

## Resurrection Before Burial

From his room where he is reading the feature article, "Tradition and Change," in his favourite weekly, *Gadfly*, Owen Junior hears a car move out of the compound for the fourth time since he woke up about an hour ago. He parts the curtains overlooking the gate and sees the guard opening the gate for another vehicle, a mini-bus. He ponders on the unusual vehicular movements in and out of the compound for a while before continuing with his reading. Presently, he hears the sound of drumming and promptly drops the magazine to find out what is happening. As he closes the door of his room, he sees his sister emerging from the staircase.

"Hey! Amen, what are they doing outside?"

"Who?"

"All those people making noise."

"Where were you? You mean, you don't know what is happening?"

"What is it that is happening?" asks Owen.

"Where were you? Of course I know. The undergraduate must have his siesta."

"Little girl, I have just no time for you this afternoon. I have legs that can lead me to find out myself." As Owen bypasses her to go down the stairs, she now decides to volunteer the information.

"Anyway, big boy, we are going to have a party. That is the reason for the noise. The bus brought the musicians and they want to see Mummy because Daddy has travelled to Benin to make other arrangements."

"What party. What arrangements? Nobody is having his birthday now."

"Somebody is having his death-day."

"Death-day?"

"Yes, death-day."

"You mean that somebody died."

"Yes, Daddy's Daddy."

"So, the old man has finally died?"

"Has he been trying to die before?" mocks his sister.

Although slightly piqued by this verbal swipe, Owen Junior ignores his sister and calls, "Mummy."

"You won't find her, Mr. Snob. She has gone to the market to buy things for the party."

Mrs. Oghogho Edokpolor is sitting on a high stool in front of a store in Tejuosho market scrutinising the material being unfolded for her. The smart trader studies her countenance as his boy unfolds a bale of black lace material for her. Sensing that she is not impressed, he quickly brings another black material decorated with a shiny border, and signals his boy to withdraw. He notices the brightening up of her face even as she wipes off sweat with her handkerchief. "This one is fine," she says and asks, "How many yards do you have?" This question gives the trader the idea that this customer must be "loaded with money" because customers normally ask for the price first to ascertain whether it is within their reach before asking for the number of yards. He therefore lures her into the store so that another seller would not attract her with a new design.

"Madam, di heat too much today-o. Come inside make fan cool your body."

"How many yards you get?" The trader still ignores this question because he does not have many yards of it. He leads her into the store and directs her to a chair before answering her question.

"Thank you, Madam. True, true, we get fine material. No customer go come for inside this my shed without seeing fine material to buy." He still ignores the question accompanying the compliment for he does not want her to go to another store. As she sits down, the trader orders his boy to bring her a very cold bottle of coca cola. He then brings out a shiny black material decorated with transparent stones which catch the colours of its environment.

"Wonderfull I have not seen this one before."

"Na new design. Na only yesterday lem bring am come from Cotonou, Camerouns. You know, dem import material from France. Not like dis place where dem insist on made in Nigeria. But I know say high calibre woman like you no go like to buy local material."

"I cannot even allow material that is made here to touch my body let alone buying it. My husband will not like me to disgrace him in public by wearing an inferior material. God forbid!" Mrs. Edokpolor replies impressed by the seller's acknowledgement of her copious look.

"My brother dey bring me made in France material. So I dey get designs wey other traders no get." The woman is impressed. The boy offers her a bottle of coca cola which she accepts while repeating her question, "How many yards ..." This time, the trader does not allow her to finish the question before quickly replying.

"I get am plenty. How many yards you want?"

"I need the material for *aso ebi* for up to thirty people. It is for a big burial. My husband and myself, our two children, and close friends shall wear it."

"I no sure say you go fit buy dis one for thirty people." The trader informs her again testing the strength of her pocket. "No worry. Just tell me whether you have plenty." The trader now confirms that money is not the problem because the woman still has not asked about the price.

"A person who get too much money for waste for expensive uniform for burial no dey pity him money. No be me go pity am," the trader muses as he unrolls yards of the material while silently thanking his stars for bringing this cash madam to his store. He resolves to 'milk' the woman by doubling the price of the material.

"Madam, dis cloth fine well well. How many yards you say you want?"

"*Aso ebi* for thirty people. Let's say about six yards for one person."

"Madam, buy five metres for one person."

"I don't know whether it will be enough."

"Im go reach. Buy five meter for one person. Na double meter. Na one ten a meter."

"One ten what?"

"Na hundred and ten pounds Madam. Na so we dey sell. We dey buy am with foreign money so we sell in foreign..."

"I am not questioning the logic. I only want to know the currency. I have dollars here not pounds. If you insist on pounds...."

"Sorry Ma. I no mean to annoy you. I go accept dollars. Dollar-o, pound-o, even sef Cameroon money, all na money pass

naira.”

“What is the last price?” asks Mrs. Edokpolor.

“Madam, I don look you. You be high class. So, na last price I give you, but I go give small discount.”

“Okay bring for thirty people.”

The trader’s boy uses his calculator to compute the amount and informs the woman.

“Hundred and ten pounds times thirty times five is sixteen thousand five hundred pounds only. Convert to dollars na thirty three thousand dollars. Discount bring am down to thirty thousand.”

Mrs. Edokpolor begins to bring out bundles of dollars.

A mercedes 250 XXL saloon car is entering the compound of River Side Clinic for the second time today. The cleaners look up from the lawn. The chauffeur comes out first and runs to the other side of the car to open the door for a man clad in expensive red *agbada* and sitting on the right side corner of the back seat popularly known as ‘owner’s corner.’ The cleaner whispers loudly to his mate, “That is Chief Owen Edokpolor. The man is big director for big company in Lagos and London and America.”

“I tink dis na di second time I see di car here today. Wetin ‘im dey come to do for dis small place?”

“It is because of that nurse who looks like stockfish. She is the one he is looking for. She says the man is her brother.”

“How can? That bone no go fit be sister to dis shiny flesh wey I see just now.”

“It is true. Their Papa is the dead man or maybe almost dead man who is in the private room.”

“*Iye mweel* Party don land for big man house. Make I begin purge my belle, evacuate di bad food inside it, make big space for better food wey I go eat for di man’s orbito. For which side dem live sef?”

“We shall soon know when they announce the burial arrangements. The only problem is that they have not allowed him to see his Papa.”

“Why?” Maybe him don die and dem wan prepare di body for burial.”

“I don’t know. Nurse Meg says that it is the doctor’s order. She

is the only one who is allowed to enter the room."

"Wit doctor no-ow. Mh. I no know wetin di doctor dey find for her body."

"Don't talk like that. The doctor is kind to all of us not just Nurse Meg."

"Anyway sha-a. Dat one no be my business. Make I just go ready. God don butter my bread. Big man don die. I go enjoy for di party."

The chief has entered the reception hall. He looks disdainfully around and again wonders how his friends can accompany him to this low class place to bring his father's corpse. He walks to the doctor's room, knocks and without waiting for any response, enters immediately. Instead of the doctor, it is his half sister, Meg, he meets.

"Who be that?" She looks up and recognises her elder brother.

"*Kooo Broda*," she greets in Edo.

"Where is the doctor?" he asks without acknowledging her greeting.

"He hasn't come."

"Is this how he runs his hospital, in absentia? No wonder my father died here!"

"He hasn't died yet, Bro."

"Then let us transfer him to a better hospital."

"This hospital is good, Bro."

"My father should die in a Teaching Hospital not in this dingy place. My friends will laugh at me."

"But he is recovering."

"Are you sure he is recovering?"

"I don't know. He may die. He is in the hand of God."

"I want him in my own hands. He must be out of this place. I have arranged for an ambulance."

"But you cannot move him in his state. He will die in your hands and people will talk."

"Then let the doctor do it immediately."

"I'll tell him when he comes."

There is another knock. "Who is that?"

"Na me. Edokpolor Edokpolor."

Nurse Meg opens the door for another half brother, the most senior in the family. After a snappy exchange of greetings, the senior son informs her that he has not found the key to their

father's room. His half brother, who loathes him, gives him a contemptuous look before leaving the room unceremoniously.

"What do you want from the room?" asks Nurse Meg.

"I wan paint am."

"But it is only the outside that you people are painting."

"Visitors go enter 'im room see 'im corpse so I go paint di inside."

"But Papa is not yet dead."

"Yes but 'im don dey die. Him go die soon by di grace of God."

Nurse Meg grimaces at her brother's verbalisation of his wish for their father's death. She is clearly annoyed although she is not shocked by his attitude. She contains herself to continue with the unpleasant dialogue.

"Where did you get the money for painting the house? You have never given Papa anything even during the Ague festival which requires you as a first son to pay him homage with presents."

"Shut up! You no get any right to talk to me like dat. You be woman and you be my junior. I say, shut up! Make you begin dey find place wey you go live. I no go keep you for dat house after Papa's burial. I just dey warn you now."

Ordinarily, she would have felt desperate because of his callousness but she simply gloats over it and instead challenges him.

"You can't eject me. By tradition I must have a place in my father's house."

"After burial, 'im no go be Papa house again. Na my own house 'im go come be. Edokpolor Edokpolor house."

"We go see!" she says defiantly.

"Wetin we go see. A beg give me di key."

"Which key?" asks Meg, her mind still on her brother's threat to eject her if their father should die.

"Papa's room 'im key."

"I don't have it."

"But you live with am."

"He did not give it to me."

"Search 'im bag. If you no give me di key when I come back, I go break di door." He storms out.

Sister Meg resolves not to tell her father that her brother has declared his intention to eject her from the house when he dies

because he would be worried. She unlocks the private room quietly. Although the door made little noise, her father opens his eyes. She locks the door very quietly and kneels beside her father in greeting. He smiles at her tenderly and raises his once feeble but now strong hand which she holds tenderly for a few moments.

Then she asks, "How are you Papa?"

"I think my body is filling out."

"You look very well."

"Why won't I look well. All di food wey I been dey eat here nko?"

"The bill is almost one thousand naira already." Says Meg.

The old man chuckles, "Make di bill reach two thousand sef. I don't care. Make I chop my own now. How dem dey prepare now? Make you tell me di latest news."

"Your senior son came."

"Edokpolor Edokpolor?"

"Yes."

"Wetin him want? Him wan see if I don die?"

"No. Him wants the key of your room. He has painted the house, na only your room remain."

"My house wey never see paint since your Mama die!" exclaims the old man springing up from the bed.

"Di whole place is white now like that time of my Mamma's obituary."

"Ah Ah. I no want white. 'Im go dirty quick quick. Make dem paint am blue or brown. You know, as di house near di road like dat, 'im go dirty quick quick with white paint."

"But how will I tell him that. You know that he will not listen."

"Dat one no hard at all. When you reach house eh? Just shout am, make everybody hear you. Make small trouble. Say na me tell you my spirit no go want white paint. Him go take fear. Him go change di colour one time."

"What about di key? He will come back."

"Give am di key. Na my bank book 'im dey find but I remove am before I come here." Meg bursts out laughing, then remembering that nobody should hear the sound of laughter coming out of the room of a "dying man," she covers her mouth with both hands while stiffling the laughter midway.

"You are really very clever, Papa."

"Cunny man die, cunny man bury am. No be so?" he replies and adds, "Small time my house go get new look too like me."

"No be only new look. The house is filling up with food which will last us for many years." She goes on to explain.

"Brother's wife sent a lorry load of food all the way from Lagos. Bags of rice, beans, yams, onions, and even *Oyibo* food wey me no know. Maybe the foreign food is for Bro's foreign partners."

"We go sell dem. Di food too much."

"She sent her housekeeper with one fine bed that shines like gold. She brought bed sheets and fine lace material for decorating the bed on which you would lie in state."

"We go use di cloth make *agbada* and you go make your own *buba* and *iro*. We go wear am go do thanksgiving to God for church." Meg looks at him with wonder and admiration.

"No wonder my Mamma been dey call you old monkey. You cunny cunny too much, pass monkey own sef."

"Na survival. I used all my money train di two boys. Wetin I no sell? Sell land, and even sell my Morris Minor car just to pay their school fees for London. I no go school. Na im I talk say my pickin dem must go school well well. But wetin I get as my gain now? Nothing. Owen read book for London finish. Him go America, read all di book wey dey there finish. Him come dey for Lagos dey enjoy money. Him say na me make him Mamma die quick. I be God? Woman wey be witch, na fellow witches eat am for night. She no dey my house when she die. She leave me when I no get money again. Edokpolor Edokpolor know say him go inherit my property as tradition talk, so him come useless 'imself. School him no finish. Certificate him no get"

"I never understand why he did not finish in school."

"No be finish. Him never learn anything. I know book pass am, me wey never go school. Na only to chop him school fees with women 'im sabi. Him no wan read. Him no wan make him own money. Na my own him wan inherit. Na useless boy like 'im Mamma."

"Why did he leave our house sef?"

"Na me commot am when him begin steal. I tell am make 'im go join 'im Mamma wey dey do *asewo* for Lagos street."

There is silence as Meg watches her father's robust face with satisfaction. She wonders at the transformation that has taken place since he was admitted a week ago. "So it was really malnutrition that was his problem as the doctor had said," she thinks maintaining her steady gaze on him. The old man breaks

the silence.

"Na only you be my mistake. Na only you I no train for school. If not for dis small nurse maid wey your Mamma send you go, I for don die. No be only you dey take care of me now?" There is silence again. Again the old man breaks the silence.

"But I go surprise everybody when I die. Even dat house sef. Di useless boy no go get am."

"A beg no give me-o."

"I dey craze? I don arrange with lawyer. No worry. Na when I die people go know say I be real old monkey."

"My Papa, when did you arrange to see a lawyer? I fear you-o, my Papa."

"You tink you go fit know everything I do," he says patting a finger of her plaited hair sticking out of her cap.

"Papa, but you always tell me everything."

"When I die, you go know say 'im get some tings wey I no tell you."

"Like what, Papa?"

"Like wetin I go do di boy wey squander my money. I no go let am squander di small thing wey go remain when I die. No. I wan do something for you wey look after me in this my old age."

"I am happy to be the one living with you. Since my mother's death, you are the only one I have. My brothers don't have time for me. Maybe because their mothers quarrelled with Mamma. Maybe Bro Owen is ashamed of me because I am not educated. As for Bro Edokpolor, he hates everybody. You are all I have to care for." The old man closes his eyes as if in sleep.

Her words have touched him. He has always known that his daughter has a selfless devotion to her loved ones comparable only to her late mother's, but this verbal expression of it has affected him deeply. He recalls how her mother, Esosa, remained faithful to him all the time he recklessly got involved with other women who eventually left him when his fortune started declining. He remembers Iyobosa who declared that he was not the father of her six children and left with all of them. As for Iye Edokpolor and Iye Owen, he believed them to have been witches whose exit from his house was a blessing even though they continued making trouble from outside, "because they gave birth to boys," he thinks. He blesses the memory of Esosa who alone remained faithful to him just as her daughter is doing now. He

silently prays that Meg's loving heart endears her to someone who will merit such a selfless devotion. He smiles at his recollection of how he, himself, has taken care of her in his Will. He has already bought a twin duplex in her name at the Government Housing Estate. His lawyer will make it known to her when he dies. He had sold the house in which they live in order to complete payment for the new house. Meg is still watching him, thinking that he is sleeping peacefully not knowing that his mind is on his Will. He smiles and she thinks he is having a pleasant dream but he is in fact congratulating himself.

"I don't play my useless son's real game. Cunny man die, cunny man bury am."

Meanwhile, Meg smiles fondly at her father as her mind reviews the event of that night when he called her to his room and intimated her with his plans.

"I wan go hospital."

Meg was alarmed.

"No look like dat. I no sick. I just wan enjoy small. When I die now, my rich son go bring money for big party. I wan enjoy for my *obito* party now." Initially, Meg wanted to laugh but the logicity of his plan and the seriousness with which he said it forced her attention and ensured her sobriety.

"I know my son, Owen, rich well well and him no dey give me money because he say I no treat him Mamma well. I know he no like me, me wey send am go school. But, him go spend thousands to bury me when I die. He go do party to rejoice over my haggard dead body. So make I go hospital. You go plan am with that doctor wey dey help you. Him go gree. Una go say I don die or don dey die. My sons go plan *obito* party. I go resurrect after I don enjoy well well. I go come back for house come wait my death."

## GLOSSARY OF UNFAMILIAR WORDS

<i>agbada</i>	big three piece garment worn by men
<i>aso ebi</i>	uniform
<i>buba</i>	blouse
<i>iro</i>	wrapper
<i>iye nuwee</i>	my mother (an exclamation)
<i>koyo</i>	greetings
<i>obito</i>	obituary party
<i>oyibo</i>	of European stock