

**Diaries
of a
Dead African**

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Chuma Nwokolo, Jr.

Villager House
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2003

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Dedication

*On 29th January 2002, my mother died. **Eziogolibuno Dorothy Nwannefuluno Nwokolo** lived to read the first two parts of this book but she inspired them all. To be raised by her was to find, without searching, the most generous love of all. Nobody who knew her would fail to recognise her words in the better parts of this book. Those are the parts I dedicate to a woman whose praise name means: a good wife **is** the home.*

*Only death could part her from her husband and inseparable friend, **Nwachukwunedu Felix Chukwuma Nwokolo**. Living is a daily privilege to be his son, this man of character whose affections leaps the gulf between continents, whose presence ignites occasions. This book is also dedicated to my own friend and father.*

Chuma Nwokolo, Jr.

29th January, 2003

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DIARY ONE

MEME JUMAI

Occupation: Farmer
Residence: Ikerre-Oti,
Delta State, Nigeria
Date of Birth: June 5, 1950
Date of Death: June 15, 2000
Cause of Death: *Awaiting Inquest.*

1st June 2000

WHEN I WOKE THIS MORNING I was sweating like a slave on the farm. Yet it wasn't the sweat of hard work that wet my bed-sheet so. It was the sweat of fear. I was feeling as if a witch had poured fear inside me the way Ma'Abel used to pump our sleeping sons with pap, more than twenty years ago. If you see how my chest was doing! That my heart did not cut was a miracle.

As I pushed my door open into the compound and hung my bed-sheet where it became my curtain, I tried to remember the exact and particular reason why I was so afraid. I couldn't; and I'm not surprised. The problems of my life are not the sort that one narrates to a native doctor and he laughs before he starts his treatment. My problems are the sort that the boldest witchdoctor will hear halfway and flee. Is that not how I went to meet Catechist just before Easter and he said he won't waste his time and mine by praying, that my problems had surpassed the kind that prayer and fasting solve. It's just that adversity isn't something people boast about; otherwise, in this Ikerre-Oti, no one can stand beside me.

It wasn't quite dawn, but, as Ikerre people say, only a ne'er-do-well needs sunlight to gather his farm gear. I got dressed. Nobody can call my house a mud-hut any more, ever since I plastered it all over with cement. (Except those people who

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have jealousy and witchcraft running in their veins and they think it is blood. That type of people can never forget what is under the plaster.) On the harvest poles staked to the wall opposite my clay bed are the remnants of the 1999 harvest... *only three yam tubers...* As soon as those three tubers filled my eyes, the silence also filled my ears. Ma'Abel was *not* cursing her stubborn stove from her kitchen outside. Abel and Calamatus were not quarrelling over who forgot to tether the goat the night before. I was alone in my compound with *only three tubers of yam*.

That was when I remembered the exact and particular reason why I was so afraid, and my chest kept quiet. Because Ikerre people also say that the day a man recognises the disease that will kill him is the day doctors stop eating his money. I remembered the name of the fear that filled me like the urine of a witch; and when a disease has a name, at least it has a salutation.

His name was Starvation.

It was two weeks until harvest and tradition decrees that not a root may be disturbed in the fields before the day of the new yam festival. The situation was serious.

I untied my pregnant goat. Another week and the lazy thing should bear. I watched her climb to her feet and drag herself out of the compound to graze, scratching herself lazily on the broken gatepost. Just as I feared, young idiots with pails as empty as their brains were already hanging around the gate in front of my compound. They're waiting for me to come out to start their giggling and idiotic singing. They've left the water they were sent to fetch at the stream, and are looking for gossip. *Nonsense and tenpence!* I turned away to the kitchen in the backyard. I cooked a pottage with a little yam and a lot of the vegetables that grew in the hedge between my compound and Ma'Caro's. I put away my farming gear. I didn't go to farm today.

In the evening I watched the black-and-white TV I inherited from my father. It is almost my age-mate and to keep the pictures from drifting up and down like the thoughts of a mad man, I have to tap it every now and again. That was how I spent the night of my first day away from the farm this year: slapping

MEME

a thirty-year old television in a mud-hut masquerading as a sandcrete house, watching programmes from the other side of the universe.

I should hate Meme Jumai, if I were not Meme Jumai.

2nd June 2000

ANOTHER SHAMEFUL DAY AWAY FROM my farm. The voice of Nwozuai the gossip woke me up from sleep. He was wheedling *akara* — shameless forty-year-old ne'er-do-well who hasn't done a spot of work in years — from Ma'Caro next door. I stared at my yams for ages. Fourteen days before the village harvest and only two tubers and thirteen inches of yam left at home! Only last week, my harvest wall had two poles strung with yams. Yet, a calamity had occurred, threatening me with a ne'er-do-well's fate. It wasn't burglary and it wasn't death. It was divorce.

Ma'Abel, my wife for twenty-five years, had left me for a vulcaniser at Warri, leaving with most of my yams. She took, she said, ten yams for every son she gave me. Me, I quarrelled with her arithmetic. Three of the sons for whom she claimed compensation died before they started farming. The other two, Abel and Calamatus, often gave me cause to wish them dead as well.

Yet, it wasn't good arithmetic that won Ma'Abel her arguments with me. It was her complete shamelessness. Come and see the crowd her screams pulled on that May 31st! The whole villagers in Ikerre-Oti gathered in that my compound. Her fellow women circled me like vultures. Many men were there as well, but where the women supported Ma'Abel by heaping insults on my head, the men stayed silent, like a lunatic's embarrassed relations.

As the crowd thickened, she had grown more excited, dragging around my loincloth, with me inside, crying that when she married me all she signed for was to be Mrs. Jumai, but instead I had gone and made her Mrs. Suffer-Head.

Yes I'm poor; but I hate disgrace. I had to yield my yams. That very evening, as I sat at the village meeting, pretending that Ma'Abel's desertion didn't bother me at all, Abel took my transistor and electric fan and followed his mother. Calamatus had left weeks earlier on another of his get-rich scams. *Idiots!*

Had that witch left me fifteen years ago, by the next weekend, I swear, I'd have married again. I swear. But, there are certain things that shouldn't happen to a 49-year-old man in whose nostrils the hairs have started to whiten. Especially with today's cost of dowry.

I chewed chewing-stick awhile, wondering whether Meme Jumai had died years ago and forgot his body in Ikerre by mistake. Then I crept out into the compound to untie the goat. Nwozuai had succeeded. He pretended not to see me as he swallowed his bean cakes, moving his neck like a boa constrictor doing in a rabbit. I squatted in Ma'Abel's kitchen and warmed the leftover pottage in the pot. I ate some of it and returned to my bed, missing my transistor radio badly and studying my remaining yams the way witchdoctors study the position of kola nuts on their divining mats. *Kai!* How could I manage the yams to make them last the two weeks until harvest? The young day matured and aged in front of my eyes. I lay on my clay bed. I sat up, I lay down, and I sat up. That was how I spent this shameful day; without my radio I couldn't shut out the mocking songs of the giggling village girls who changed their route to the stream to pass under my window. *Witches.* In the evening I ate the last of the pottage and shut in the goat.

I didn't leave the gate of my house today either.

With which face will I look at the villagers on the day after *the day after* the day my family left me for a *vulcaniser*? Tomorrow should be better. By tomorrow Chemist's son would have returned from Dubai. And even if he hasn't, a village as useless as Ikerre-Oti should have found fresher gossip for

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itself. In the evening, I tried to find something worth watching on television. As all the dials were broken, I used my pliers to hunt for a station, but it seemed that all of them had agreed to be idiots today. I slept early.

3rd June 2000

THE FEARFUL BLEATING OF MY goat woke me at 2 am this morning. My useless heart was banging as if it was a mortar for somebody's pounded yam. Goat-thieves have been harassing our village recently; yet, there're two short and cogent reasons why they shouldn't just go near my goat. Firstly, it is my only goat; secondly, it is extremely pregnant. If they wait another month they can steal her without destroying me completely.

Yet if Penis would listen to reason, would they have named him Penis? Besides, it was pitch-dark outside. None of those reasons were sharp or cogent enough for me to risk my life over a goat. So I took my late father's double barrel down from its hiding place in the zinc and aimed at the moon from a crack in the window; I broke that night into pieces. If I can't sleep, why should anyone else? Afterwards, even my goat fell silent. Yet my heart was *knacking* as if I had shot myself. I swear, if by morning that goat is no longer tied to my *onugbu*, I'll take my gun and my last four cartridges to the Village Square and let what happens happen. People should know that the fact of a man's small penis is no reason to take away his wife.

At first light, I went into the yard where the goat was tethered and saw it lying there on the wreckage of my broken bicycle. *Witchcraft and black magic!* Flies from the pit latrine had already filled its open mouth and nostrils. On the inside of one leg were the marks of snakebite. The sight of that dead goat,

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with its violently pregnant belly, hit me more than my wife's desertion. I hurried into the latrine and in that darkness, allowed the foolish tears to disgrace themselves. I considered the sufferings of my life. *Nonsense and tenpence!* If they were to bury me with all my problems, they would need a very large coffin. It was two months since I last ate meat of any description and here was this little mountain of flesh, for which I had great plans. God has a lot of cases to judge in heaven! Why couldn't the serpent wait another week for my goat to born and then swallow a whole kid if it so desired?

Yet, were the devil to leave wickedness, who else would employ him? I cut up my goat. *Serpents and demons!* If I tell you there were four kids inside that goat you won't believe it. *Four kids!* And if you see all the saliva I swallowed as I cut up that goat! Part of the carcass I buried in the compound, in the evening I dumped the rest down the pit latrine. What has happened has happened and if Reverend Father preaches everything in his mouth, Mass will never finish. It isn't everything that happens that should enter a diary. There're too many idiots that go around, reading other people's diaries.

I went to farm today. Everyone is still looking at me funny-funny, even though Etina, Chemist's son, is back . Anyway, that's their business. I'm not the first man to lose his wife to another man. I won't even be the last. If only she had enough shame to choose a trader or a landlord or something. A *roadside vulcaniser!* And all this nonsense is because I'm poor, nothing more. Will the vulcaniser say he's more handsome than I am? Will he say I was incapable of making sons?

Anyway, by Sunday my clan will be having a meeting on our land case. I don't normally like village meetings, but this one I won't miss. It may be one final opportunity for me to be rich before I die. My clan has been fighting a land case in Warri for the last sixteen years and the lawyer should be coming to brief us on the judgment. If we win, well, I'll just become rich overnight. And the first thing I'll do with my new car is drive to the Vulcaniser and have him check my tyres. Hopefully, Ma'Abel will be there when I pull up.

And I'll drop his tip on the ground when he's through.

4th June 2000

IT WAS STILL DARK WHEN I woke this morning and I remained like a corpse for a long time. I moved my hand in slow motion until it fastened on a broom — which wasn't there by accident. Then I leapt out of bed like a warrior and slammed the head of the broom against the last of my yams. There was a screech, a furious scrabbling and then, silence. I wasn't smiling as I put on the lamp. There was a deep gouge on my yam, but of the rodent that caused it, no evidence. I can't afford to leave the light on but when I went back to bed there was no sleep for me until dawn broke.

I've never studied yams like this before. Two tubers and eight inches of yam. If breakfast wasn't the worst meal for a farmer to skip, I would simply have left for farm. I cut four inches of yam and boiled it. Is it not the scarcity of venison that made deer the delicacy that she is? To think that the day would come when Meme Jumai would boil yam by the inch! I still recall my harvest of March '95. If my yams of '95 were chickens, these tubers of today resemble the eggs they could have laid! Everything's so stingy nowadays, the rains, the soil, — and now, even my kitchen pot! So I boiled the four inches of yam and ate.

What sort of life is this now? I plant a hectare of yam and now I have to tend it on an empty stomach. It is a real shame: A vulcaniser to steal a farmer's wife and yams!

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The local government clerk came in as I was leaving for the farm. He wanted his council tax. I told him that money was something my pockets hadn't seen for months and he said that there was a conspiracy in the village because everyone was saying the same thing. I told him that the moon everybody had seen was no more a mirage and he said he wasn't leaving my house till he had his tax in his hand. Therefore I took my sack of implements and told him to look after my house. He told me that he was warning me, that he would seize my yams! I looked at my two tubers and four inches of yam and my chest began to *knack* again.

Poisonous serpents and demons! I told him that if he didn't leave my house before I opened my eyes, anybody who saw the bites on his body would think I owned a dog. He told me that the reason why they nicknamed him 'The Go-Go' was that he never turned back. I told him that he would soon see the difference between the fly that followed the rubbish to the dump and the one that followed the corpse down into the grave. He pulled out a whistle and shook it in my face. He told me that I was playing with arrest and detention, that a single blow on his whistle would bring the police running; but his voice was shaking as well. So I told him I had no quarrel with that, but that he should also whistle for a hearse for the corpse they would meet with me. He shouted that we villagers were idiots, that we won't pay our taxes but will keep complaining that there was no water in the pump and no chalk at the school. But that was all frustration, because he was shouting from outside my house. I told him that the womb of the pauper had many beautiful and stillborn dreams, and that it was better for me to eat my tax than for him and his boss at the local government to eat it. Then I locked my door and went to the farm.

It is the man and his government that are idiots. As if it made any sense to go looking for something in the pocket of someone who was looking for something.

5th June 2000

THERE'S A PLANTAIN SUCKER ALMOST ready to be harvested along the Katai Road, near the farmlands. It's not mine, but then it isn't anyone else's either. It's there, just off a public road. As I pass it today, I gauge it with my eyes. It isn't quite ripe but I can't risk leaving it beyond tomorrow. In this village, I know that ironing starch is hiding a lot of empty stomachs all over the place. But for Ikerre-Oti's monstrous taboos, I would have unearthed a tuber ahead of the harvest feast — but there's no crime more heinous in Ikerre criminology than the eating of the first fruits before the village idols. And there's no talebearer more adept than the green boughs of a yam plant, wilting after the secret rape of its underground tuber.

The gossips seem to have formed a scandalous new song about me. Whenever I approach they stop singing and start giggling. That's their business, anyhow. Their mates are waxing records and making money, they, they are forging songs with other people's affairs.

Samuel Ekiti came in unexpectedly this evening after I returned from the farm. He surprised me as I was drinking the palm wine I harvested from a tree on my farm. There's a story behind that single palm tree and I'll tell it here. It is the type of tree experienced tapsters call 'The Trap'. It's about forty feet tall with a nick in the middle. The weight of a man on its crown may just be the thing to break its trunk. No experienced

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tapster would climb a tree like that. Indeed it would take a very desperate boy to try it. Well, yesterday I climbed it under cover of darkness and tied a gourd to its crown. This morning I climbed it just before dawn and brought down my prize.

After all, it's my birthday. If I can't eat like a human being let me at least drink wine like one. When I think of the kind of party that my father must have thrown on the birth of his only son, even the wine is not sweet any more. Yet, I have to stop thinking all these bad thoughts. Ma Abel used to say that it was bad thinking that made my face squeeze up like an old man's scrotum.

Despite my precautions, Ekiti must have spotted my gourd up the tree. Reluctantly, I share the blood-bought wine with him. In exchange, he offered me some of his snuff, which of course I rejected. The sort of insults one gets in this village. You offer a fellow premium palm wine and he reciprocates with an evil-smelling snuff! So that the day you pay him a visit, unless you catch him at a meal, he won't feel obligated to entertain you!

I spent a lot of time, while Ekiti was sitting there soaking up my wine, thinking about Ma'Abel. All those years I was priding myself that I had chosen well, that I had ended up with a woman who did not look her age. Other men of my age had wives that looked like their mothers; I had a wife that looked like my daughter. I thought I had paid the price of my privilege when I started hearing rumours about Ma'Abel and the councillor, Ma'Abel and the butcher, and Ma'Abel and the owner of the Postal Agency. Then Ma'Abel ran away to the vulcaniser! *Devil, lend me money!* Isn't it better to have a wife that looks like your mother?

I was thinking all those evil thoughts that make a man's inside bitter even when he is drinking sweet palm wine, when the village miser stood up and said he was going. He took my empty cup and sucked it just to make sure. Then at the door, he said to me, Sorry about your goat.

Sorry about my goat! I spent an hour after the sponger left, trying to figure out his words. *Sorry about my goat!* My wife left and he didn't come to commiserate. My sons left and he didn't come. Then my goat dies and he turns up. How did he

know about my goat to begin with? There's something about this that I don't like.

6th June 2000

THIS IS MY FORTY-SEVENTH year on the farm and I've never seen a year this bad. There are still nine days until harvest and I don't like the prospects of my kitchen at all. I leave for church without breakfast. I don't know what kind of demon pushed me to do my father's second burial last year. That week of the feast was the last time I had money in my pocket; and it was all borrowed money. Even now I still have Fasmin and Kemberi to pay; and what has made me lose weight like this, if it is not the campaign of insults I have endured over their money. They send their uncouth children to demand their money at the most embarrassing moments. Last week a 7-year-old held my wrapper at a village meeting wailing that his daddy needed his money to pay his school fees.

Although I'm going to church, I carried along a jute bag for the plantain and made a detour through the Katai Road. It's a quiet road on Sundays, perfect for a discreet harvesting. I'm still a hundred metres from the plantain sucker when I realised that a thief had been there already. It's difficult for me to believe what I am seeing. There's so much hunger in the land. People can't even keep their hands from larceny.

I was dizzy with anger and hunger when I reached the church. Warden Isaac must have noticed, because he looked the other way when I stepped over his rope to take a seat at the back, in the place reserved for church elders. I couldn't stay till the

end of the service though. Reverend Iwu's sermon was on hypocritical Pharisees as usual. It wasn't more boring than usual, but people kept glancing at me when he uttered his perpetual 'woe unto you's. After a while I couldn't stand it any longer and I just left.

By now, my hunger was as wicked as a demon. I dared not stay at home for fear of eating my remaining yam. I decided to visit Chemist, who is actually my second cousin Neziyanya, to rejoice with him over the safe return of his son from Dubai. The crook was out with his entire family. He was clearly trying to get out of serving refreshments to well-wishers. Can I blame him? His son is going to Dubai and back. Mine has gone to the vulcaniser for good.

Because I saw the entire Mentu family in church, I'm afraid I plucked a pumpkin from their house as I passed by their hedge. The whole thing was a conspiracy between my bowlegs and a larcenous machete. I was already bending down before I reached the pumpkin and before I knew what was developing, the pumpkin was in my sack. I felt sorry immediately. But what has happened has happened.

In the afternoon I went for the village meeting. I got there late, to give them time to finish the collection of monthly dues. To avoid unnecessary attention, I also sat at the back. When the time came for the lawyer to talk, he stood up and started some nonsense about 'interlocutory this' and 'exparte that', ending by asking for refresher fees if we were still serious about our case. I left them debating a new family levy. That's the problem with these useless meetings. You can't spend one hour without someone finding a reason to separate you from money you don't even have.

I was thinking about the pumpkin throughout the meeting. In all my adult life, I have never stolen another man's thing. Could hunger change me, or was I a thief all along without knowing it? In the night I cooked the pumpkin with a little yam.

It wasn't even sweet.

7th June 2000

I LEFT FOR THE FARM with only my machete and hoe. Until the day of harvest my farm work will be mostly weeding. Erosion had eaten up most of the Katai Road. The children from Ikerre-Oti Comprehensive jostled with us farmers for right of way on the remainder of the road. They are going to school and they are happy! I that went to school for thirteen years only to lose my wife to an illiterate vulcaniser.

Chentus saw a boa constrictor on his farm. Instead of shouting for help like a well-bred Ikerre-Oti man, he struggled with it like a madman. Greedy idiot. All he did today was roast snake from morning till evening. His shoulder was bleeding from where he fell against an anthill, but he did not seem to mind, so long as he kept the entire boa meat to himself.

The sun slowly roasted my back as bitterness grilled my insides. Was I foolish, twenty years ago, not to have headed for Warri with my school certificate? Yet, Edem had done just that, hadn't he? He had worked twenty-eight years at the Ministry of Works until he was retired three years ago, looking as thin as a palm tree and just as black. All the wretched property he acquired after three decades of office work, didn't they fit into the back of a small pick-up van? After two and a half years of travelling to Warri to pay gratification and push his file, he was told that his gratuity was ready for collection in Lagos. He had learnt idiotic ways in the city too. He threw a foolish party when

he got the letter. I still remember the hatred in the eyes of his youngest daughter Eka, as she served rice and the meat they rarely ate at home to the visitors that came to Edem's party. He died in a motor accident on his way back to Ikerre-Oti. A fraudulent Good Samaritan brought his corpse to the Village Square, denying that he saw the gratuity envelope.

I met Nwozuai on the Katai Road this evening. He looked forwards and backwards to make sure we were alone then he brought his melon head close to my ear, so close in fact that I could smell the stale palm wine in his breath.

He told me that what he heard in the market about me was so disgusting that he could never have brought himself to repeat it but for the fact that we were near-kinsmen, and I told him to just say what he had to say and let me go my way.

So he told me how people were saying that hunger had made me eat my decomposing goat.

I told him my goat had died of snake poison and if the rumour was true I'd be dead myself.

He said he thought it was a foolish rumour himself, but that he was repeating it exactly the way he heard it.

As we parted company at the sawmill, Nwozuai didn't know how lucky he was that my machete was in my sack, not my right hand. I knew very well that the next person he met would learn how people were saying that the decomposing corpse that Meme Jumai ate *had even died of snake poison*.

Suddenly, I knew the content of the new mocking songs of the village girls, and the reason for the laughter that kept breaking out behind me everywhere I went in the village. It wasn't on account of my wife and sons. It was on account of my goat. I felt the blood in my head clotting and heating up and couldn't see very well any more. When Nwozuai disappeared from sight I sat on an old anthill and cursed him for almost an hour. It was fully dark before I found the strength to go home.

8th June 2000

ONE TUBER LEFT AND SEVEN days to go! God will help his own. This afternoon I left the farm early to attend the burial of my distant cousin, Journeyman. For a poor man, it was a well-attended burial, although most people turned out to see the coffin rather than the corpse. Journeyman died last December but because his son was in Rome, our greedy elders refused to bury him. Bury him, bury him, his age grade kept pressing, but no, the elders wanted to eat Italian *lira*. They knew that once Journeyman was inside the ground, it would be impossible to squeeze anything from his son; so they took him to the mortuary and left him there, like kidnappers waiting for a ransom. Imagine that! For five months, a man who died of hunger has been sleeping naked in a corpse's dormitory whose room rate was higher than the biggest hotel in Warri!

It was last week that the elders finally realised that Journeyman's son who had abandoned his father in life had also abandoned him in death. I don't know how they settled the mortuary bill. What I know is that I'm not paying any levy, if they like they can ostracise me, because I didn't join them to scheme for *lira*.

But why am I writing all these things? It's because this afternoon I attended Journeyman's burial. It was a proper poor man's burial. If you want to see people dancing reluctantly then you should attend a pauper's funeral. Today, Journeyman's mourners were dancing purely out of duty, because no one

was going to smell food or beer after the dance.

The dead man's body was lying-in-state in Ifetu's casket. Ifetu was another of our cousins. People used to call him a wicked man, but that was a naked lie, because ordinarily wicked people would never have allowed him to enter their meeting-place. In fact, known wizards were careful not to quarrel with Ifetu for fear of haemorrhoids — which were his preferred means of afflicting his enemies. Ifetu knew he had no friends. He also knew Ikerre's penchant for avenging people's misdeeds on their corpses; so he bought himself an expensive coffin, which he stored under his bed. He also dug and plastered a shallow grave right in his courtyard. He figured that whatever grievances his neighbours nursed against him, eventually when his corpse started to stink, someone would tip him into his coffin and push it into the grave.

Unfortunately a drunken truck-driver crushed him last week in far away Ipoti, where he had gone to collect his rents. What was left of his corpse has been festering since then, but the stink of it hasn't disturbed anyone in Ikerre-Oti enough to bring him home to his beautiful coffin. As for Journeyman, kind pauper though he was, nobody was willing to contribute a kobo for his coffin after the lira fiasco. The elders commandeered Ifetu's coffin for his burial; which is how come Journeyman was lying-in-state in a coffin more expensive than the house he died in.

When I went to see Journeyman's body, I shivered. And I realised why they say that the chick should heed the fate of elder cousins at Christmas, because that would be her fate, come Easter. One look at Journeyman's bony head, and I also realised why they say that it is only what a person eats that he carries to his grave. Journeyman's other children have been peddling the story that their father died of AIDS. What I want to know is: where did Journeyman get AIDS? Do people get AIDS from eating cassava peel? *Nonsense and tenpence!* People just try to win unnecessary sentiments for nothing's sake. Posing with a big man's disease, as if it's hard to recognise the body of a person who died of hunger.

9th June 2000

I LEFT THE FARM THREE hours early today: I lived on fruits throughout yesterday so that I can eat yam today; and when you have tried both. You'll notice a difference between blackberries and food. I measured two inches of yam and boiled it with a tray of spinach. My trap had refused to catch bush rats or grasscutters for a few months now so I fried some dried termites to go with the palm oil. That trap of mine is a real puzzle; the last time it caught an animal was the week before Chentus started farming the land between my farm and the river. No matter how early I reach the farm these days, he's there before me. One of these days I'll catch him red-handed. As Ikerre people say, the grains that the chicken spends her life scratching up doesn't end up in the stomach of the goat.

I am still hungry when I finished my meal so I cracked some palm nuts and chewed their hard kernels, escorting them down with great gulps of water. Every time I cracked a nut I sneezed loud enough to drown the crack of the shell. Ikerre-Oti has the most foolish traditions in the world. There was no child in my house and I couldn't, on top of all my problems, afford the scandal that an old man was cracking kernels like a child.

I tried to sleep; but every time I closed my eyes, I saw a host of flies gathering on the red carpet of my dead goat's tongue. Why did I cut portions from the bloody goat anyway? Especially with that evil Nwozuai always dropping in next door to harass

his aunt for food. It was desperation, short and simple. And see where the whole thing had landed me now.

I'd buried the goat's entrails and foetuses right away, but I'd also fed Ma'Caro's dog a portion on the sly. The greedy mongrel had never eaten that much meat in its life. I had to drive it from my compound with burning firewood when it wanted to embarrass me.

By evening when I returned from the farm I didn't see it again. It was around six o'clock that I heard Caro wailing. Come and see my chest *knacking!* I allowed one whole hour to pass, then when things quietened a little, I called Caro to the hedge. I asked her after her dog.

It's dead, she told me, beginning to wail again.

I hurried into my house, trembling like a man whose spouse had just tested positive to HIV. That was when I dumped the rest of my goat down the pit latrine. The crying that I cried when I buried my goat was nothing compared with the one I cried when I buried the pieces of my goat.

At least, I didn't cry again when Ma'Caro told me how Johnny Bus-Stop's taxi ran over her daughter's dog. What puzzled her was why the dog was too lazy to dodge a thirty-year-old banger. That exact and particular news, I took like a man. Should I not also have eaten my goat-meat like a man and let what happens, happen? Now, my reputation is in tatters just because of meat that I didn't even taste. This world is not fair at all.

10th June 2000

FIVE DAYS MORE BEFORE the harvest! Unless I start skipping one day between meals I'm clearly going to run out of food. Sleep finished from my eyes at 4 am this morning. I tried and tried but my eyes stood open like a bereaved widow's. I lay there on my bed assessing my last eleven inches of yam. If there's one gift we didn't discuss on the day God made me, it was the gift of fasting. The very thought of a full day without a meal gives me a headache. Particularly when I imagine Ma'Abel cooking my yams for the Vulcaniser.

I am looking face-to-face at Starvation and I have to confess, he's an ugly beast. Yes, Maxwell Otombri seems to be drastically losing weight as well. Even Otudo was recently caught stalking Oba's fowl with his son's catapult. *Shameless man*. Yet, Ikerre-Oti people have been saying it for years, and it's true: the crab in the pot finds no solace in the fact that his whole family is boiling with him.

Kai, but I'm hungry! I dressed for the farm and stole out of my house with some *pirim* seeds in my bag. As early as that, I could hear cackling in Ma'Etibang's darkened house. I'm not surprised that people call her a witch. When I got to my farm I didn't enter, instead I walked down Katai Road, past Chentus' farm, towards the stream. As I neared the trail where I set my trap, I heard that beautiful sound of a crying animal. My heart started pounding again, but this time it had a good reason to do so: there was a bush rat struggling in my trap.

If I can't say the truth in my diary I don't know where else I can say it again. I was just shaking and swallowing saliva as I looked at the rat. It was the fattest rat I have seen in a long time. If you see how its eyes were shining! In the light of my torch, its whiskers were dancing as if it was already roasting on my brazier. A bush rat is a bush rat; but maybe because I hadn't eaten meat in months, it looked as big as a buck. I reached into my bag for a knife to remove its entrails... and my fingers touched the *pirim* seeds.

Kai! There're many kinds of hell, apart from the one waiting for sinners in the grave.

If you saw the fight I fought with myself! I knelt down there in the darkness before my dying breakfast, with my knife in one hand and the *pirim* seeds in the other. Hunger was physically demonstrating to me, what the bushfire did with the ears of the rat, as I tried to decide between my stomach and my head. My stomach was screaming for breakfast but my head was telling me to poison both the rat and the trap-thief. In the end, common sense settled the matter: if I left my house at 4 am again to check my trap people will call me a wizard on top of my troubles. If I wanted to harvest meat from my trap again, I had to solve the problem of the thief once and for all, that very morning.

So I dropped the sweet *pirim* seeds and the rat chewed them immediately. Some animals are cursed. The same long-throat that landed it in soup had now put it into fire. It convulsed and died immediately. I got up and left at once. I've cried over a woman. I've cried over a goat. I'm not going to cry over a rat as well.

I returned home and boiled four out of my eleven inches of yam. By 6.30 a.m. I left for the farm as usual. I checked my trap and it was empty as usual. I started to sing. I didn't think such happiness was possible for a robbery victim.

11th June 2000.

I LEAVE FOR THE FARM before dawn today. I have noticed that a mango tree along the way is slowly ripening its fruit. The disgrace of being seen on a mango tree is something that can drive a fifty-year-old Ikerre-Oti man into exile. The small girls don't even need to coin a song. They have many ready-made ones into which to slot one's name. This is the sort of thing that my sons could have been doing for us had they not succumbed to the temptation of quick money and pumping tyres.

I got to the tree before dawn and I was still up there when Samuel Ekiti arrived underneath. He had already hoisted himself on the lower bough when he heard me rustling in the tree. He paused. Because of that horrible snuff of his, he's the only man I know who snores while he's awake. I could hear the fear in his breathing, which slowly gave way to anger.

I listened to that breathing for a long time, forming the furious conviction that he was same thief who stole my plantain on Sunday. He must have known that I was no snake. Yet, he dared not use his torchlight. To expose me was to expose himself as well, for his feet were also firmly on the mango tree. Eventually, fifteen minutes before it would have been light enough for us to recognise each other anyway; he hurried away, perhaps to find another tree. I contented myself with the dozen fruits I had picked already and hurried off to the farm, with my harvest sack heavy with something more than tools today.

At the farm this morning, I noticed a termite trail that led from a new anthill and I emptied a small bottle of kerosene across the trail and over the hill. There were some beetle holes as well, but since I didn't have money for pesticides, there was really nothing I could do about it.

I don't work very long before I tire. During the worst of the heat I sit in the farm shelter and eat mangoes. All the while I was eating the fruits all I was thinking about was roast bush rat. After throwing away the last of the mango seeds I dried my hands and sighed deeply, all the while looking lustfully at the lush yam bushes on their poles. God knows that I cannot afford another scandal right now; otherwise I'd dig up a yam tuber on the sly, ahead of the village harvest festival.

In the evening I boiled and ate four inches of yam. Then I put on the lace outfit I made for the second burial of my father. I also removed the last three inches of yam from the pole and placed it behind my trunk. Why should any visitor see three inches of yam on fifteen harvest poles? If I am starving, do I have to announce it to the whole world?

I went over to Chentus' house near the butcher's yard. His wife was counting the eggs laid by their chickens. Where's your husband? I asked.

He went to Chemist to buy diarrhoea medicine, she said.

Is that so? I asked sympathetically.

She was still counting her eggs as she confided, Since this afternoon, all of us in the house have been shitting like agric chickens.

But can't you see the wickedness of human beings? They have their chickens at home; they eat eggs every blessed day, but they won't leave my rats alone for me. That's too bad, I told her. Tell him that the next time he takes meat from my trap it will be real poison, not *pirim!* The woman's mouth fell open, giving the game away.

I went home thinking the sacrifice of my rat meat well worth it.

12th June 2000

I REALLY DON'T KNOW HOW I entered Barika's shop on my way from the farm this evening. He was grooming his sleek beard behind his cash register as I walked shamefully around his aisles. It was perhaps the only supermarket in Ikerre-Oti deserving of the name.

Eventually, I approached the richest man in Ikerre-Oti. Behind him, a greying poster advised, *No Credit Today, Try Tomorrow*. He smiled genially at me, Chief Jumai; we haven't seen you for a long time! For Barika, every customer was a chief. It was foolish flattery like this that separated people from their money.

I told him that people did not go on condolence visits with empty hands, and that it was the emptiness of my hands that had kept me away from his shop.

Barika punched his cash register with regard to a stove wick for Edna as he laughed and replied with his own proverb. True, Chief Jumai, but all that's necessary for a condolence visit in respect of a dead goat is a skinning knife.

I paused. The proverb was in standard use, though hardly apt, but my unfortunate connection with dead goats caused me to examine the old trader's face for sly undertones. He smiled, as I realised why Ikerre-Oti people say that in a dwarf's presence, bending down is construed as an insult.

I decided I wasn't in a position to be sensitive. I have come to you in respect of a *little* c-c-c-credit, I said, You know very well that harvest is three days away, and that I planted a few hundred bushes of yam... I couldn't continue, for the mournful look had entered Barika's face. He picked up his calculator and began to punch an idle fortune.

How *little* a credit have you come for? He asked, and I came straight to the point, putting a 2-kg bag of semolina on his checkout counter.

Just for *two* days, I added.

Barika sighed and put away his calculator. You remember that story of Tortoise and Hyena? He asked me.

Which particular one? I asked, disliking the trend of the discussion. I had come for food, not the kind of foolish folktales Abel spent his life spinning instead of farming or looking for a proper job. Yet, if the hearing of a tale was the price of food then I was desperate to pay it.

Hyena was cooking the pottage for which he was famous, began Barika, resting his head on the *No Credit Today* poster. The smell of it was so bewitching that all the animals gathered in envy. Yet it was Tortoise and his sweet tongue that got to eat it all. You've forgotten how? He promised Hyena his beautiful daughter in marriage in return for his pottage! It was an irresistible bargain for Hyena, whose foul breath had made a notorious bachelor. Many months later, when the debt became bad, Lion's court sat and Hyena made his case. You must remember Tortoise's defence: Oh King, Hyena gave me his pottage knowing I had no daughter. I still have none, but when I have one, most certainly, he shall have his bride! And the king said...

Barika broke off his story to punch his cash register in respect of Dumbili's loaves. Several gossips who seemed more interested in Lion's judgement than their shopping were hanging around, glancing from me to the bag of semolina as the miser in Barika counted and recounted Dumbili's money. I drifted around his shop a little, and when I got near the door, slipped out.

They can have the story.

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I headed for my trap only to find a grasscutter struggling there! I didn't know, as between my dinner and myself, who was shaking the more. It was the back of my hoe that killed it. I didn't know, as between the sweat on its fur and the saliva in my mouth, which was more. I returned home right away. It must have been a small animal, because I ate it once and it was finished. In fact it must have been an *infant* because the only bones left in my pot, from which I ate directly, were claws.

Hunger is a terrible thing. Once I started eating, I just couldn't stop. I that threw in my last three inches of yam, planning to stretch the meal till harvest, I couldn't stop eating until it was all gone. True, hunger is a demon.

Food is good, and anyone who disagrees should just step aside for me.

13th June 2000

AND I THOUGHT I WAS suffering before! Today was the pomp and plain beginning of my nightmare. From morning until 5 pm, the only thing that moved inside my mouth was my tongue. Somehow, I managed to finish my work on the farm. It is still two days to the harvest, yet my pots were as empty as the mind of a simpleton. Sometimes I think that this village is dedicated to the devil. The sort of wicked traditions that it has! Why can't a man eat his own crops before the collective sacrifice was made at the village harvest festival?

When I returned from the farm, I hobbled over to the bathroom stall like an invalid. Over the hedge, Nwozuai told me that while Calamatus was duping people left, right and centre, my senior son, Abel was sending emissaries from the Vulcaniser's clan to ask for the hand of an Ubiaja girl in marriage.

Which is another clear evidence that Meme Jumai is actually dead. What else can explain my absence from my first son's marriage? First he hides his girlfriend's pregnancy from me — as though I'm the village wizard whose favourite delicacy is the content of a swelling womb — now this: *emissaries from the vulcaniser's clan!*

After bathing, I discovered a lizard that had crawled into one of my barren pots. It had been dead a couple of days. I threw it away. I saw how it was possible to die the death of a

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lizard, a death without heritage, lying three or four days in my bed before I am discovered, and even then, thrown away with hissing, with neither outcry nor mourning. I washed my pot grimly. The passing of a man should be different from the passing of a lizard.

I noticed that my house was beginning to dance gently in front of my eyes. I dressed slowly, deciding that it had to be the Etongs, a large, wealthy family of eight sons and not a single daughter. They have a farm more than ten hectares large and their stall at the expressway market is still full of yams and snails to this day. Yet, even though Chief Etong was my distant cousin, and my father once served an apprenticeship in the blacksmith forge of his mother's stepfather, going to their house wasn't an easy decision.

Back in '89 when Calamatus had his appendix operation, Chief Etong had visited us in hospital. To impress the villagers who had gathered at the bedside to commiserate, he rebuked me for not coming to his house to collect his own contribution towards the hospital bills. He reminded me that we were Africans, that one man's problem was his brother's burden. That very night, I was at his house and he said Tomorrow. I was at his house the next day and he said Tomorrow. He said Tomorrow eight more times before I abused him thoroughly and went home.

Yet, wasn't that ten years ago? Since then we have resumed exchanging greetings and sharing kola nuts. I got there just before 6 pm and I stayed two hours. Despite the stunning aroma of Afang soup coming from the kitchen, a callous thing happened. Mrs. Etong didn't bring the family dinner into the parlour as usual. Instead, from 7 pm onwards, the family took turns at disappearing into the kitchen from which they emerged minutes later with a glass of water and a toothpick in the corner of their mouths. Chief Etong himself, with whom I shared a locker in form five, shamelessly made his own disappearance and returned only to fall asleep in front of me.

It was when he started snoring that I went home. — It wasn't me who wrote a desperate letter to Abel. I sat there watching my right hand scribbling the most sycophantic idiocies. I sat there, watching my hunger consume my shame the way dogs

lick up vomit. I don't know what miracle has happened to him in two weeks, but if Abel has money to marry his Ubiaja girl, he should have money to feed his own father for two days. I can't sleep much tonight. If I send the letter through Johnny Bus-Stop first thing tomorrow, I could get Abel's cash by evening.

14th June 2000

TOO WEAK TO FARM TODAY. I lay here dreaming of food and listening to voices from the street talking of masquerades and dances for the harvest festival. I reread my letter to my son. It read like something written by a man lying prostrate on the ground. My shame struggled with hunger. I tried to tear the letter but I watched in amazement as my trembling hands folded it away.

At noon I visited my cousin, Chemist. Neziyanya eats well, harvest or no harvest. It's just that wickedness has poisoned people's minds; nowadays only those who were formed in the same womb consider themselves to be 'brothers'. If only people will listen to their memories once in a while. Wasn't it just nine years ago that the fake drug scandal blew open and the CID came for Neziyanya? Didn't he spend two nights in my pit latrine before someone ate bribe to quench the case? Yet, people are so ungrateful. The last time I mentioned that favour, he had asked me insolently to calculate the two-day rental of my latrine, so he could pay me once and for all.

Anyway, my arrival at Neziyanya's house was perfectly timed. The pestle pounding the yam was just tailing off and the heady aroma of *bang*a soup was in the air. One of those Ikerre traditions that no one can complain of is this hospitality that mealtimes evoke. Here, it is considered more honourable to skimp on one's children's rations than to deny food to a visitor

fortunate enough to walk into a meal. Not only had I walked into a meal, I had met my cousin in a jovial mood, for I heard Nezianya's expansive laughter as I knocked on the door.

The laughter ended as if its owner had fallen inside a river; then a child asked: Who is it?

It's Uncle Jumai, I said. Open the door.

There was some whispering. Then, in a voice apparently strained by a resolve not to have her ration cut in half, the child said: They're not in!

I shook the door handle. It's me, Uncle Jumai, I assured her. I was getting angry myself, I mean, who was this brat telling me that I couldn't enter my brother's house? Open I say, let me message you!

Then something strange happened to the voice. In fact, it was after what happened at Nezianya's door that I accepted that things have utterly spoiled in this country. The voice started out childlike, cracked mid-sentence, and ended up an angry roar: *I say they're not in, what is it? GO AWAY!* I staggered back, shaken by the venom in Chemist's voice.

I stumbled away, burning with shame. My feet were taking me towards the motor park to dispatch my SOS to Abel. It was a good thing, all told, that I ran into Nwozuai on the way. With his previous misdemeanours still very fresh in my mind, I ignored him completely, but as he approached, his melon head turned left and right and I knew he had news for me. There was something irresistible about Nwozuai's gossip, although I had never known him to bring good news.

He brought his mouth so close that I smelt the stale beans pottage in his breath. *Nonsense and tenpence!* This world is an evil place. Here was Nwozuai's mouth smelling of beans, a man who doesn't have a farm, who hasn't done one morning's work in ten years!

If it weren't for the fact that you and I have the same lineage, he began, and I told him I was in haste. So he told me how Abel's marriage bid had ended. The emissaries had been asked if it wasn't true that the groom's family was so poor that they lived on the meat of dead animals and they were driven home

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in disgrace. I think Nwozuai would have said more, but by that time I had bitten him twice. He set off down Katai Road screaming as if it was a lion and not an ordinary man that he had been talking with.

Afterwards, I stood there like a palm tree whose crown had withered. Inside me was the emptiness of a man who buries two sons in one day; because I didn't need a soothsayer to tell me that I would never see them again. It wasn't me who told my hands to tear up Abel's letter.

15th June 2000.

HARVEST DAY. IT WAS DAWN and even the dead could feel the excitement in Ikerre-Oti; as for me, I was so weak I could hardly lift a hoe. By nightfall I'd be prosperous again, but first I needed enough strength to harvest yams.

My father had left me four things: the house, the gun, the TV and my surname. That morning, as I pushed my black and white set into a jute bag, I felt as though I were selling my name. At the electrician's house, his wife was busy folding up their mattress, converting their home into a shop while he sat on his high stool, soldering the guts of a small transistor. All around him, on wooden shelves, were various appliances that hardship had pushed their owners to sell. He had cleaned them up now in preparation for harvest and the seasonal prosperity of Ikerre people.

I put my TV on his workbench, not liking how it looked amongst the other TVs in the workshop. It works like new, I told Okosisi, who wasn't a very polite man: You yourself know that they don't make televisions the way they used to.

At first I thought he had seen something funny in the radio he was mending, but when he continued to laugh after it fell and broke, I realized he wasn't going to make me an offer. My heart was doing that nonsense again and my saliva had become a resinous gum. I went home.

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The sun had come out well well before shame allowed me to enter Ma'Caro's house. *Please* can I have a plate of pap? I said to her.

It isn't a strange thing to ask for food in a *buka*. But the way I said the *please* warned her that I didn't have the means to pay for it. I had never done that before. I could see that she was frightened I might start weeping in her presence. She hurried into her kitchen for some food. By the time I made the cover of my house, I was actually weeping out of shame.

It was eight o'clock before I was finally ready for the farm. It was just as I stepped out of the house that the first of the villagers returned from the farmlands, leaping and rolling on the ground. They were screaming: *Termites! Beetles!* And the way they were rolling in the sand, you would think the insects were in their pants rather than their yams.

Why people have to be so emotional is what I don't understand. I returned my harvest basket to the house and went to the farm with only my hoe. It was my longest journey ever. I met many more hysterical villagers. I saw many tubers riddled with holes, but I said not a word. It was that resin thing in my mouth again.

Yet, my mind was sparking. *Kai*, but this world is wicked. Is there nothing like fairness any more? Is there nothing like mercy? Is there nothing like justice? Is there nothing like salary after a hard month's labour? Like harvest after a terrible, terrible planting? The first tuber I dug up was riddled with holes. It had just enough starch to keep the yam plant healthy, not enough to sell, not enough to eat. I didn't dig up another.

The walk back to my house was my shortest, but full of memories. I walked carefully, like a full gourd of palm wine that must not spill. I remembered the day I named my second son. I had written to my father requesting that he send a name. He was in Utagba-Uno at the time, a messenger at the postal agency. So he sent a letter back: Calamatus. I turned the name up and I turned it down. *Calamatus*. So I asked Johnny Bus-Stop, who delivered the letter in his taxi, whether there was a name like Calamatus among the people of Utagba-Uno, and he said that his own business was to bring the letter and not

to interpret it. So I named my second son Calamatus. And when people asked me, Calamatus? I told them to keep the question until my father came.

Was that not how, that Christmas, my father visited and asked whether it was a specie of vegetable we were referring to when we spoke the name Calamatus or a human child.

So I asked: Weren't you the one that sent the name?

And he said, No, that *Clement* was the name he told the letter-writer and that the boy *knacked* his head, *knacked* his head, and wrote what he wrote. But by then it was too late. Calamatus had become Calamatus. The tailor had erred in his cutting, and it must become a new style.

I'm home, now. I packed away my tools carefully and lay on my bed. I listened to the voice of the village from morning till evening. It was a bad harvest for yams but beans and cassava farmers were not too badly off.

When I heard the sound of their harvest masquerades whooping on the streets, I rose and brought down the double barrel. It has four more cartridges. It is enough. I will take it to the Village Square and square up with the wicked. My father left me a heritage, and I'll leave my village one. If a man finds no rest for his elbows, he can at least use his knees. I've crawled through life like a lizard but I won't die like one. I am leaving now for the Village Square, and let what happens happen.