Anuli and the other taking Mmecha by the hand.

Mgborie knew something was amiss. The girls had spent much too long this morning at the river. She figured some young men had stopped them to speak to them. That would be a good thing. However, she was troubled. Her instincts told her it may have been something unwelcome. She thought

about the day Ikenna's lifeless body was carried into the village from Osimiri. The goddess had taken him, silenced him with her snakes; silenced him forever. She wondered where he was. Was he with the ancestors or in Heaven? Was he good enough to be in the Missionaries' Heaven? But he had never heard about the Jesus whom the missionaries preached. Where would he be now? She broke her thoughts momentarily and looked at the pot of *Oha* soup she had been cooking on a tripod just outside their little hut. It was ready. She stirred it and then served a drop on her left palm to taste. She gave herself a little nod after tasting the soup. Then she heard the tumult from a distance behind her hut. She hurriedly took the pot of soup into the hut and rushed back out to see what was going on.

She peeked into the river path and saw the crowd approaching. She made out Okafor carrying someone on his shoulder. The commotion was thick. She waited just a little bit before she noticed Mmecha in Okorie's care, weeping. She gasped and then gave a loud shrill.

"They have come again o. My enemies have come again!" she threw herself on the ground. Among the crowd those who knew her ran to her and held her. "Woman do not hurt yourself. The girl is alive. The girl is alive." Mgborie sat up. Relieved. She shook her head and lifted both hands, "My God, you have done well..." She praised.

"We have to take her to *Umunnato*," Suggested an enlightened fellow in the crowd.

"Umannato to do what? We have given her medicine. She will be fine," answered Okafor.

"Let us take her there. The White Man's medicine is sometimes more powerful than ours. You gave her medicine to keep her alive but she is not well yet. *The hand cannot be thicker than the thighs.*" Another voice added.

"Please let us go there o. But how shall I pay them. I do not have any money. *Should I not hang my bag where my hands can reach them?*"

"Do not worry, Mborie. The missionaries have already paid for us all. They say it is Jesus Christ who has paid but have not seen Jesus Christ, we have only seen them," concluded the first man.

Ummunnato was the location of the General Hospital built for the people who lived in Bende division, a local government in Eastern Nigeria of which Amaiyi was a part. It was miles away. Riding there could take an hour. Okorie offered to get his father's bicycle and Ekekwo, the first man who had suggested the trip offered to bring his too. Everyone was eager to help out, the joys of communal life.

Okorie hurried away while Okafor stayed with Anuli. She was breathing heavily but she did not speak. She was now lying on the ground beside her mother who was still sitting down, relieved for all the help she had received. She placed her hand on Okafor's shoulder. "My son. Thank you very much. May my God bless you and your parents. You are a blessing to us. Thank you."

“ It is well, Mother.”

Okorie ran through the village square. His father's house was on the other side of the village. He stopped for a moment. He could not resist. The *Ikperikpe* Dancers were out. They were war dancers. His grandfather father often told him and his brother that their ancestor Ejeagba was a great warrior who often led the war dances in his generation. The lead dancer would carry a narrow rectangular platform on which were among other things the freshly cut human head, a pot of concoctions, feathers of rare birds and the skin of a leopard or other wild cat. These days they did not carry real human heads but Okorie's grandfather had told him that Ejeagba, his own grandfather was a true warrior. He got his name 'does not return empty handed' because whenever he went to war or to an

assassination, he always came back with fresh human heads. Okorie sometimes wondered whether there would be recompense on his generation for all the blood his ancestors shed.

The *Ikperikpe* Dancers all wore the traditional red and white soft woven hats which fell to one side. Those who were not singing had palm leaves in their mouths signifying silence. After the assassinations of those days, no one was to speak of what they had done. The music was largely made with primitive percussion instruments. Every now and then the 'singer' made intermittent long shrills in tune with the drums and sticks. They danced shaking their 'breasts' which was a prominent part of their physical features. They were the strong men of the village, second in appearance only to the *Men of the Big Hoe*, a

bunch of heavy eaters who farmed acres for anyone who could pay with a lot of food and palm wine.

Okorie ran on after watching for a few minutes. He rode back to the edge of the river path where Mgborie Agu's hut was. Anuli was still breathing but less heavily. Okafor had to carry her again, walking behind Okorie and the bicycle till they found smooth road some distance away from the village square where the dancers were still sweating it out, dancing around the five hundred year-old tree which marked the square. Every year, a live chicken was hung on this tree and allowed to die there. Women were forbidden from coming close. A marker on the ground showed the border but stones were available for men to sit on at the foot of the tree. It was not very clear what the tree did

for the village but ever since anyone remembered, it was supposed to be something sacred.

The ride to Umunnato was silent. The morning sun had become very strong by the time the three bicycles got there. Mgborie's cousin had also come with his bicycle. Okafor still had the job of carrying Anuli. Umunnato was a reasonably moderate sized building. It was big enough for Bende Division's health problems. The entire building was painted pure white. The white missionary nurses welcomed them as soon as they crossed the open gates and arrived at the reception. A white nurse asked what was wrong with her.

"Osimiri... Osimiri almost killed her"

“Osimiri,” Nurse Anne replied sounding not particularly alarmed, “OK. Bring her this way “

Nurse Anne spoke Igbo fluently and knew the villages in Bende quite well. She knew Osimiri referred to the part of a tributary of the Niger that crossed Amaiyi. She also knew that Osimiri was also used to refer to the river goddess who killed people twice a year. She also knew that there were snakes in that river. So, it must have been a snake bite.

It was not too long before the venom was neutralized with a very painful injection. Okafor was amazed. “The White Man is spirit,” he concluded. He and his brother kept gazing at everything at the hospital. It was certainly not something they were used to. Mgborie was more concerned about her daughters, grateful that neither death nor

Osimiri had dealt her another blow that morning. Her daughters were safe.

Later that evening Anuli and Mmecha were out listening to tales about Osimiri from the village sage, Mazi Okoro. They were ecstatic, almost as if nothing had happened that morning. They enjoyed the tales of the Village Sage, Mazi Ebube and then sang folk songs with other teenagers, dancing around a bonfire. The twins were there too. They talked. Okafor with Anuli and Okorie with Mmecha. They laughed, talked and laughed again. As the sun sank into the horizon on the west side of the village, just behind Osimiri, the twins decided to walk the girls home. Mgborie was glad to see them. Her smile formed as soon as she saw them, long before she could hear their conversations. Maybe this all worked out for good after all. In one day, both her

daughters found good young men. That would be the story, if the twins asked eventually. There was still hope for Mgborie Agu, maybe she could enjoy life once again.

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The Elder from the War

The calm of the evening was always soothing after church on Tuesday evenings. For most single, middle-aged worshippers, it was the perfect environment to meet someone new, hidden away in the open darkness surrounded by cars parked at varying distances in the parking lot. The light was not sufficient to show everyone's face so it was very easy to miss someone you know. People hardly stopped to check who was passing by them; everyone was in a hurry to get into their car and get home.

Kevin Asamoah had been attending the Shalom Covenant Church for about three years but hardly knew anyone. It was a modern church, everyone minded their business. It reminded Kevin about something he had read in Frank Peretti's book, *The Visitation*: a certain church in that book was described as a factory, one batch

of worshippers being moved out to prepare for another batch, nothing personal, nothing intimate, no family; just a very well-organized church where everything functioned like clockwork. The problem was it simply did not meet the needs of many. Many people did not feel they were part of a family, simply part of the batch of worshippers.

Kevin was thirty-four but single. He always hoped he would meet someone suitable in church. On Tuesday evenings like this, he would keep looking around as he walked very deliberately towards his shiny 2015 Honda Accord. One person or the other often caught his fancy. There was something about high-flying over-thirty ladies who drove their own cars that stirred him very profoundly. Earlier that day he had seen a dark tall lady in traffic driving a

brand-new Kia Sonata. They had exchanged glances in a very peculiar kind of way and she followed him till they got to church. She was dark and had short hair made to look like dreadlocks. Her earrings dangled from her ears and her evening dress was spot on. She was the typical diva, ready for an enthralling encounter. Keven noticed she had laughed as soon as she parked beside him. He developed cold feet and failed to say anything to her. It was a bit of a shock they were both coming to the same church, or maybe she just followed him because she also fancied him or wanted some adventure that evening.

Kevin was never in a hurry to go home; he did not have much to go home to as a single man living single. As soon as he approached his car, he recalled the mystery lady and noticed her slot was then empty.

She had left! He had again missed an opportunity to meet someone new. Could it be that she had just followed a good-looking man in a good-looking car and she wasn't really coming that way. He heard isolated chatter in the distance, two ladies exchanging pleasantries. Besides this chatter, the only other sound was that of doors shutting and cars zooming off away from the church premises. The parking lot was gradually thinning out as he shut his own door and turned on the engine.

"Excuse me, Sir!" a voice beckoned from the passenger side of the car. Kelvin startled. He hadn't noticed anyone following him. This gentleman must have been practically tip toeing behind him. How could he have noticed the old man when his mind was rather focused on all the ladies in the parking lot? He must have been over

seventy, very thin, hardly well fed. He looked utterly unkempt and all his hair was full blown grey. His moustache was eons old, entangled with strands of hair from his nostrils and his face was marred with crevices, stretch marks and wrinkles. He had left two or three of the top buttons of his old and dirty striped shirt loose like nothing really mattered to him. Kevin looked at him and thought to himself, "How did you sit in church?". Not many people would have been excited about sitting beside this fellow in church. What would they do when the anchor said something like "Give your neighbour a warm handshake and say, 'Welcome to church'?". Shalom was a high-profile church! No one wanted to be seen around anyone that looked unkempt, poor or like some riff raff. How did this man get here? Was he really in the service?

“How may I help you?” Kevin asked finally after assessing the elder. It was a rhetorical question. Kevin just about knew what the man wanted. Somehow every person in need had a way of seeking him out. There was something about him that attracted needy people. It was so commonplace for him to run into healthy but needy people that he had begun to think of it as something God wanted him to do with his life which was becoming more and more vain. Maybe he ought to have asked “What do you need money for?” or “How much do you need?” because that might have made the discussion shorter.

“My name is Francois Kokou. I was in church today ...”

Kevin stopped listening momentarily. He knew this line. The beneficiary of his benevolence always sought to convince

him, the godly benefactor, that he was also godly. There was something quite sublime about begging in the name of God in this part of the world. It was very effective! After all no one wanted God to be upset with him or her for not helping a poor fellow when one had the means to do so. That would be utterly sinful, wouldn't it? He recalled the pair who had stopped him close to home a couple of weeks earlier to say they had run out of money while on evangelism and that slender young lady who always showed him the notes she took in church each Sunday and wanted to have a spiritual discussion before finally asking him to help her with some change for lunch. He almost always obliged. They were genuinely in need it seemed and giving them a little money always made them go away. He kept listening.

“... in Sierra Leone. I lost my two children and wife. They were burnt to ashes when the rebels came to Freetown. I thank God I was in a meeting that day or else I would have been dead...”

Was this Mr. Kokou actually going to tell him his entire life history? Why didn't he just get to the point? Kevin waited patiently, reaching for his wallet. But then he thought to himself what a contrast Mr. Kokou was when compared with the exquisitely polished and well made-up young ladies that had occupied his mind so deeply that he didn't even notice when Mr. Kokou seemed to sneak up behind him. He wondered maybe if the Lord Jesus were to appear to him whether He would look like the mystery lady or like the old and ugly Mr. Kokou. He paused and then retrieved his mind from its wandering once again.

“... I have been looking for someone to just help me with 10 cedis to go home... someone invited me, but I cannot find him anymore...”

OK. Great. He had gotten to the point. He needed only Ten cedis. Someone invited him. And where was this person who abrogated his responsibility by abandoning this old man after making him leave his house. Kevin knew he could not dig up the answers to these contemplations that night except he wanted to stay at the empty parking lot overnight. He considered taking Mr. Kokou all the way home at *Kotobabi* like he half-heard him say but he shelved that thought. What if he was a thief or something? He handed the old man brand new 20 cedi note and gently drove off, watching Mr. Kokou through his rear-view mirror out of curiosity. He noticed Mr.

Kokou was just about stopping another church member before the evening news on radio caught his attention. It then occurred to Kevin that the old man was on the wrong side of the premises; he could easily have gotten a bus at the other entrance that faced the major road.

Kevin hadn't driven ten minutes when he noticed the Sonata sitting idly by a brightly lit restaurant. On instinct, completely without thinking it through, he swerved into the slot and stopped right beside the Sonata. He overheard the taxi driver that had been following closely behind him hurl an insult, but it was not very important to him. He stepped out of the car and took a deep breath, glancing at his Bible and notebook which he had tossed in the back seat back in the church's parking lot. He walked towards to the restaurant's door but

before he got there, he noticed the mystery lady sitting alone. The walls of the restaurant were made of glass and Kevin could have sworn she gave him a glance though she did her very best to fix her gaze on her plate of chicken salad.

Kevin had never been here. It had such a pleasant look, very well-lit and decorated with plastic flowers. The furniture was mostly made of wrought iron framework. One could see right through the full length, thick glass walls and watch the entire mix of urban night-time life playing out on the streets of Ring Road, Accra. While Kevin admired the interior décor of La Gourmet as this particular spot was labelled, a sturdy gentleman walked by and sat facing Amanda Lartey.

“Now what is a pretty young lady like you doing sitting alone?”

Amanda paused, "Waiting for someone..."

"And what dumb fellow would be keeping you waiting here all this while? Been watching you, you know?"

"You mean stalking me?" Amanda laughed.

"Oh no. Not at all, lady. More like watching out for you..."

This thick fellow had a certain slur in his speech as if he was singing in the Opera. Amanda couldn't quite tell whether it was a very well made fake or he really always spoke like that. Kevin managed to sit, not taking his eyes away from the duo. It was really bad timing for him, or by the other guy. He did have a truckload of confidence approaching a lady of this class with his abysmally skewed body mass index. His checkered shirt was of good quality at least but it might have looked better on him if it

was properly tucked in. And those jeans trousers ... such a poor attempt at sagging if there was ever a good one.

“My name is Jeremiah Frimpong, but my friends call me Jerry Sky...” he went on and on, gesticulating like a secondary school boy on his debut stage play. Amanda could not stop laughing. She laughed so hard that Kevin could not help but join her in a chuckle. She noticed, stealing a quick glance the second time. Kevin was pretty sure she was more entertained by this joker than attracted; but then it often happens that women are not bothered about a man’s looks as long as the man can make them happy however he does it.

“So, where does the Sky part come from?” Amanda finally asked, coughing from laughter. Jerry was happy to explain:

“I am a highflier!”

Amanda roared with laughter. “Are you a comedian as well?” She pointed towards him with her very long and well-polished fingernail.

“Oh No! Very serious guy. I work with MTN! I can tell you more about my job and you can tell me about you. Can I buy you dinner this weekend?”

“Oh! why not tonight. I am just kidding... just kidding”

Kevin got up to pick up a drink. He needed a reason to keep sitting there waiting for Jerry Sky to complete his act for this evening. Then he heard her add the magic line:

“But I’m waiting for someone actually,” Amanda had repeated.

Jerry Sky made his rib-cracking 'Goodbye Speech', completely void of any sense of embarrassment arising from the hostile last line of this young lady. Kevin, on the other hand, must have sworn she raised her voice or was it just what he wanted to believe. By the time he returned to his seat with a bottle of canned maltina, Amanda was alone, Mr. Jerry Sky had finished his act. Maybe he would have dinner that weekend or maybe not. Kevin just sat there, staring into the television and sipping his maltina a bit at a time. Amanda watched him this time, not at all bashful, waiting for him to say something. She tapped the glass surface of her table every now and then with her hardened fingernails, trying to get his attention. She couldn't have driven Jerry Sky away for nothing! She was actually having a good time till this stranger came

hanging around. She liked him, or maybe she was just curious about him.

“Hi” She whispered, waving at him gently, only very slightly raising her hand from the table, her elbow was resting on the table as though she heisted. What if he did not respond? She had to take the chance. If he wasn’t going to say anything all night, why did he follow her all evening. Well, she was the one who followed him to church earlier, but he followed back, into *La Gourment* and that must mean something good. Kevin moved over to her table and soon they were chatting like long lost friends.

“... so, this man came along to my car in church and told me his entire life’s story. He was in Sierra Leone in the nineties. Saw the war first-hand and even lost his family in it.

He said he used to be a diamond dealer back in the day. I found it quite unbelievable...”

“Why unbelievable? Life happens. My Dad used to ride trains back in the day when those things were really booming in Nigeria. He was doing quite well till what they call the oil doom happened. Ha Ha Ha. A few years after the fall of the naira some old general said Ghanaians had to leave Nigeria.... Stuff happens. I was just five years old, but I remember how It was when we first came back. It was hard. My Dad became a poor teacher. So, you never know, the man could very well be telling the truth....”

“Yes, but it’s still very hard to understand. You know, in my head I asked myself how come he didn’t have some investment somewhere he could fall back on ... and

what a mistake, he doesn't even have a house in his homeland. It is just appalling."

Kevin wasn't great at exciting ladies into romantic relationships, but he definitely knew how to engage a smart lady in a good dose of intellectual discourse. Amada Lartey was up to it. She held her fort quite well and that singular characteristic simply excited Kevin.

"You know, thinking more about it now, I actually do know that man," Amanda said, breaking the brief silence, "I have actually helped him out before after a Sunday Service"

"Wow," Kevin broke in, "He told you the same story?" he asked making Amanda laugh again.

“Well, if he had told a different story then we would have reason to be suspicious, wouldn't we?”

Kevin stared into her eyes, leaning forward. They were absolutely clear, a sharp contrast to her very dark complexion. She seemed good to be with and was certainly smart. He liked her short cut. She had started something that looked like dreadlocks on it. Her poise was intact, she had that look of a fierce go-getter, unafraid to take chances. Maybe she was spiritual too....

“But who knows whether he just goes about telling people the same story in order to make money off them? Some people don't want to be rid of their problems, they just want to keep benefiting from them.” Kevin added.

“You know what Jesus said about people in need don’t you? I am not so good at quoting, but I do remember he wants us to help people in need as if we were helping Him! Now that’s awesome. Every person who needs our help is like giving us an opportunity to do something for Jesus!”

Kevin was spellbound. Where did she get that from? When they parted ways that evening it was with a promise to meet again soon. Kevin thought about how his day had gone: Francois Kokou was the old man; devoid of any kind of artificial makeup, utterly unkempt, nasally offensive, jobless and incapable of giving him anything or being of any material benefit. Kevin had spent just a few minutes with the elder, hardly paying any attention to his apparently obnoxious story. He let go a couple of currency notes sufficient to do

away with the bother of taking time to listen to someone in real need. Amanda Lartey was the young lady, a sharp contrast: feminine, young and full of life, well taken care of on all fronts, worthy of being seen together with Kevin. Worthy. This was the typical human experience, worth, prestige, reputation. The rich did not think the poor worthy of their company. White people do not think of black people being worthy of their company in certain quarters. Hutus do not think of Tutsis being worthy of their company. The list goes on and on; there is always something or the other that creates the barrier to human relationships: social status, race, creed, tribe... the list never ends. Church was the worst place for prejudice, but it was so obvious at Shalom Covenant Church, obvious to the victims.

Saturday night. Mr. Kokou was seated with a couple of friends at a cheap night club. The noise was deafening, a combination of very loud highlife music, drunken chatter and wanton whistling at scantily clad young girls some underaged. It was dim, the only lighting in the room was coloured: blue, green, and some other dark colour. The activities in this environment did not require much light. Mr. Kokou still looked unkempt but he certainly didn't look beggarly. Chattering with two friends he called Sammy and Kofi, he laughed hysterically on occasion at obscene jokes they made about the adventures of their youth. Sammy would tell about his time in the Nigerian Army before he went AWOL during a tour in Liberia. Kofi spoke of his days as a young musician and all the money he lost chasing women in Northern Ghana. Francoise as Mr. Kokou was called didn't say

much except a few stories from the days before the war in Sierra Leone. The other two always thought he was hiding something about his past. He never spoke about the diamonds to them.

“E be like say I don get some good catch for dis church wey I dey go o” Mr. Kokou announced after some random jesting. He released a long stretch of cloudy smoke from the Indian Hemp he was consuming with relish before he continued. The room was so turgid with hemp that everyone had gotten accustomed to it.

“One man give me Ten Ghana pe last week Tuesday. Other people dey give me just one cedi, two cedi, three cedi... God punish dem! Di man na rich man o. Di car wey im de drive suppose reach twenty thousand dollars!”

"Heiiii.... Woyome! Woyome!" chorused the other two, referring to a popular Ghanaian businessman who had received over Fifty Million Cedis in judgement debt from the federal government. His name had become a symbol of gains made by questionable means.

"I dey tell you something!" emphasized Kokou, *"I go jam am again tomorrow. Na im go dey sponsor my syringe."*

Everyone laughed. Kokou retrieved a syringe from his leather bag and pieced the top of a bottle with its needle. He filled the syringe up and injected himself on his left forearm while the others looked on relishing the moment. Sammy took off his old, sagging fedora and fanned himself briefly with it and then covered his knee with it. He waited for his turn.

“Drop your money first!” Kokou snapped

“Abeg na” Sammy responded, “na bicos you don get sponsor?”

Kofi giggled while reaching deep into his pocket to retrieve a few old five-cedi bills.

The following Sunday Kevin and Amanda had made plans for lunch after church. Things were picking up between them like those smoldering coals of fire they had seen as they were leaving La Gourmet that Tuesday night. Every day was barbecue day at La Gourmet so they both thought some other day they would experience those pieces of red meat.

Accra was one of the hottest places in Sub-Saharan Africa in the first half of the Gregorian calendar. It was as bright as it

was hot and Sunday afternoons were often not left out. Everything looked beautiful after church at Shalom Covenant Church, every colour on the fancy clothing of the better privileges came alive in the sunlight. Smiles were richer, hugs were warmer. The air-conditioning from the church auditorium would have just started wearing off before everyone got into their airconditioned cars, ready to go home, paying little attention to the likes of Mr. Francois Kokou.

“Hey ...” Amanda called out softly as she met at the Church cafeteria.

“Hello Amanda...”

She sat down, half-sliming and taking a sip of a cup of smoothie she had just picked up from the counter. From the corner of his

eyes Kevin noticed the attendant at the counter staring at them. He must have thought to himself, "Are they married? Are they 'committing sin'?" Just then Mr. Koku walked in, staggering. The way he walked one feared for him that he would suddenly fall apart. "He must be ill or something ..."

Amanda thought to herself. Kevin didn't see him until he turned around from the counter. He was both shocked and upset. How could he intrude so rudely? Did he need money all the time? Kevin received money in six digits every month so he had no way on understanding that Ten Cedis every week was very difficult to live on particularly when someone was on drugs!

"How may we help you, Sir?" he snapped, giving Mr. Kokou a very hostile stare, straight in the eye. The old man was not a bit perturbed. He let out a little forced

cough and softly responded in a cracked voice:

“I am so sorry to disturb you Sir...” He dipped his right hand in his breast pocket and out came a doctor’s prescription for some lung infection. “...I have to by some medicine... you see I used to smoke a lot before so it affected my lungs and created all sort of diseases in my tracheal system. I don’t have anyone to help me... please just Twenty Cedis to buy my medicine...”

Kevin’s first instinct was to ask what had happened to his extended family. How was it possible that he did not have anyone at all to help him? On second thoughts, he felt there was no need inciting another long story about the old man’s life. He needed to spend time with Amanda who was just smiling at the old man. He handed him a

Fifty Cedi note and Mr. Kokou thanked him profusely.

“That must be the second time this week you are giving someone something to dismiss them rather than out of Christian compassion!” Amanda said, sipping her smoothie carefully,

“Unless of course you have other beneficiaries...”

Kevin stared at her. She always seemed to get him thinking more seriously about his spirituality.

“You do know he still smokes, right? Probably Indian Hemp!”

“What?”

Amanda laughed aloud. She could not believe the depth of his naivety.

“The dark lips, bloodshot eyes, desperately agitating for small amounts of cash... he is what you call a junky. Does that make you regret giving him money?”

“Of course!” Kevin snapped, visibly upset.

Amanda laughed again, practically reeling. “You don’t want your money used for unholy purposes? Anyway, I think you just weren’t paying attention the last two encounters you’ve had with him. You might have noticed if not for a certain tall dark lady you were thinking about”

“Naughty you! And I suppose you know the name of that lady, huh?”

Amanda rolled her eyes and pursed her lips. Kevin watched her, strongly attracted to her sassiness. Her boldness in saying her mind. Her brain that matched her beauty.

“On a more serious note, Kevin, I think most people in our churches these days are simply too much into their own selves. I am avoiding using the word selfish but that is just what it is. When I was young, we were Catholics and a lot of emphasis was placed on helping the poor and less privileged. Why should the fact that a junky comes to church to beg for money bother you? Who did Jesus die for?”

“Well, Amanda,” Kevin deliberately reciprocated the direct reference. There was something endearing about calling each other by name.

“People simply take advantage when someone is ready to give money in such a large church. That’s why we have structures in place to help the needy...”

“And how often have you donated to the Charity Box? Do you even have time to go near there? I think we should rather consider it a privilege when we have the opportunity to help someone out of the blue. It might be Jesus appearing to us, you know!” She winked and laughed again. Kevin laughed.

The debate went on for another thirty minutes till they both agreed it was time to go somewhere more private. Out in the car park, just as they were stepping into their cars, still chatting and not wanting to let each other go, Amanda tapping him gently on the shoulder and pointed in a certain direction. It was Mr. Francois Kokou again, the elder from the war, in a distance, asking someone else for money.

“I think we can help him. Together.”

Lagos Street

Dark nights. Dark and lonesome. There is just something very romantic about 10:00 PM and its close neighbours. It's like the moment between relief from the day's work and late night when your body has had enough pounding. For a single person, it is like hunting season. That is how it always felt for Kwaku Asamoah. At twenty-five he was lucky to have a car of his own in this economy and it happened to be very useful, that sleek Honda Accord his father let him drive. He had finished school early and landed a big job with one of the banks in Accra's rich Ridge area. Life was good.

Amanda Osakwe. Nigerian. Early thirties but something about her body was invigorating. It seemed like she never aged. She could still pass for a secondary school student in one of those Nigerian movies she

always watched. She looked great on the outside, but life hadn't been so fair. Her father was a Nigerian trader born and raised in Aba, arguably the most popular commercial hub of eastern Nigeria well known for *Ariaria* Market. She didn't enjoy life much in Aba, she started longing for the big cities as soon as she was thirteen, inspired by Nigerian movies shot in Lagos, Abuja, Johannesburg. Her taste buds were groomed for the limelight and she wanted the fame and fortune the Nollywood producers had painted in her mind.

Ngozi Ebiri. Nigerian. Raised in Benin City but born of Igbo parents. Her parents were travelling missionaries who had worked for Dutch Campus Ministries. She remembered travelling to at list fifteen states in Nigeria. In each state, her father would work as a Student Trainer in the main University in

the capital and spend time on weekends seeking out souls in remote villages. Once in a while she would go with him being the first daughter of two. She enjoyed the trips, helped distribute items to the villagers and even helped her Mom cook when students came to the house, but she never really understood what her father kept telling the students and villagers about Jesus Christ.

Kwaku had picked up both ladies at the west end of Accra during one of his evening trips in his Honda Accord. Nothing deliberate, simply spontaneous with no intent but adventure. Two ladies going somewhere would be a like spicy seasoning to this evenings thrill. Ngozi sat in front, being the more daring of the two, she was poised to milk this young millionaire. Amanda admired him from the rear-view

mirror and noticed he was watching her too. He sped off without asking where they were going, and the vehicle was turgid with the sound of the Koko Master blaring from Kwaku's flawless sound system. He moved his body to the beat even as he accelerated, 80km per hour, high on adrenalin.

"You have a very nice car," Ngozi ventured, with her eyes savouring the gleaming surface of the dashboard that Kwaku had recently sprayed. A reflection of her face was faintly visible on the glove compartment. Then she took a good look at him. "Small boy", she thought to herself, half-grinning, waiting for a response.

"Yeah! Thanks," he smiled, elated with pride. His smile was enchanting. He looked in the rear-view mirror again and asked Amanda, "What's your name?". Neither was sure whom he was asking so

the response came from both: “Ngozi” “Amanda”. All three laughed and the ice was broken.

“Nigerians. My name is Kwaku”

“Kwaku. Wednesday born. How did you know we are Nigerians? Or are you guessing?”

He laughed again and even tapped his forehead on the steering wheel. Amanda was on the edge with his manner of driving. It was very disconcerting, but he seemed to be in control.

“Oh! but your accents have given you away. You Nigerians speak some way. So which way are you going?”

“Someway *kwa*? It's you Ghanaian's that speak somehow. What is 'someway'. Na

wa. We are off to East Legon, Lagos Street. Will you take us that far?"

"Of course. Great to meet you. I am your friend for tonight ..."

Kwaku took turns glancing at Ngozi and Amanda briefly. He couldn't help but notice the way Amanda's face fell when he made the last statement. She was reminded of her life when he said, "... for tonight ...". Every man she met was her friend for one night and there did not seem to be any end to the cycles in sight. Ngozi couldn't be bothered, she had accepted who she was and was happy with her life.

"So where were you going before you met us?" Ngozi asked excited. To Amanda her voice seemed distant. She had withdrawn in her thoughts and was no longer paying much attention to the discussion.

“Just driving around. Cool evening to drive around”

“Money dey. Rich boy! So, where do you work?”

She suspected he was doing something shady and wanted to know how he would answer when asked such a question directly. It was foreign to her for anyone to own a Honda Accord 2016 at this age without dirty hands. Even her own hands were dirty, or should I say her legs.

“Home!” snapped Kwaku, “What about you? Do you live in East Legon?”

Both ladies laughed hysterically. Amanda was jolted temporarily out of her daydream by his apparently naivety. Or maybe the naivety was theirs as he should have been laughing. He knew they were prostitutes or at least he guessed they were. They were

too easy to pick up, and there was something about the way they dressed and comported themselves. Girls for sale. He also knew what typically happened at Lagos Street at this time of the night. The men went there to meet the girls and the girls went there to make some money. That was it, to make money; not to make friends or meet boyfriends just to make money. No strings attached, just meet a human need and have your needs met. Amanda never wanted this, she got trapped in Ghana while pursuing here thirst for fame. Ngozi couldn't care less as long as the money kept coming.

Kwaku had left the glasses, enjoying the breeze of the night as he sped furiously along Liberia Road. The ladies had worn themselves out laughing, almost in tears. Their lives were full of mixed feelings – the

highs of orgasms deflated by the lows of a feeling of worthlessness. The highs of negotiating a big deal from a randy rich man, subverted by the feeling when that same man threw a bundle of cash at them and retorted, "You no get style, sef!". The highs of a loud all-night party diffused by the jolt of reality by daybreak, headaches and that hollow feeling when alcohol wears off. The highs, the lows and all the vain points in between.

Kwaku swung back to his spiritual dimension, feeling pity for these two ladies and though about how to start a faith conversion. Wondering how 'Have you given your life to Christ?' or 'I want to share the Gospel with you' would sound, he decided to start on a milder note.

"What church do you attend?" he began.

He chose that line expecting a response like, 'Church? To do what?' or simply, 'We no dey go church!' so he could start his presentation by telling them what a noble thing it was to ensure one always attended church, but he got a different answer. Ngozi told him the name of her or their church, he wasn't quite sure. He was taken aback, and his train of thought was messed up. They actually go to church?

"OK," he responded at last, "It's a good church. Do you go every Sunday?"

"Oh... yes," Ngozi replied emphatically. She heard Amanda sigh deeply. "We even have midweek services of Wednesdays and prayer meetings on Friday Evenings. On the last Friday of every month, we have an all-night vigil. Very powerful. You are invited. E dey be!"

Ngozi laughed. Amada giggled at her attempt at speaking the Ghanaian version of pidgin English. Kwaku cringed. He wondered what they were teaching in that church. He knew the church and was all the more disturbed. How come these two ladies could comfortably attend week after week, two of three times a week and have absolutely no conviction about changing their lifestyles.

“So, you don’t work during Night Vigils?”

“Ah. You to give to God what belongs to God and to Caesar what belongs to Caesar na!”

“So, doesn’t your body belong to God?” Kwaku had slowed down the vehicle and become more serious. This was getting bizarre to him. His mind was reeling. What could he tell these ladies who knew the

scriptures and could quote some of it, attended church regularly and still didn't see any problem with prostitution as a profession? Ngozi didn't venture answering his last question clearly. She just threw a few words back at him "Of course it does!"

He turned to Amanda who had been quiet. She was so innocent looking. So young. She could have passed for an entry-level marketer at a popular bank. And she even had the appearance of brilliance whatever that was.

"Amanda, you also attend all services?"

She nodded gently and Kwaku saw it briefly through his rear-view mirror. "Yes please". She had turned her face toward him momentarily then turned away again, looking the window at the nice-looking buildings of Airport Residential, speeding

past them. In her mind she wondered where all this interrogation was going? She was eager to get out of this young boy's car and breathe some fresh air.

Kwaku paused for a while and decided to just give it to them since there was nothing to lose anyway and they were just making the turn at *Siashie* into Lagos Street.

"I think God expects more of us in terms of keeping our bodies holy for him. We cannot be living the way we want and expect Him to be pleased with us. The Bible says, 'Nothing in all creation is hidden from Him to who we must give account, but all things are uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account'..."

Kwaku went on for a few minutes before Ngozi interrupted.

“*Abeg* ... all this Bible wey you dey quote. Just take am easy. Na condition wey make crayfish tail bend. God understands...”

Kwaku knew that people typically begin to get offended when conviction was getting to them, so he was patient. Maybe this stealth evangelism of his was working after all. He recalled someone told him back in the day about a certain pair who made it their duty to visit brothels for the purpose of sharing the good news of Jesus Christ. He always considered this an incredible feat akin to going into the lions’ den to rescue their prey.

He was about to proceed with his preaching when Amada pointed to a rowdy restaurant and told him they would be stopping right there. The music was loud and fast paced. It must have been Shatta Wale or Stonebwoy singing, Kwaku wasn’t so sure. Puffs of

smoke littered the air around clusters of dimly lit round tables. Hoarse laughter was replete, open caressing and scantily clad men and women were all over the place. Green bottles of beer were the predominant drinks and three or four northerners preparing beef and chicken barbecue in streams.

“Na wa o. Dis kain young pastor wey we come meet this night!” joked Ngozi as Kweku drove off. The smock on her face was intriguing, the picture of someone who didn’t believe in the authenticity of anyone who claimed to be “holy”. Her church attendance was some sort of panacea for her pounding conscience. Concluding everyone else in church was also a hypocrite made her feel better. If no one was good, why should she feel bad about her lifestyle? Amanda was different. Her friend had to

constantly assure her they were OK. Everybody else was doing something bad, including the pastors. In fact, she had confessed to Amanda that she had slept with the assistant pastor multiple times. She wasn't telling the truth. The truth was she had tried to sleep with the assistant pastor multiple times, but he hadn't gone all the way. He could neither talk about it nor stop her from coming to the office because he couldn't exactly tell everyone the complete truth about what happened.

Kweku's thoughts were on his encounter as he drove home. His car radio was on, but he hardly heard what was going on there. His thoughts were on himself, the duality. His faith often conflicted with his feelings, his attraction to women, the rush of hormones in the evening. He knew those ladies

needed Jesus and were exposed to Him every Sunday but dualities in Christians like him probably kept them far away from a real encounter with Jesus. Surely there would be judgement for these scenarios.

The following Sunday was a beautiful service. Everyone seemed elated. The worship was 'powerful' as they would say, the message was on point, lives must have been changed dramatically, Kweku had thought to himself while stepping out. His was a large church, almost ten thousand strong. He thought about it for a moment: the thousands in his church and in many other big churches in Accra. Where do these people live? Surely, they couldn't be living in the same Accra where a civil servant would demand bribes to circumvent processes. They couldn't be part of the lineup of ladies in skimpy clothes who

come out at 9:00 PM on your way to Adabraka. Surely, they couldn't be part of the many young men flirting with ladies after work hours every evening and sometimes getting trapped. Where did all these people live. As his thoughts reeled within him, he was jolted back to reality by a plump middle-aged lady waving frantically at him and calling out, "Osofo-Guy! Osofo! Kweku!" It was Ngozi.

"You see. You refused to invite me to your church. Someone else invited me!" she announced excitedly. Kweku was a bit shocked. She was a prostitute and here she was in his church. He thought prostitutes only attended other church - those mushroom churches - but not his.

"Such a powerful service! You are really blessed o" Ngozi continued.

Christianese. That was the language everyone who attended a Pentecostal church knew how to speak. “Bless you” “Powerful” “Awesome” “I was blessed” “Anointed man of God”. You could easily pass for a great Christian if you knew some of these phrases. Ngozi knew all of them! Kweku was flabbergasted. Can someone really sit through a service in his church and go and sell her body on the same night? He was tempted to ask her whether she would work that night, but he withheld the words on the edge of his lips.

“How about Amanda?”

“Oh! That girl? She doesn’t lie going to church o. I have to force her. Today she told me she is sick! Will you drop me?”

She gave him a strong look in the eye. So that was what all the excitement was about: a free ride.

“OK” replied Kweku, his mind reeling again.

“How can people be so hardened?” he thought to himself. Amanda could easily be the better of the two - so convicted of her lifestyle that she felt unworthy to attend church. Ngozi didn't feel she was a sinner. And one has to believe one is a sinner in order to seek salvation. Kweku was at a loss as to how to deal with this one. And she obviously wasn't the only one.

As they stepped out of the gate towards the car park, they glanced at people one after the other wondering what they were up to in their personal lives despite all the heavy preaching in church. Every now and then

he saw someone he knew and said hello with a smile, wondering even more. He was probably saving himself for last. He would need a mirror for that.

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Nd'Ukwu

In the old days, when people still drank water from rivers and walked by the light from Palm Tree wicks, the vestiges of the ancient giants still roamed Igboland. The sons of Egbuta were among the last of them known throughout the region now known as Eastern Nigeria. They walked with gait, exceeding eight feet. Their arms were the size of a man's legs and they hunted antelopes with their bare hands, running after them on their own feet. Their chests appeared like anthills sitting on their torsos, smooth as a coconut husk, solid as rock. There was no war they could not fight, and nothing scared them, not even a trip to the forests where spirits and gods were said to dwell. They spoke with strength in their tone and feared no man, their eyes glowed green and their minds were exceptionally keen.

Ikwaagwu, Ikere, Obike and Ebiri were four brothers, sons of Egbuta. The voices of the young women sang for them and the drums of smaller men made the music they danced to as they returned from their expeditions. Every time the moon rose again, there was a battle to fight. The kings of Igboland paid them to fight and whoever parted with the most bags of cowries or pieces of *ola* was an ally of the giants. The number of battles to fight never seemed to wane and neither did the strength of *Nd'Ukwu*.

"They posed no challenge at all, these men of Mgbidi" boasted Ebiri, the youngest as they returned. His brothers strained to hear him amidst the loud music.

"Not at all. I could have defeated the entire army alone," Ikere laughed.

“Of course, you could!” laughed Ikwuagwu.

The rest of the army of ordinary men; men of *Umummecha* danced more than they spoke and drank large quantities of fresh palm wine straight from the kegs. Many were fast getting drunk and staggering after the beautiful young women who sang for them.

“We have to return. The sun is fast setting and our journey is a long one” offered Obike.

“Does something in the darkness frighten you, my big brother?” asked Ebiri, still excited.

“Maybe the spirits of the men we have killed!”

Ebiri roared with laughter. "If they were so powerful, we would not have killed them, would we?"

"Well, when a man becomes spirit, he becomes even more powerful than any man, even the giants. We do not fear them, but we must not make them our enemies."

"You speak truth, Obike. There will come a time when we shall also become spirits, giant spirits. We shall become powerful even among spirits," said Ikwuagwu

"Isn't it strange that the route to that realm passes through the doors of death? You speak of the day of our deaths!"

Ikere rarely spoke but when he spoke there was such profound wisdom, like one who often sat with the elders.

“Maybe I shall become a god!” announced Ebiri.

“Gods were never men, Ebiri. Gods are eternal”

“Is that so? So how did they begin? Surely, they must have begun as men. Maybe as men who were beyond the nature of ordinary men? Like us.”

“Gods do not need to begin,” insisted Ikwuagwu, “They do not count the rising and falling of the Sun like we do. They dwell in another realm”

“It must be a great thing to be a god!”

Ikwuagwu made his way through the crowds to the podium where the Elders of *Umummecha* were seated. He was welcomed with a soft smile from the head of the elders, Mazi Ogwo Ahamdi. He bowed and

greeted “*Ndi Eze*¹, I greet you”. Mazi Ahamdi stretched his staff and accepted him. He scanned the podium with his eyes for a moment. The regalia of the body of kings was impressive in Umummecha – lion skins, leopard skins, feathers from eagles and falcons rarely seen, cowries and charms not known in many parts of Igboland. It is said that those skins had been passed down from five generations before, when the men of Umummecha were mighty warriors, almost as mighty as *Nd’Ukwu*.

“*Ikwuagwu*, you are welcome. We greet you. Come and sit with us and let us speak,” said Mazi Ahamdi.

¹ Literally “The Group of Kings” referring to the concept of communities in Igbo land being ruled by a committee of elders.

A servant quickly retrieved a stool fit for a man the size of Ikwuagwu and set it up on the podium. He sat, causing a slight squeaking noise from the platform which was made of bamboo sticks and palm fronds.

“I thank you, my kings. You have done us great honour today.”

“We owe much to you and your brothers. You have saved us not once, not twice, not thrice but many times from the hand of our enemies”

“You could have done the same yourselves, your kingdom is known to be a land of might warriors. But you choose to honour us by giving us the privilege of fighting with you. We thank you”

“We thank you more, Ikwuagwu, son of Egbuta. We shall go to battle again soon. We wish you well. Go in peace and tell your father the kings of *Umummecha* greet him. Remember the voices of our ancestors: ‘*Gidi gidi bu ugwu eze*’². We shall meet at the new yam festival”

The rest of the kings smiled and waved at Ikwuagwu as he stepped off the podium. One of them motioned to a servant and he followed Ikwuagwu with two others carrying four white cocks, gourds of palm wine, yams and bunches of pumpkin leaves. Ikwuagwu stared at the three young men and looked back at the kings, thanking them with a broad smile. He looked at the three young men again and noticed the look

² Unity is Strength

of fear in their eyes. Every normal man feared the giants. They were glad *Umummecha* had them for friends.

Truly the sun was setting, and the giants had to walk a long distance to the mountains where they lived. It was a night of the full moon and their path was lit. But the sounds of the spirits did not fear the light of the moon. On their course, the trees often hid from them the light of the moon. The talk of spirits was not a talk for this night. Even Ebiri, who spoke always, did not speak tonight. Ikwuagwu was the eldest, wise, pensive tonight. When they passed *Mgbidi*, they heard the drums of masquerades in the caves. It was that time of the month when priests met with spirits and mighty men met with their *chis* in person. It was an eerie sound, reminding

them once again of the talk of the spirits... and the gods.

It was morning. Egbuta rose from his mat first. He noticed the glimmer of light travelling all the way from the horizon into his hut through the window. He opened the door and walked out to the darkness of dawn, a pleasant darkness, dubbed by the light of the rising sun. He yawned and looked towards the huts where his sons slept. He turned back into the hut. He had slept before they returned the previous night and he knew that they had been killing for the previous seven days at Umummecha.

“Ala, drink with me and may our women be fruitful. May our lands be fruitful, and may we have life ...”

"Ikenga, drink with me and make us greater than our enemies..."

"Idemmili, drink. Protect my sons whether they travel by land or sea..."

"Agwu, drink. Grant us health..."

"Njoku Ji, drink with me and prosper us year after year..."

"Amadioha, drink my drink and may your thunder never fall on my sons..."

"Ogbunabali, drink. May we never come under your judgment..."

"Ancestors, Drink wine ..."

Egbuta called the names of several gods, pouring a drop of palm wine on the dusty floor as he made each prayer. He then had a long drink himself. He must have been

much thirstier than the gods, the way he drank, or desirous of drunkenness. He had emptied the gourd. Then he broke a twig from the shrub he had grown in front of his hut and began chewing it. Just then Ebiri came out of his hut. He wiped his eyes and stared at his father. His brothers were fast asleep, exhausted from their conquest.

“Have you awoken, my son?”

“Yes, Father. I greet you.”

He drew near and sat on one of the three tree stumps that were carved like stools at the centre of the compound.

“I had a terrible dream father. It was very fearful. Yet I do not remember it!”

“Tell me the parts that you remember and maybe I shall remind you of the others ...”
Egbuta responded. He was known to hear

from spirits things that were not heard by ordinary men. It seemed the strength of his body had gone into his spirit as he aged. Spiritual strength.

“What if I remember nothing of the dream? Can you still tell me what it was? Surely the spirits who visited me can tell you the dream”

There was a short silence. Egbuta brushed his teeth hard with his chewing stick and spat. He stared at the rough end of the chewing stick as though examining it for something that must have been retrieved from his mouth. His eyes were cloudy, like one lacking sleep, or one too full of palm wine.

“My son, every power in this world has its limits. There are hierarchies among men

and there are hierarchies among spirits. Omnipotence does not belong to us.”

“Who determines that limits of our powers or the powers of the spirits?”

“It must be the gods! The gods rule the world ... the world of men and the world of spirits”

“Then there must be a god of gods. The god who rules the world of god. He must be the one who has omnipotence. Can we seek this god?”

The light of the sun was strong now, but not its heat. A bright beam crawled along the ground all the way from the horizon, creeping into every corner and climbing upwards every wall as time passed. Ikwuagwu, Ikere and Obike walked out of their huts, wiping their eyes. The both

walked over to the same tree where their father had been and plucked twigs.

“Have you awoken, my sons?”

“I greet you, father”, they chorused.

“Your brother has a mind of the white man my grandfather told me of. He told me of the white men who came from across the great ocean which few people have seen. They ask questions and their gods answer them with great inventions, profound things ...”

“We have been told that the white man was a god that came from heaven,” Ikwagwu volunteered after spitting on the ground, “How come you say that his gods answer him?”

“They are but men. My grandfather spoke to them himself and touched them with his

hands. They asked a lot of questions about him and sought to take him where they came from. They were amazed at the greatness of his body and he was amazed at the greatness of their minds”

“I wonder which is greater. A great body or a great mind ...” said Ebiri.

As the sun rose, the time came for them to take the family meal. The women had returned from their trip to the stream downhill with pots of water on their heads. They heard the laughter of the giants as they made ready the fire for the meal of the morning. Ebiri’s questions never ended and some of them amused his brothers. In a few minutes the men were interrupted by the aroma of boiling *Oha* soup as one of the ladies opened the large pot to introduce the *Oha* leaves grown in the backyard. The soup was replete with smoked fish and bush

meat harvested from nature; fresh spices enriched the broth. Mgbaeke, Egbuta's senior wife, well known for her classic culinary skills had supervised the cooking. Ejije, his youngest wife, served them.

Breakfast was refreshing but the mid-morning nap the giants had planned was interrupted by a messenger running and panting profusely towards the Egbuta compound. He wore only a leopard's skin around his loins and a bead neckless. He looked like he was from Elugwu. He bowed at a distance, got up and started running again.

"Nd'Ukwu, sons of Egbuta, I greet you!
Egbuta, son of the Giants, I greet you"

He was still panting, making the giants eager to hear what was pursuing him. If they were not such fearless men, they might

have stood on their feet, ready to flee as well. The young man paused to catch his breath while five men and a few women in the background stared at him.

“My son speak quickly lest you die from all this running before we hear the news you have brought” said Egbuta, now standing and holding on to a staff.

“My elder, a frog does not run in daylight unless something is pursuing. Something mighty has pursued the warriors of Elugwu. I have run for many miles, seeking the sons of the giants.”

Obike interrupted, wearing a suspicious look on his face, “The warriors of Elugwu are a mighty lot themselves. They have never sought help from us, not in my lifetime”

“My lord, you have spoken truth. The elders say, ‘*A chuo aja ma a hughu udele, a mara na’ihe mere be ndimmuo*’³. We have seen something that our fathers did not see. The warriors from the north who invaded us came with weapons of fire. The sound of their weapons was like the voice of *Amadioha*! Many of us have fallen on the field of battle, the rest were scattered in the forest, afraid and ashamed to return to our hometown ...”

“Who were these warriors? What village of the north are they from?” asked Ikwuagwu, his voice coloured with rage. The messenger looked in his direction, observing the glimmer of his broad chest, rubbing against his huge biceps.

³ If the vulture fails to hover at the end of a sacrifice, then you know that something happened in the land of spirits

There was some unplanned silence. Then Egbuta spoke, "I must consult the gods ..."

The women convinced Osita, the messenger to have a meal and rest while Egbuta consulted the gods. When he returned from the shrine in the back of the compound, the ominous look on his face could not be mistaken. He had heard something unwelcome from the gods. He summoned his strength and spoke like a warrior.

"My sons, you must go to this battle in haste. Do not underestimated the warriors from the north. They shall match you height for height by reason of their horses." Egbuta paused, then added, "Go and prepare!"

"Ebiri," he called softly as the giants went into their huts to prepare for another battle. His last son turned around and walked gently toward him. He had never seen his

father so shaken. His voice was firm, exuding strength but masking a fear that had suddenly grasped his soul.

Egbuta brought out a piece of kolanut and placed it in Ebiri's palm. He then took a piece of white chalk and made a mark on his left breast.

"When you return, rebuild your father's house... and may the gods answer your questions."

Somehow, Ebiri interpreted the words of his father to mean that he would return alone. He could not come to terms with that. Who were these warriors so great that they would defeat the giants? Who were their gods? What were these weapons Osita spoke of?"

It was midday by the time the giants reached a town called *Agbani*. It seemed like

a dense darkness had enveloped them. The web of chaos that engulfed the battlefield was nothing like what the giants had seen before. There was thick smoke everywhere, the weapons of the northerners were weapons of fire. Loud, fierce, lethal. The warriors didn't need to come close. Each loud thunder of the weapons made a man fall dead. One by one, the giants fell - Ikwuagwu, Ikere, Obike - the mightiest warriors in Igboland, lost in one battle.

Ebiri left the battlefield in a hurry, running hard, breathing hard in the thick forests and heading south. His father told him he would return, and he wanted him to know he was right. The sweat on his body put a shine on his muscles. He was miles away, but he kept running. Alone. It had begun to get dark, but his mind had been dark since he left the battlefield. He had begun to

reconstruct the events in his mind. The young man who came to ask for help, the long trip to Elugwu, the large number of warriors they had amassed along the way, the northerners and their weapons of fire!

The memories of the battlefield were like a nightmare haunting him in daytime. The lines between sleep and wake were so blurred now that he found himself awake, his torso flat on the undergrowth, his right shoulder tightly fixed against a large tree. He had been asleep, but he wasn't sure whether the nightmares happened in his sleep or while he was awake. Then the questions started.

Who were they? Where were those weapons made? Are we not the greatest anymore? Have the gods forsaken us? Am I going to die?

He staggered towards the rising sun and then southwards. He was sticky, a mix of sweat and blood. He was hungry, having helped himself with all sorts of fruits, rodents and reptiles along the way. He was about a quarter of a day way from home when everything went dark. Then there was a single source of light, a form that increased in size gradually until he could tell it was a man or something that looked like a man.

“I came to answer your questions,” said the figure.

Ebiri squinted, trying to make out the figure but he couldn't. It was still quite dark. He was at a loss as to why it was still dark. Moments earlier he thought the dawn was breaking.

“What questions?” he responded, hooding his eyes with his right hand, still trying to figure out who he was speaking to.

“The questions of your heart. Your deepest questions”

“Who are the men with weapons that spit fire?”

“You need to go deeper than that. That question is but the surface of your curiosity. There are more important questions you must ask. A man who asks questions will not lose his way”

The questions of Ebiri’s heart were not questions that began two days earlier when he set out for Elugwu. They were questions that followed him to every battle he had ever fought. He wanted to know if he could ever die in battle and what would happen if he died. Would he wake up in the land of

the spirits or would he vanish forever. Would he remember his father and brothers or would not know anything at all? Would he be reincarnated and start another life. Was there any judgement for his deeds after death? What was the purpose of death or life in the first place? Did he really need to fight all those battles? Which question would he ask first?

“I am here to answer your questions ...” the entity emphasized, “What is the most important thing you would like to know?”

The question sounded like an echo in Ebiri’s mind. What was the most important thing he needed to know right now? His brothers had been killed. There were no more battles to fight, there was a much more powerful enemy. There seemed to be nothing left that was worth spending his energy on. He wondered about his father.

“I would like to know what happens after death,” he blurted out.

“What makes you ask this, Ebiri,” the Entity responded in a soft but compelling voice.

“We fought many battles and won all of them. For generations my family has been the key to victory for communities we can no longer number. We have devised many weapons to subdue our enemies but no matter how great our weapons are, they do only one thing: they deliver our enemies to death...”

“I come from the line of giants. We are the mightiest tribe in Igboland and anywhere else we know but we are not mightier than death. One generation after another passes on and leaves the tokens of our victories to the next. I feared that one day, a mightier tribe shall arrive, and deliver us to the

hands of death. It seems that such a day has already come!”

“Death comes to all men because the earth is broken, broken by evil. And all men must answer for their deeds”

Ebiri felt cold water running over his face. The feeling became more and more intense as he roused back to reality. He was lying flat on his back and a blurry figure materialized in front of him. It was his father. He had been spilling water on him and calling on his gods.

Ebiri sprang up abruptly, poised to fight. He was his mothers at the distance, closer to him were the four hunters that had carried him from the forest. He focused on his father and stared at him.

“My Son,” Egbuta said, breaking the eerie silence. Ebiri approached him and embraced him. Everyone broke into a smile.

“You spoke strange things today. We thought some evil spirit had cast a spell of madness on you”

“I met no evil. I met only good. And he told me about the world to come”

“What world is this. Let’s sit and eat and you shall tell us.”

Egbuta called loudly, “Ejije! Bring food”

All the men sat down, excited about an early meal. One of them, obviously the vocal one, began chattering about what Ebiri had said: “One God? A day of judgment? God coming to the world. Such strange things”

“You must tell us more. And you must also tell us about the battle”

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