

## Over his own Dead Body

Yinka turns round to lie on her belly while stretching her arms wide on the big double-sized bed. Not satisfied with this position, she rolls on to the other half of it and curls herself in a foetal position. This does not soothe her troubled mind as a sudden surge of heat wells up inside her. She glances at the broken down air-conditioner which her son, Dapo, has taken to the repairer two times to no avail. There seems to be a sound breaking into her thoughts. She gets up from the bed straining her ears to ascertain whether the sound is from within her aching head or outside it. She switches on the light as if it has the power to help her determine the kind and source of the sound. The sound, faint and coming from a seemingly long distance, resembles a siren. "Maybe the governor and his entourage .... But where will they be going by this time of the night." She now thinks of the possibility of its coming from an ambulance or a police patrol vehicle. "More likely to be police chasing armed robbers." She thinks, recalling the spate of armed robbery in recent times. She never could contemplate how people were able to sleep peacefully with the threat posed by these night marauders. As for her, it was by the singular luck of her husband's place in the political class that she had police guards for the house the family occupied in the State's Council Quarters. But now, things have changed. As soon as Party for Progress, her husband's party, lost in the last elections, they had to move out of the Council house to their present house at Ugbowo estate which is as vulnerable as any other part of Benin City.

Yinka cannot complain about their loss of power for she has always regarded it as the bane of her family problems. She has always been comfortable even before her husband became a politician. How comfortable, she queries herself looking around the room? Her eyes scan the persian rug which a party member had presented her as a birthday gift, "in appreciation of your husband's good gestures to me," he had told her without

revealing that her husband had taken the party's share of the proceeds from the rural electrification contract which was not even executed and that he then had his eye on another contract to mobilise women for effective participation in politics, a venture which would require the presence of Yinka as wife of one of the ruling men. The air-conditioner has packed up but it is the least of her problems now. Her eyes rest on her husband's side of the bed which he has not slept on for several years. In the Council house, he was always preoccupied with one political activity or another both day and night. With the change in her husband's political fortunes, she had hoped their domestic life would be better. But she is disappointed as things have become even worse.

She queries the wisdom behind her continued use of their double-sized bed which occupies the larger part of this room that is smaller than the one she occupied at the Council quarters. It represents for her a repository of memories that are better forgotten. She decides that it is high time she removed it and substitute it with a smaller but cozier one. The blaring sound now becomes more discernible. "It is definitely a police siren," she thinks, and turns on her back and continues her ruminations. "Armed robbers have struck. Who is the victim this time." She shudders at the unjustness, the cruelty of some people who use force of arms to rob others of what rightly belongs to them. In a sudden flash of epiphany, her mind begins to draw a congruence between the robbers' forcefully dispossessing people of their property and the deprivation she is currently undergoing in her own home. The heat wells up inside her causing her to get up from the bed. She hears the clock chiming, three times. By now her head is so hot that she has to resort to the only thing that assuages her headache these days which is taking her complaints to her Maker. And she always chooses the living room for this communion especially at times like this when her own room has become psychologically stifling and physiologically oppressive to her. The siren blares again. She is now sure of herself and concludes that a big robbery must be taking place in the land. She gently opens her door and tiptoes through the corridor bypassing her husband's room. She makes to knock on the door of the room where her husband now sleeps to see if he will open up to her now, but decides that it is better to proceed to the Arbiter who never fails her.

She is still kneeling in front of the statue of Infant Jesus when she hears the creaking sound of a door being opened. Maybe one of the children is going to the toilet, she thinks, glancing sideways once and continuing with her prayers. "... that I continue to thank you for Dapo's admission into the University, for Ayo's continued excellence. Protect all of us from robbers of all kinds who now operate both at night and during the day depriving people of their possessions through deceit, intimidation, and force of arms. Peace has eluded my home for a long time, My Lord and my God. Please, whatever has made my husband restless since yesterday ..."

"Olayinka!"

She recognises her husband's voice. She is not startled. At least he is now out of his room and has decided to talk. She is, however, disturbed because from the way he has called her, she knows something is amiss. It is only on very rare occasions that he calls her name in full the way he has just done and those are usually when things are not normal. That was how he addressed her recently when he broke the news of his party's defeat in the last elections. Under normal circumstances, he calls her Yinka or more fondly Yinkus. She neither turns to answer his call nor continues with her prayers. She waits. He waits.

"Olayinka Adebayo." Yinka is now convinced that something terrible must have gone wrong. Even though the call this time is more gentle, it is no less menacing. What is more, he has called her by her maiden name, something he has not done for twenty years now. And the way he almost spelt out every letter in them ... She sighs, turns her head in his direction, slowly, almost slower than he had called her name. The now blaring siren does not scare her nor disturb the slow movement of her neck in response to her husband's call which is more menacing than the threat of robbery communicated by the siren.

She screams at the "apparition" she beholds. The piercing sound of her voice synchronises with the siren to rouse and draw out the children, Dapo and Ayo, who run out promptly as if they, themselves, have been apprehensive of an emergency. The scene looks like horned Chamcha confronting his wife and her lover in *Satanic Verses*. It is the kind of situation which Dapo with his rather queer sense of humour would have used to thrill his mother or his colleagues in the drama class except that this particular one appears too bizarre for such a pastime. Ayo grips

her brother's arm and in her fright digs her fingers into his skin as if her grip is not firm enough to strangle the poor boy who is equally appalled by the "apparition." Yinka's mouth has remained open after the initial scream that brought her children out of their rooms.

"My wife." This time, the call has a tinge of desperation but it appeals to Yinka's bond with her husband. She starts to rise from her kneeling position. Dapo cannot understand the scene. He struggles to free himself from Ayo to see if he can seize the cutlasses. He cannot understand why she would not let go his hands. He begins to bump his buttocks backwards to get his sister off him thereby hurting her tommy while pulling his imprisoned hands. Suddenly, he lets out a scream. Ayo's teeth has dug into his neck.

Ogundele quickly drops the cutlasses on the floor, temporarily abandoning his own mission, in a desperate bid to free Dapo from his sister's grip. Both husband and wife join hands in dealing with the crisis; a cooperation that has eluded them for a long time now. As soon as she loses hold of her brother, she launches wildly. It is her father who receives the punches. "Ayo! Ayo!" Two shakes bring her back to her senses. She starts weeping. She is now in her father's arms. It is Dapo who demands an explanation. He calmly turns to his mother, "Is the family going mad or are we rehearsing a scene from *House of Horror*?" His mother does not answer him but follows him to his room. Dapo knows that he will definitely unravel this puzzle but he must wait. His father's elusiveness has given him the opportunity to cultivate the friendship of some political enthusiasts on the campus who are just beginning to constitute themselves into an influential study cum action group. They first "dissect" a problem through discussions and arguments before mapping out strategies for action. That was how they arrived at the decision to vote another political party into power to see whether they would be better than Progress Party. Once convinced that it was the right thing, he went along with the plan against his father's party.

Sitting on the couch, calming his daughter, Mr. Ogundele begins to appreciate, for the first time, how big the girl has grown. He recalls her as a baby and wonders how and when she has grown into this big woman almost too large for him to carry in his strong arms. He scans her body smugly sleeping in his arms

just as when she was a baby and shudders at the thought of her fright at seeing him with matchets. "Did she think I wanted to use the implements on them? How could she think of such an outrageous thing? Doesn't she know how much I love my family?" He continues looking at her as if to extract, from her sleeping body, the answers to his questions. It shocks him to realise that as a father, he cannot foretell her answers to such questions. For the first time since Prudent People, the new political party, came into power, he realises that he has something more precious than his political life. His wife has always drawn an analogy between the political system and the family. He recalls her counsel that one member of the family can upset its balance and cause crisis which, if not properly arrested, can "tear the whole fabric of the organisation apart." He remembers how hard she tried to make him appreciate that his public life is dynamically part of his domestic life just as the internal and external affairs ministries of the political system are connected. He of course had drawn a dichotomy between the two and zealously pursued the external affairs. And now that it has crashed, "Shall I be able to pick up the pieces of my family?" He wonders thinking of his family as a shattered clay pot.

Ogundele has pumped all his time, effort and money into the elections. When he lost, Yinka tried to convince him to accept defeat graciously and other people's rule for a change.

"But they are not the people's choice. They bribed the electoral officers and manipulated the result." He has said in reply to his wife's counsel.

"It is God's will." She replied refraining from reminding him that others said the same thing about his party's success at the polls on the two previous occasions it won elections.

"God's will that the person who is ruling us is corrupt?"

"There must be a reason for it," Yinka has replied, adding, "a reason that we mortals do not know. If it is not God's will, He would have prevented it."

"Woman, it is annoying when you go on like this."

"Maybe we need bad rulers so as to learn how to find a good one and appreciate it when we get that one."

"It is enough now, political and religious preacher," he has sneered at his wife, an indication that he was clearly annoyed. He then pretended not to hear her any longer even though she persisted in making her point. "Dear husband, when you learn

that God works in mysterious and miraculous ways, you'll be able to understand and accept His will. Not that you won't try your best but you must use the talents ..."

"I said that is enough!"

"I have not finished." She entreatingly insisted, "Once you have used the talents God gave you and in a positive way too, then you leave the rest to God. We should not fold our hands and wait for God's will but should learn to be happy with our achievement after we have given our best efforts to a venture."

"Thank you Madam Yinka. Know All!"

"So," she continued ignoring the mockery "Now, it is your turn to do your job as a teacher. As a father and husband, take good care of the family God gave you since you have not done so for a long time now." Ogundele would have liked to protest about the insinuation of his inadequacy in domestic affairs but knew that his relegation of the family had caused some major family quarrels which he had quelled by sheer force of his position.

"Leave the new rulers to their fate and allow history to judge them accordingly." His wife has concluded leaving him little room for protest.

The blasting of the siren fills the whole room. Ogundele's gaze leaves his daughter and catches the cutlasses glittering on the floor where he had absent-mindedly dropped them in his rush to save Dapo from his sister's grip. He takes another look at Ayo in his arms and sees that she has calmed down and is still sleeping soundly. He notices her mass of hair has partially covered her face which beauty he observes, has a striking semblance with her mother's. Thoughts of politics for once recede from Ogundele's mind as Ayo's face evokes memories of his first meeting with Yinka.

It was at the wedding of his friend, Ambrose Okoko. He first noticed Yinka when the master of ceremony invited friends of the bride for a photograph with the couple. His eyes had trailed her until she took her position beside the bride. His admiration increased when he saw her face. He followed her immediately after the photograph was taken. That was the beginning of their courtship which led to their marriage by traditional law and custom. After the traditional rites, she insisted on another marriage by christian rites in the church.

"But we are already married," he argued.

"Not in the eyes of God." She said.

"In the eyes of our forefathers, we are husband and wife,"

"I am a christian, why not do it the christian way. After all I met you in a christian ceremony." She maintained quickly. Ogundele thought about the inhibitions likely to be imposed by the exchange of marital vows on the altar which his friends refer to as "choking bondage." He knew he had no plans for polygamy, but the "choking bondage" of christian marriage was against his personal inclinations and the tenets of Islam — his own religion. He had another serious reason for his aversion to church wedding. As a young teacher, he knew he would not be able to afford the expenses involved in it so soon after the customary one. He had frowned his face to register his aversion to church wedding because of the financial implications of such a venture. He however had chosen to be tactful as he then thought. He did not tell Yinka the truth but gave her a condition, which he thought she would not accept being the daughter of an Anglican Minister. "Okay. If you want a christian wedding, then it must be in the Catholic church." This information surprised Yinka because Ogundele, as she knew him, had nothing to do with the Catholic church. She could not imagine herself being wedded in the Catholic church knowing that members of her family, staunch Anglicans as they were, would not attend such a wedding.

"Why Catholic church?" She asked.

"I want it," was Ogundele's curt reply.

"But you are not a Catholic. Your family is even Muslim."

"Okay. Do you want to wed by Islamic rites?"

"No no no!" She exclaimed.

"Then to Catholic church we go."

Ogundele grinned in satisfaction for he felt that she would have to forget about the whole idea of church wedding altogether.

Yinka knew that her father would not accept her being wedded in a Catholic church. But she wanted to ascertain her own personal view of the matter independent of her parents' views. Having been married under traditional law, she reasoned that she was no longer under her father's authority. She recognised that she could act independently. She had attended other people's church weddings, after the traditional ones. Why would her own be different? She would resist any attempt to deny her

of the once-in-a-life time opportunity of walking down the aisle in a white flowing gown with her man like she had witnessed so many of her friends do.

"I want a christian marriage and a christian marriage I must have whether Catholic or Anglican," she declared.

What Mr. Ogundele started as a joke eventually led the couple to the Catholic church. He however felt a certain sense of triumph for he had shown that he could not be controlled by his wife or her family which was the impression he would have created if he had agreed to an Anglican church wedding. He conscientiously attended all catechism classes and by the time he completed them, he had become a convinced Catholic christian. Ogundele freely confessed his earlier apprehensions to his wife. Their wedding itself was a simple affair because Yinka by then understood her husband's monetary handicap and settled for a low-key ceremony.

The sound of siren again disturbs his reverie. He does not ponder on the implications of the sound but looks up at the wall clock to determine the time. As if in response to his scrutiny, the clock begins to chime. Five times. He knows that the time is drawing near for him to pick up his matchets and proceed with his task. His eyes shift to the miniature statue of Infant Jesus and a crucifix in the far corner of the room with a tabernacle light illuminating them. He smiles at the irony of his marriage. While Yinka has become closer to God, the person who took her to the Catholic faith has drawn farther and farther away just because of his pursuit of money and power so that in the innermost recess of his mind, he now doubts even the existence of God. The siren blares as if beckoning him to his mission.

He removes Ayo's hand still wound round his neck, carries her to her room, and carefully lays her on the bed. He watches briefly to see that she is sleeping soundly before going to Dapo's room where his wife lies beside him.

"My wife," he calls quietly but she does not stir. Gently, he removes her hands wrapped round the boy. Both of them stir. Dapo merely grunts and continues with his sleep. Ogundele makes to carry Yinka as he did his daughter. It appears an awkward thing for him to do because he has not done so for many years now. She resists.

"Please, let me," he pleads, "I want to explain." Dapo half-opens his eyes and dreamily asks, "You want to kill my mother?"



"God forbid" answers his father despite his doubt in the existence of God. The boy closes his eyes. Ogundele leaves Yinka beside the boy, draws a chair nearer the bed, sits on it and begins his explanation.

"Yesterday afternoon, my former friend, Ambrose . . ."

"Which Ambrose?"

"Ambrose Okoko."

"The one in whose wedding we met?"

"Yes."

"But he is in the other party."

"Yes. He is my political enemy. But you must realise that robbers can go anywhere because they are armed."

"He came with guns?"

"No. His ammunition was worse than a gun. He was armed with the power of the ruling party, power to steal and not be shot like common robbers, power to destroy and go unpunished. That was why he had the audacity to come and threaten me yesterday that his party would burn my house in the village today. Imagine Ambrose and his gang of hooligans! It will be over my dead body! I must prevent it. I'm going to stop the bastards!"

"How?" asks the boy who is now fully awake.

"By physically preventing them of course. I went and bought those two cutlasses immediately and I will be travelling home this morning to await anybody who will come to burn my house."

"Don't you think that guns will be better?" asks Dapo.

"I have no licence to carry a gun. If I shoot, they will just send me to prison for illegal possession of fire arms and then that won't prevent the house from being burnt."

"I'll come with you then."

"No, my son. It is kind of you. However, the dog does not involve its puppy in its struggle for bones." His wife hardly allows him to complete the parable before cutting in.

"So, it was because they want to burn a house that you rushed in with two cutlasses to frighten the children and myself to the point of passing out? You want to destroy this family? A family I laboured to raise while you devoted all your time and energy to public life. Did you even remember to raise any of them?" Without giving him any chance to defend himself, she continues venting her anger on him for all her years of frustration. "Consider the wreck you almost made of your daughter by your

wild behaviour! You are old enough in politics to know that it is an act of foolishness for anybody to fight the party in government?" Ogundele feels that he deserves his wife's derision yet he is annoyed about her reference to his loss of power. He however controls his emotions and seeks to appeal to her sense of reasoning.

"Yinkus," he calls her fondly as if he was not the one involved in the machet episode, "our people say that a person having something dangling between his thighs cannot be in a house and we say there is no man there. I must show that I am a man."

"Well, since you have the patience to listen to me now, I might as well tell you that there are better ways of showing that you are a man than having matchets dangle in your hands."

"Yinka. Please, don't insult me in front of the boy."

"Dapo is no longer a boy but you don't even know it. He has been the one performing a man's duties in this house for a long time." In an undertone she adds, "I mean those he can perform as my son."

"That's enough Yinkal"

"If you walk stubbornly to your death, I promise to despise you for I shall regard it as an act of betrayal for you to abandon the family finally and stubbornly walk to your death! It is high time you put a stop to your wayward behaviour!"

"Ah ah? This is getting too much. At first it was that I was wild. Now it is waywardness I am being accused of."

"Yes! You always like to have your way. You must always be obeyed. For years I have cried to you to think of the family. No! It is politics today, money tomorrow and election the next. Where have they led you. You poured all your money into the elections and you lost everything. So, learn your lesson. Come back to us for a yam barn starts life from the farm. No! Things have even become worse since you lost the last election. Since yesterday, for example, you have not talked, you have not eaten, you have not noticed or talked to me whom you call your wife!"

"One thing I have learnt in my years of marriage to you is to adopt the wisdom of the baboon who does not react to unpleasant tunes. I can never win you in an argument."

"Exactly, you will always refuse to see reason. And will swallow your thoughts unless I drag them out of your mouth."

"Why should I tell you something when I already know what

your reply will be. You want me to believe that God will go to my village and kill my enemies who want to burn my house!" The boy coughs loudly. They both look at him and then at each other, embarrassed.

They however continue the conversation but almost in whispers.

"My husband, God can do it. You have fought enough. Leave the rest to God. Stay with us and let us enjoy what we have. Do you know, for example, that this boy here has developed a talent in ..." The alarm clock rings. Husband and wife turn to look at the clock but the boy does not move. He already knows that the alarm wakes him up at six o'clock. Yinka is about to resume her speech when Ogundele cuts in.

"Well, I go to defend what is mine. If you see me back here, we shall rejoice. If not, then you must find consolation in the fact that I died like a man. I promise to die mowing down my enemies, day time robbers. I must defend what belongs to me in the true spirit of my ancestors, famed warriors in their time." He storms out. Dapo now fully awake makes to go after him but his mother restrains him.

"Leave him," she says, "He is still an unbeliever. But, I know that one day, God will touch him and he will believe in the need to fully trust and rely on Him."

"But we can't just sit here and watch him go to his death. People don't fight with cutlasses in the modern world."

"That is what they use in his village."

"But his opponents are from the city. They will use guns."

"Your father is stubborn. Leave him now to his fate and to God."

Yinka is praying with her son when Ogundele bursts in on them in a fit of hysteria.

"You said it!" You said it! you ..." he shouts continually. His wife and son are startled. Ogundele has only his pants on for he was about to get dressed when the radio announcement interrupted him. In excitement, he has rushed to Dapo's room jumping up and down like a mentally deranged or possessed man. Dapo regards his "naked" father skipping like a monkey taunted with banana and silently vows never to get involved in politics, if this is what it makes of people.

"What is wrong again?" Yinka asks.

Ogundele can only blabber, "On the radio ... martial music ... coup ... God ... My God is great! He is wonderful! He is great! He..."

Mrs. Yinka Ogundele rushes out to hear the news herself, to know that it is true that the new government is ousted by soldiers.

Her husband continues shouting praises to God for "swiftly using His divine hands to rid the country of those political robbers, my enemies."

"Military robbers and political robbers, what's the difference?" His son thinks without sharing his thoughts with his father. It is obvious that Dapo does not share his father's excitement and he gets up from bed to get ready for the day. Ogundele leaves the room quietly in search of his wife, still in his pants.

The sound of siren blares continuously, like a straying cow, filling the house with its noise and drowning the military music issuing from the radio. Dapo is piqued by this new noise forcefully robbing the house of peace so early in the morning. He determines to meet his colleagues immediately and make his reservations about the military known to them. He smiles for the first time since the machet episode in anticipation of sharing his thoughts with like-minds. His mood lightens at the prospect of "dissecting" the recent political events that disturb and rob people of peace and prosperity.