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SHORT STORY

OF WIVES, TALISMANS AND THE DEAD

by

I.N.C. Aniebo

Ibe lay still, his heart beating fast from apprehension rather than fright. He had just woken from what he now knew was a dream, where he had been urinating in a bathroom. Had he wet his sleeping mat and himself again? An eleven year old *still* wetting his mat? as his father would say.

His heart beat subsiding, Ibe got on his knees and ran his right hand over his own side of the mat. It seemed dry. Slowly, he ran his hand over the area again. Sometimes certain areas dried out while others remained wet. It was dry...It *was* dry. He smiled happily into the darkness but becoming aware of an urgent demand stood up quickly.

He almost cried out with pain as he groped at the door and finally got it open. The raw, cold breeze of the harmattan dawn against which his pair of shorts afforded no protection, knifed through his body. Although it made him shiver, he still luxuriated in the intense relief of the pressure and pain of his full bladder.

Back in the house, he was filled with pride at what he had done. He wished it was morning so he could tell his mother all about it. He had gone outside *alone*, walked into the dark and urinated like a grown-up and he had not even woken his younger brother who shared the mat with him.

Keyed up now with excitement, he could not go back to sleep. Just when he began to wonder if the day would ever arrive, he heard the rhythmic swishing of brooms outside. He woke up Anyado, their servant, to sweep the kitchen and make the fire.

A few minutes later, his mother came out of the bedroom to prepare breakfast for his father who went to work early. In the kitchen Ibe told her as nonchalantly as possible the feat he had accomplished that morning. She patted him on the head and promised to buy him a new sleeping mat soon.

With his father's departure to the loco shed, the mid-morning hush Ibe now associated with the holidays settled on the house. He often broke its creeping, eerie feeling with some kind of activity or other. But today, he did not want to play

childish games. Casting around for something grown-up to do, he decided to visit his *wife* Egeolu inspite of the ban his parents placed on such visits. Up till now he regretted ever having told his mother about the sugar and *akara* balls he had seen strewn all over the front of Egeolu's home.

"Don't ever pick up anything you see around that house" his mother had said sharply. "And I think you should stop visiting your *wife* for a while."

He had not liked her last statement, but did not protest because she looked so angry. His holidays would be so empty if he could not visit Egeolu. In the following weeks he tried hard not to break the ban, but did so twice. It had been so easy. Their families shared a long rectangular cement, zinc-roofed house in the backyard of a walled-in compound. All he had to do to escape detection was wait till the members of his family had gone out and then slip in next door.

Waiting now, he slumped in one of the wooden armchairs in the parlour. His mother was getting ready to go to the market.

But how nice it would be if Egeolu walked in now and saved him all the waiting. No, it would not be as nice as going to visit her. He had not forgotten the discomfort of their first meeting. She had walked into the house during a midmorning like this one. He had just arrived from Minna, where he had been left in the care of relatives to complete his schooling for that year--his parents having been transferred to Zaria earlier.

He had been sitting in this same chair, when Egeolu came in her eyes on the floor. Looking up briefly she said "Welcome" in a voice that reminded him of the infant-class time bell. He stared at her, suddenly unable to speak. Most girls as fair as she were albinos, but her deep brown eyes and black hair showed him she was not. He watched her slow progress towards him till she stopped in front of the chair next to his. He did not know what to say or do, so he continued to stare at her bowed head till his mother's voice jolted him.

"Well, are you not going to shake hands with your 'wife Ibe?" his mother asked him.

He turned to her doubtfully, and she was smiling, so he got up slowly from the deep armchair and stretched out his hand and found a small, fragile one which he shook limply and dropped. He sat down again, looking from his mother to the girl.

"Sit down, Egeolu," his mother said. "If you wait for Ibe to ask you, you will stand there till your legs ache. No,

not there. Sit next to him. After all, you are his 'wife.'"

Ibe continued to stare at Egeolu as she carefully avoided his eyes, shuffled to the chair pointed out to her. He was fascinated by her small mouth with its full lips, the lower one having a tinge of red.

As soon as his mother had gone off to the kitchen, Egeolu turned suddenly to him and said accusingly, "We expected you, yesterday."

After a moment's surprised hesitation, Ibe said, "I entered the train yesterday." He did not want to start a conversation with her. Girls preferred talking to doing anything else, and that he did not like.

"How long did it take the train to get here?" Egeolu asked.

"One day," he said grudgingly.

"One day? Where did you sleep at night?"

"In the train."

"I have never been in a train."

"It is not as comfortable as a mat. My neck hurts when I turn my head."

"Come on, Ibe," his mother said, coming in from the kitchen. "It is time to have a bath so you can be as clean as your 'wife.' Bring out that underwear of yours. I want to thread in the waistband while you are bathing."

"Let me do it, mama," Egeolu begged. "I know how to do such things."

Then the ban had come and visiting her became an exciting adventure, fraught with danger, but in the end, especially after a successful one, so very satisfying.

And even Egeolu's mother had joined in the spirit of the game. Once she had concealed his presence from someone who came looking for him. A small, delicate woman, one would never suspect she had the courage to tell an untruth, without blinking an eye. Ibe had loved the hide-and-seek atmosphere of that visit, and was glad Egeolu's father was not around at such times. Ibe had never forgotten the beating he had received from the wicked man one moonlit night.

Ibe, Egeolu and the other children of the compound, were playing *boju-boju*. It had been Ibe's turn to seek, catch and drag one of them to the home ring before they all got there to safety. As soon as he untied his eyes, he ran to the alley behind the kitchen, found no one, then to the latrine where he found Egeolu. He caught her before she could get away. He shouted to let the others know he had caught someone and started dragging her towards the home ring. During the struggle, he found himself holding more than half of her gown in his hands. But that had not stopped her. Free now, she had run into the home ring.

Just then her father, tall and huge, came out of the house. "Egeolu!" he called sharply. "What are you doing?" Ibe still stood near the latrine with the greater part of Egeolu's dress in his hands, when he was grabbed by huge hands. Moonlit games were stopped after that.

Only Ibe's mother believed his version of the story. Ibe avoided the Ezeugwu family till Egeolu apologized for her father's behavior, and invited him to visit whenever her father was not home. Her mother, who now knew what had really happened would welcome him.

Ibe and Egeolu now met more often outside than in the compound. They camouflaged their meetings by arranging to go, almost at the same time, to fetch water from the pump situated at the end of the street. During these trysts they renewed their pledge to marry when they grew up. They knew it would not be long since Egeolu was already nine years old.

* * *

"Ibe, wake up!" his mother said. She was back from the bathroom carrying her soap dish and wet towel, and there were shiny droplets of water on her exposed shoulders.

"I was not asleep, Mama," Ibe protested, wishing she would hurry up and go before he did fall asleep.

"I know. You are always day dreaming! Is that how you are going to spend your holidays? Go out and play!" She went into the bedroom without waiting to see if he left.

Ibe sank back in his chair. Once again he wished he had not reported that morning about the shining cubes of sugar and *akara* strewn all over the front of Egeolu's home. They had been the cause of his being banned from visiting her. And when they no longer appeared on the door steps and under the windows, the ban had not been lifted! "I wish I were a big man," Ibe thought, squirming angrily in his chair.

Last night, he had overheard Anyado and the other servants talk about Egeolu's father, while they ate their dinner in the kitchen.

"Poor Mr. Ezeugwu," one of the servants said. "It does not look like he will ever recover from his illness."

"I don't feel sorry for him," Anyado said gruffly. "At the Loco Shed, they say he is a terrible chief clerk. He takes bribes from everyone, including his town's people. That is why he was tried in court."

"But he won the case," another servant said. "So he is innocent."

"Yes," the first servant said. "He won the case after six months. He must be innocent. The police really gave him a great deal of trouble."

"He won the case because he had a very good lawyer," Anyado asserted. "Now his lawyer can not help him with the *juju* that is keeping him in the hospital."

"You think it is *juju*?" the second servant asked.

"It must be," Anyado said. "Look at all those *akara* balls and sugar. Do you think it is all for nothing? Of course it is strong *juju*."

"The other afternoon I saw a native doctor doing some medicine behind the house," the first servant said. "Before I could see what he was doing, he drove me away."

"Don't go near those medicine men again," Anyado warned. "They can be wicked, especially if they are not very strong. Mr. Ezeugwu's enemies must have a very tough one. He has been sick for months now."

"Poor Egeolu," the first servant said. "I like her so much."

"I like her too," Anyado said. "It is bad luck that gave her such a bad father."

"Yes, you are right," said the second servant. "It is bad luck."

Ibe crept away when he heard them collecting their empty plates and arguing whose turn it was to wash them. He wondered

how *akara* balls and sugar could poison a man and make him sick. Besides, Egeolu's father's servants always swept them up and threw them into the latrine before anyone in his household was up. Had Egeolu's father not been actually ill, Ibe would have said the servants were simply making up frightening stories. It was terrifying to think of food being used against one. Egeolu's father must have done terrible things to his enemies for them to use such powerful *juju* against him.

"Ibe! Ibe! Go and play. I do not want you catching cold. His mother was finally dressed for the market. Ibe got off the chair and went outside. "Look after your brother," she told him. "I have put your sister to sleep. When she wakes, give her the *akamu* in the cupboard. Tell Anyado to meet me at the market when he returns from the shed. What shall I get you from the market?"

"Eggs."

"You have been eating too many lately. It will spoil your stomach."

Ibe waited till she was out of sight, then making sure there were no cubes of sugar or *akara* balls at the doorstep, he knocked at Egeolu's door. There was no answer, even after repeated knockings. He pushed at the door and found it unlocked. He went in. Egeolu and her younger brother were fast asleep on their parlour bed. He thought of waking her and decided against it. He went out quietly closing the door behind him.

Now he did not know what to do with himself. His half-formed plans had centered on Egeolu. He wandered aimlessly around the compound ending up behind the kitchen. It was an alley formed by the back walls of the kitchen and the six-foot cement block wall separating his compound from the next. It was used as an occasional refuse dump where he sometimes found odd-shaped bottles and containers to play with. Rooting in it now he found an unopened tin of 'Peak' condensed milk. He looked it over and shook it, listening to the liquid sound of the contents. It sounded good. Elated with his find, he went back to the house. His sister was still asleep, so he sat down on the parlour bed to drink the milk. It tasted a little funny at first but he soon got used to it. And far too quickly, the tin was empty. He threw it outside and stretched out on the parlour bed. He felt tired and drowsy. Yawning prodigiously once or twice he fell asleep.

He woke up frightened, his heart beating wildly. He felt like throwing up but could not muster up the strength to move to the edge of the bed. He kept his eyes tightly shut as he fought down the nausea and when he felt he had succeeded, opened them.

To his utter surprise, it was already dark, and the lantern had been lit. He was no longer lying on the parlour-bed but on Papa's huge brass bed in the bedroom. Also, he was covered with a thick blanket, yet he felt cold. He pulled the blanket up to his chin and lay still, waiting for something to happen.

Then suddenly it came, a shriek of pain and sorrow that set his heart pounding, followed immediately by similiar shrieks. A screaming chorus swelled in volume till the building seemed to be made of it. That was what had woken him earlier, he thought. Then his stomach heaved and he struggled to the edge of the bed and threw up.

"*Ewu-o-o!* He's awake! He's awake!" shouted his mother coming into the bedroom. "Thanks be to God on high! *Ewu-o*, my child, I was afraid..." And she was crying as she whispered, "I was afraid you were dead too."

And his father hurried in, asking, "Is he awake?"

"Yes," his mother whispered.

"*Ajala aka gi!*" His father held him now while his mother cleaned him up.

"*Ewu-o*, my child, what did you eat? You have put fear into us."

"Get the aspirin now Mary," his father said, tucking him back into bed. "I think it will stay down. Now, young man, tell us what happened to you."

Before Ibe could gather enough strength to say anything, his mother was back with the tablets and a glass of water. Ibe drank the medicine, managing a few swallows of the warm water. He was tucked into bed for the second time.

"I do not think he is in a fit state to say anything," his mother said. "Do you think the nurse will come?"

"He will come. We do not owe him money."

"Ibe," his mother whispered into his ear, "your wife's father is dead."

For the first time since he vomited, Ibe began to think. So that was what had caused the screaming. He wondered if Egeolu was crying too. Perhaps like him, she did not feel anything. No, that would not be possible. She would not be able to keep from crying if everyone around her did. Even he would

cry.

And the more he thought about Egeolu's father's death, the more elated he felt. The man deserved to die. Had he not beaten him unjustly? What higher punishment could be meted out to a man so unjust?

But Ibe's elation was soon cut short by his chattering teeth. His sickness and cold returned with renewed strength and tears flowed involuntarily down his cheeks. And the weeping and crying in Egeolu's home which had not abated made him feel worse.

He must have dozed off because the next thing he knew he was thinking of his younger brother and sister and wondering if they were frightened by the noise. Then he was wondering how he himself had slept all day. Had he had his lunch? And dinner? He felt cheated he could not recall what lunch had tasted like. It must have been his favorite pounded *fofo* and soup, and new soup too! The old one ran out last night which was why Mama had gone to the market.

Ibe licked his dry lips. It tasted bad. Would Mama give him the new soup to take away the vile taste in his mouth? He tried to call out but only a croak came out of his dry throat.

Anyado came in, looking huge, his shadow thrown across the bed by the lamplight. Ibe croakingly made him understand he wanted some soup.

Mama, accompanied by a fat man, came in a few minutes after Anyado had left. The fat man pulled Ibe's blanket roughly back and began to examine him. Mama held the lamp so the man could see clearly.

"Wetin echop for afternoon?" the man asked. He sounded like a Calabar man.

"Ibe, what did you eat when I went to the market?" Mama asked in Igbo.

Ibe shook his head not trusting his voice.

"Esay eno chop," Mama said in pidgin.

"What kin' ting evomit?" the man asked.

"Ebi like akamu."

"Akamu? Una chopam for morning?"

"No."

"Askam again. I wan' know before I givam this injection."

Ibe finally revealed he had drunk a tin of 'Peak' milk he found behind the kitchen. He was given the injection and it was not as painful as he had imagined.

The soup was brought to him later but he could not eat it. He drank a cup of tea, but threw it up immediately afterwards. Now he felt even more tired and feverish. The crying next door was beginning to sound almost like the chug-chug of a train...

...he was lying on one of the divan seats of a second-class compartment of a passenger train. Egeolu sat on the divan opposite. She was smiling at him. She was also saying something he could not quite catch. He tried to make her speak up but after a while it did not matter so long as she was there with him and they were in this train going somewhere. He did not know where they were going. But he was sure it was away from her father.

They were like that for a long time; she telling him things and smiling and he pretending he understood what she was saying and smiling back.

Suddenly, the compartment's sliding door was violently pulled aside letting in a draught of air, laden with coal ash and smoke and the sound of the steam locomotive and of many wheels flying over the joints of the rails and there in his customary short-sleeve white shirt and khaki trousers stood Egeolu's father.

He was smiling. No. He was grimacing, his eyes fixed on Ibe.

Egeolu stood up and went to her father. Holding on to the bottom of his shirt which had not been tucked into the trousers, she pleaded with him in an urgent tone. Ibe knew she was pleading on his behalf, so he tried to avoid her father's stare. But he could not. He simply could not move his head.

Egeolu's father pushed her away, in what looked like a gentle movement of the arm but it sent her staggering to her seat. Ibe, angry now, jumped off the divan and pushed at the man he hated so much. He wanted to push him out and lock the door of the compartment. At first, it was like pushing at a wall, then when he thought he was succeeding, he found he was being dragged out of the compartment.

"I'm taking you with me!" Egeolu's father said in a deep

terrible voice...

Ibe woke up screaming and pushing against the wall of the bedroom and his mother rushed in crying, "What is it? What is it, Ibe?" Gathering him into her arms before he had time to reply, she began to soothe away his fears.

"What frightened you, my child?" she asked gently. "Tell me so I can drive it away."

"Where is Papa?" Ibe asked. He did not think she could drive away Egeolu's father.

"He is next door."

"I want him to come here."

"Don't you want to tell me what frightened you?"

Ibe shook his head.

"You won't be frightened again if I leave you?"

Ibe shook his head, again.

"All right. Let me first change your dress. It is we She brought out a clean jumper from the box nearby. "You will soon be well now that you are sweating. Next time don't drink bad milk. You see how sick it made you? Any time you want milk, tell me, and I will give you a good one. Do you hear? Now, I will go and call your father. I will not be long. Do you want me to turn up the light? Is this enough? I will soon be back

Ibe lay quite still on the brass bed, and stared at the lantern, afraid to look anywhere else or close his eyes. He felt that as long as his eyes were open, Egeolu's father would not be able to take him away.

From next door came the continued sound of wailing and crying. There was chanting too, and stamping of feet, and many voices asking where Egeolu's father was and others answering in a sing-song they were searching for him.

Ibe shivered. He knew where Egeolu's father was. The wicked man was waiting for him to close his eyes so he could carry him away with him. Ibe was even more determined not to sleep. Tears of fright started trickling down his cheeks.

"Nna-a, nna-a," said Ibe's father coming into the bedroom. He sat on the edge of the bed. "Who dared frighten nna in his sleep?" he asked. "Tell me and I will teach him not to

do it again." While he talked he felt Ibe's forehead and chest.

Ibe told him all about the dream, the tears now streaming out and wetting the pillow.

"Now, dry your tears my child," his father said gently. "I am going to drive him away. He will not disturb you again. Dead men should not wander in the land of the living. They should go back into the earth where they belong."

"But Papa, do they not have to be buried first?" Ibe asked in a frightened voice rubbing his eyes with his fist. "And I heard the people say they were searching for him."

"That is what we always say when someone dies. It is merely a song. The dead body of Egeolu's father is not lost. And my son, when a man dies, his spirit goes into the earth where it remains till it is born again with a new body. The dead body is powerless without it. We bury it in the earth so that it will not smell like rotten meat. There are many ancestral spirits waiting in the earth to be born again and also looking after us that we pour libation to them to thank them for their good work. Now, I am going to drive away the man who has disturbed you, and let the ancestors keep him far from you."

Ibe watched his father bring out a big ring from the pockets of the trousers he normally wore to work, and carry out certain intricate movements from one corner of the room to the other, muttering to himself and occasionally touching the ring to his lips. This done, he brought out a small bottle and soon the air was filled with the heavy fragrance of SEVEN FLOWERS perfume Ibe loved so much.

"Now," said his father, sitting once more on the edge of the bed. "That dead man will not disturb you again. He can not!"

"Papa," Ibe said after a pause, "now that I have seen a dead man, will I die?"

"You did not see a dead man, my son. You dreamt of one. People do not die because of what they dream, but because of what they do. But now, you will not dream of that man again. I am going to sleep with you so that even if you dream of him, he will not be able to do you harm."

"I am no longer afraid, Papa," Ibe said, yawning.

"That's my man! Your mother has taken your brother and sister to Nwankwo's house. Tomorrow morning, we will join them there."

"Papa," Ibe said drowsily, "Papa, how can...how can a huge...?"

* * *

Ibe did not see Egeolu until two weeks after her father's death. There had been continuous coming and going in her home. And even when he did see her they could not talk to each other.

Her family was leaving for their home town in Eastern Nigeria. With their bread winner dead, only their blood-relations would take care of them. Now Ibe wished he had not wanted Egeolu's father dead. At the time it never occurred to him that there was a connection between his being alive and Egeolu's continued stay in Zaria.

Standing by the unpaved street as the family, all dressed in black, came out on their way to the railway station, he realized how closely linked together a family was. If only he had not wished her father to die, she would not be leaving him now forever. But the man was wicked, unjust and not as gentle as Egeolu. Yes the man was unjust, but perhaps death was too great a punishment. Perhaps he should have wished him a long illness, a long fever. If only he had known! Next time, Ibe decided, he would not wish anyone dead, no matter what. It was too heavy a punishment.

Egeolu had not even glanced at Ibe as she walked tearfully by, her mother's arm around her. For a while, just as the family disappeared around a sharp bend down the street, his eyes smarted and misted over. But his father had once told him a man must not cry for nothing, so he blinked back the threatened tears. When his vision cleared, the street was empty, the hot sun was suddenly tempered, and the compound, his home and the day were also empty. Everything was empty.

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