African Mysticism Volume I

Yomi's Stories



Table of Contents

The Road	3
Hide in Plain Sight	16
Cameraman	27
Changeling	37
Double Your Money	57
Maryam don go	73
Iron Gate	91
Mami Wata	111
Handprints on an Iro	125

The Road

The big, red-headed, black-bodied agama lizard basking near my feet doesn't move when I stir. I'd say he's fourteen inches head-to-tail, and he's the dominant reptile in these parts. A mature male like him has seen enough to know that it's nippy kids he's got to look out for, not creaky old men like me. Despite his apathy, I stretch slowly, for he's as entitled to his peace as I am. Soon it will be time for us to part ways, but for now the sun is in charge, so man and reptile must rest and share the shade.

I decide to name my companion Geronimo, after a gecko that used to live behind the light on my bedroom wall. Geronimo will soon make his way into the bushes to ambush beetles and butterflies. *Bad Geronimo! I like butterflies.* Geronimo might be a mind reader because he rolls one beady eye my way to remind me to mind my own business and then looks away again. He's right; I should mind my own business. I ate lunch early because food is lighter in one's belly than on one's back, or else I too would be contemplating my next meal. Fed, and with water in my bottle, my way lies wherever my feet carry me. Today, as on most days, I shall scan the horizon and head in the direction that seems emptiest. I don't purposefully seek solitude, but neither do I enjoy much in the way of company.

With time to kill, I check my feet for jiggers, an occupational hazard for a barefoot nomad. I no longer get blisters; time and many miles have toughened the soles of my feet. The small, sharp-edged stones that once hobbled me are just a minor irritant now. If I can, I prefer to walk, the only barriers to my movement being wide expanses of desert or water. I might linger in a place for a few days, sometimes a week, on occasion two, but never longer. I leave before I tire of the people, or so I tell myself. Maybe I run away because I fear they will tire of me. It doesn't matter why I choose not to linger. All I know is that when the wind gives me a nudge, or the raindrops start to talk, or the sun winks knowingly, or the shadows whisper my name, I feel an irresistible urge to pack my things and move on.

I've been asked many times why I chose this wanderer's life, and the truth is that I don't know. I try not to think about it. An Oyinbo man once told me that I suffer from a condition whose name I always struggle to recall. He was the first person I ever talked to about a supernatural event. When we were done, he said he wouldn't sleep that night, like I'd told him a horror story. It wasn't a horror story; it was just the retelling of a disturbing event. Since it is too hot for me to move right now, and my mind is stuck in the past, I'll tell you the story, and you can judge it for yourself.

…It was back in the days when the hair on my head formed an afro, my muscles were strong, and I was able to work as a labourer. Travelling had yet to become a way of life, but I had spent three years away from home studying for a law degree. My father died the year before I went to university, and six weeks after I sat my final exams, Mum died. The morning after her funeral, I sat in an empty house and felt the walls closing in around me. The room grew ominously dark, though the curtains were open and the day was bright. When I'd shaved that morning, the face in the mirror had been the face of a stranger. I'd begun to question my own identity, and I suddenly felt certain that if I stayed in that house, I would go mad. I ran out the front door and didn't stop running until my lungs were on fire, my legs were leaden, and the house and my old life were behind me. I've long since slowed to a walk, but it's too late to turn around, and I'll only stop walking to drop down dead.

Back then, there were no such things as ATMs, and I'd never even heard of a credit card. The money in my wallet hadn't lasted long, so when I came upon a group of men constructing a road, I enquired of the foreman if I might earn a day's wages working for him. I was hungry, and if anyone tells you that you can find food foraging in the bush, laugh in their faces. Without vast experience, there is nothing for a person in an equatorial rainforest but sickness and death.

The foreman looked me up and down so scornfully, I regretted my request, but before I could retract it, he said I could start immediately. Well, from the first minute of my employment, I was made to work so hard I could hardly think. I was placed in a row of shirtless, over-muscled men, all grim-faced and sullen, dripping with sweat that cut rivulets in the thick dust that covered them from head to toe. We worked in groups of three. A man with a pickaxe broke the leached, red earth that had been baked hard by the blazing sun. My job was to jam a spade into the cracks and lever the soil free. A third man shovelled loose earth into a wheelbarrow, wheeled the soil away, tipped it out into the bush, and returned in time to collect the next load. Nobody spoke. The only sounds were of men grunting from exertion and metal implements ringing when they struck the hard ground. When I absent-mindedly began humming to myself, my companions paused and stared at me like I'd come to work naked and smeared with faeces. I quickly shut up and put my back into my work.

I wasn't a weakling by any means, but my muscles weren't used to this kind of hard labour. By the end of the shift, I could hardly stand. Too tired even to eat, I staggered to the side of the road, found a pile of empty sandbags, and fell asleep on top of them.

I had a strange dream in which a boy with blue-veined eyes came to me and told me to follow him. I didn't want to go. Everything about him was wrong – he looked like a child, but he didn't possess that intangible quality of youth. On the contrary, everything about his

demeanour, especially the way his eyes drilled into me, spoke of something ancient and powerful. My story might have ended there had I been able to refuse, but my dream skipped a beat, jumped to a new time and place, and I found myself trailing him through the dense bush that hemmed the road in on both sides.

As we went deeper into that dark, forbidding jungle, the hairs on the back of my neck began to tingle. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw shadows turning to follow us as we passed, but not the people themselves. I knew I was dreaming, but I couldn't wake up. Not wanting the dream to descend further into nightmare territory, I concentrated on where I was placing my feet and tried not to think about the gathering menace.

I succeeded in distracting myself, but then someone grabbed my shoulder to bring me to a halt, and I woke with a thumping heart. To my surprise, I found myself upright and surrounded by dense vegetation. I thought I must have sleepwalked into the bush, until I saw that I still had company. It took a few seconds for reality to register, and when it did, I felt sick with fear. The shadows that had followed me weren't silhouettes of people; they were three-dimensional figures that reflected no light. They were alive!

I didn't faint, although I wished I had so that my mind would be blank and not locked in this excerpt from a horror movie. My memory is hazy, probably because I was in shock, but I remember three things from my first waking moments. The first is that I suddenly became aware that I was cold, and I began to shiver. I have since learnt that this is a physical symptom of shock, and I can tell you it's a horrible feeling when the cold comes from within. The second is that I wanted my mum. There's no rational explanation for that – I knew Mum was dead – but it's the truth. The third is that my knees turned to jelly, so my legs could hardly bear my weight, let alone carry out my desire to run away.

There I was then, a quivering, shivering, jelly-legged wreck. I was a touch cowardly too, because after I'd fallen to my knees, I tucked my head in, closed my eyes, and repeated over and over – 'This isn't happening, please let me wake up.'

'Wake up? Ọdẹ! Stop repeating what I said. Wake up! Get up!'

I raised my head and peeked between my eyelashes to see who had spoken. It was the foreman. I was kneeling on the sacks I'd fallen asleep on. The morning sun was creeping into the sky, and all around me, men were getting ready for the day's work.

'Sah?'

He looked at me with a mixture of fury and puzzlement. No doubt he expected me to leap to my feet, but I was disoriented and exhausted. I was still trying to wrap my head around the

whole dreaming-that-I'd-already-woken-up episode. He shook his head at my sorry state and walked off. My stomach rumbled, reminding me that I was hungry. I wished I'd had the presence of mind to ask him where I might get something to eat, but I had dallied too long with the jumble in my head. I saw him speak to one of his men and jerk a thumb in my direction. It was quickly apparent that he was delegating the problem of the slacker I represented to someone else.

'You!' the man called out, and it was obvious that the foreman had linked his fate to my work, which he was not happy about. 'Get a spade and start digging. Where do you think you are, on holiday?'

I assured the angry man that I didn't think I was on holiday, then I hauled my weary bones over to a stack of spades, picked one up, and joined him and another scowling young man. I tried talking to them a couple of times, but they glared at me with such hostility, I presumed talking to me would get them into trouble, and if I got them into trouble, things wouldn't go well for me. This was a place that was all about work: hard, back-breaking, relentless toil under the hot sun. This was not a place for notions of brotherhood. Even the foreman broke rocks and hauled sacks on his broad shoulders.

I dug a trench until my blisters burst. My hands were bleeding, so I plucked up the courage to ask the foreman if we had gloves. His reply was to spit on the ground and tell me I could forget gloves, but if I hadn't dug a foot of trench by the time his spit dried, he would have me flogged. Spit dries fast on the ground in that heat, so I shut my mouth for the rest of the day and dug as if my life depended on it.

You may wonder why I didn't just walk away. I wanted to, but the men projected such menace that I was too afraid to challenge them or to run away. I'd be caught in seconds if they had a mind to catch me. They were all lean, fit, powerfully built, strong, silent types. They communicated with minimal gestures. The pursing of lips, a glance to the side, the nod of a head. Every gesture was a command; nothing was questioned; nothing was discussed. I could imagine a chin raised in my direction would be all the foreman needed to have me taken out of the line and beaten to a pulp.

As I sat on the ground in the brief water break, I resolved to run away when it got dark. They could keep my wages; nothing was worth this amount of suffering. I was so concerned for my safety I tried to mask the very thought of leaving.

I looked back down the road we were making and wondered how far back it went. After my strange dream, it would have taken more courage than I possessed to go through the bush in the dark, so the road was my way out. I was squinting, to counter the shimmer off its surface, when

a shadow fell on me. Fearing I had attracted the attention of one of the men, I looked up nervously. I blew out my cheeks and let my shoulders fall. It was only the water boy. He dipped a little half gourd into his bucket and offered me my portion, but my hand shook so hard when I took it, I spilt most of it on my trousers. Our water boy was the weird-eyed child from my dream!

I should have been pleased to find an explanation for a strange dream character. I must have seen him in the daytime, and he'd made such an impression on my subconscious that he'd come to mind at night. The rationale didn't work. I hadn't perceived him as a child in my dream, and he was even less childlike in real life. His eyes had the power to command all my attention. His countenance was of world-weary wisdom and a cynicism that viewed the suffering of man as little more than a distraction. His face suddenly softened, and I thought I detected pity in his gaze. I hoped that was true because he otherwise projected the terrifyingly amoral aura of a child soldier.

He looked down the road, following what had been my line of sight. When he turned back to me, I knew he sensed my desire to escape.

'Na de way you wan' go?'

The question was laced with meaning. Just as he knew my intent, I knew he could not be deceived.

'Yes…' I replied warily, uncertain of the cost of this admission.

I took his raised eyebrows and the downward curl of his lips as a sign that he didn't care what I did.

He took a ball of bread from his pocket and tossed it at me.

'Eat, so you don't die. Eat it slowly,' he warned, and walked off.

If he'd been a normal boy, I would have told him that I needed more water. Instead, I pressed my lips to my wet trousers and sucked out what I could, not caring how ridiculous I'd look to anyone watching. The water drifted down the line, away from me, but the bread ball was some compensation. It was traditional bread, so doughy that a loaf could be squeezed to the size of a small orange, and it was packed with sugar. It provided the calories I needed to work to the end of the day, and once again, when the foreman called time, I found a pile of empty sandbags and lay down as if to sleep.

I didn't sleep, although I have rarely been so tempted. The previous night I had passed out, but this time I was able to observe what my companions did. I was hoping to see them start a fire and cook an evening meal, so I could join them and try to get some sustenance for the road ahead, but they all did what I had done – they lay down and went to sleep. It was bizarre. I hadn't been the only one who'd worked hard; I wasn't even close to having worked the hardest, but to

see men cluster into a group by the side of an unfinished road, lie down, and lose consciousness in seconds was scary. Nobody stirred. Nobody snored. It occurred to me to wonder if they'd been drugged, but that wouldn't explain why they'd all quietly chosen to sleep at the same time and had then fallen asleep in the same minute.

The night grew dark, illuminated by a quarter-moon that kept slipping behind the clouds. My stomach was in knots. I could invent rational explanations all I liked; these men were under a spell. My need to escape reached such a pitch it couldn't be contained. I got up and tiptoed across the road to the group. In the darkness beyond the sleeping bodies, I saw shadows moving, but I no longer looked for bodies to which they would belong. In my fevered imagination, the men and I were being surrounded by some nameless dark force. I thought about waking the men and rallying them to mount a collective defence, but I needed them asleep if I was to escape. Was I abandoning them? I looked at their sleeping forms, recalled their frightful demeanour when they were awake, and shook my head. No, they were part of whatever this was.

I wondered why the shadow people remained in the bushes and didn't come to the road. Then I remembered that the boy had looked disappointed when he'd learnt that I planned to leave via the road. If his disappointment was because the road marked a boundary the shadow people couldn't cross, then it was my way out.

When the moon emerged from cover, I began to walk, and walk, and walk. The road seemed to go on forever, never deviating from a straight line, and always with a shallow, upward gradient. At one point, I turned and looked back, expecting that having travelled for so long the men and their camp would be far below me, but all I saw was the road sloping upwards to a vanishing point, as if I had unconsciously descended into a shallow valley while being sure that I was climbing.

I resumed my progress and walked for hours more. I was staggering drunkenly forward when I hit the ground. I'd fallen asleep walking. I thought *this is too dangerous; it's a new road, and surely closed to traffic, but a driver coming this way might not see me lying in the middle of it, and I'll be run over*. I had to stop. I had to sleep. Thinking I'd walked far enough to have escaped the men, I lurched to the side of the road and curled up on the ground to sleep.

'Oya! Time to work!'

I looked up. It was the foreman. I felt a strong sense of déjà vu. I was lying where I'd woken up the previous day. The morning sun was low in the sky, and all around me, men were preparing for the day's work.

As I dug, and later carried sacks of sand, I cried. I had walked myself into the ground and gone nowhere. I had to know what was going on, but I was too frightened to ask. At the break, I tried not to look the water boy in the eye. I avoided his gaze because I didn't want him to see my red eyes and tear-streaked cheeks. I drank my water and handed him back the empty gourd without looking up. He took it, but his feet didn't move.

'Good walk?' he said, and there was mockery in his tone.

I could think of nothing to say in reply.

'There's no way out back there,' he said.

'I'll find it,' I said defiantly.

'No, you won't.'

The certainty in his voice was crushing. Was I doomed to work on this road with these men until some unspecified time? For the sake of my sanity, a question that had been building up in the back of my mind had to be asked. I finally looked up at him.

'Is this death? Am I in hell?'

There was a pause before he answered, as if the right response required contemplation. He answered with a question of his own.

'Dead keh. Wetin kill you?'

I had no idea what might have killed me, so I shrugged. Something in his eyes changed, as if a new person was seeing through them. He spoke to me with the gravitas of an old sage, and it was impossible not to be taken by the certainty and depth of his wisdom.

'You are not dead. But you dey with the dead, and dem must remain here for a long, long time. Dem no can leave. Pesson no can un-die. So, you wey never die must find a way out.'

He gestured to the line of men with his chin, and I noticed that none of them dared to hold his eye.

'These ones na bad, bad people wey don die. Dem enjoy to watch you play with dem, so dem no go help you leave. You would see it if dem could laugh, but pesson wey dey suffer punishment no get sense of humour.'

I looked down the line and quailed at the thought that all the men I was working with were dead. They didn't look dead, but when I looked up at the water boy, I knew this to be as true as his presence in front of me. There was more than a hint of desperation in my next question.

'Can I leave this road, this work?'

The boy was silent for a while. Then he said something I didn't understand, handed me my ration of water, and moved on to the next man.

'No be road can carry you from dis place. Na fear wey keep you here, but na yourself you fear, because you know the sinful things you can do.'

I had plenty of time while labouring to reflect on things, and by nightfall I'd drawn some shaky conclusions. If I believed the boy, then I wasn't dead, but the dead were *playing* with me. *No be road can carry you from dis place*… That meant the road was no way out. I looked at the dark and impenetrable bush.

No way am I going through there. Maybe I'm going the wrong way. Maybe I must go forward, past the point we've reached. That's it! The way out is not back down the road; it's in front of me.

When the men had fallen into their trance-like sleep, I roused myself and began to walk up the road in the direction I had stared at for much of the day. I didn't get far before I had to turn around and go back. Beyond the end of the tarmac, a line of shadow people barred my way. I picked up a pickaxe, thinking I might threaten them with it and get them to part, but I put it down before they took offence at my effrontery. Even if they had parted, I'd have been mad to walk between them. No matter what weapon I carried, I was no threat, so I slunk back to my sacks, a black mood of depression hanging over me.

I'd intended just to pause while I thought things through, but exhaustion overtook me, and I fell asleep.

The next day, I was made to work so hard I was sure I'd be dead by sundown. The water boy didn't speak to me, nor did I say anything to him. When the men fell asleep, I stared down the road until I'd built up the courage to face it again. I found that I couldn't just get up and walk; I was in too much pain for that. I rolled onto my belly, then used my protesting arms to lever myself to my knees. Forcing myself erect was so painful, I nearly passed out. My legs cramped, my shoulders cramped, my arms cramped. I had to stop. I looked in either direction and stood paralysed, crying in pain and self-pity until I had no tears left.

The way forward had turned out to be more intimidating than the way back, and the way back had just led me mysteriously round to my starting point. Perhaps my suffering made it easier to understand what the boy had meant. The men were on some kind of punishment detail. No surprise then that they had no sense of humour. I was doing what they were doing, and I could no longer remember ever having had a sense of humour. It didn't matter that I couldn't think of anything I had done to justify this hellish treatment. I was past caring who or what I had offended. I wanted the water boy to turn up, so I could have it out with him. I was in…

A new flash of insight turned my thoughts from self-pity. I remembered what the boy had said – *Na yourself you fear*...

It translated to me as – you're not scared of the shadows because of what *they* are, you're scared of the shadows because you can *imagine* them doing bad things to you, but you only *imagine* that because *you* can do bad things.

I'm afraid because I know the sinful things that I am capable of. Was he trying to say that they're harmless?

They weren't harmless. They didn't look harmless, and I had sensed their hostility, but maybe they wouldn't hurt me. After all, I had done them no wrong.

I stood and watched the men on the other side of the road, trying to convince myself my logic was sound. I told myself that not only could I go into the bush, but that when I was there, I should seek out the shadow people. They would show me the way out of the nightmare I was trapped in because... and this was the sticking point – they would show me the way out because they weren't evil. My fear that they would do something evil existed only because I knew that I had the capacity to do evil. I was projecting my flawed character onto them.

I begged fate for a sign that would provide an alternative to the decision I was approaching, but no sign came. There was no way out via the road. I looked at where we'd called time for the day and gave a bitter chuckle that made my ribs ache. If you knew what to look for, and I now did, it was obvious. It was exactly where we'd ended yesterday, and the day before, and it would be where we'd end tomorrow if I stayed. A thought that had started to form in my head reached its alarming conclusion.

This is hell. This road goes nowhere, and the road to nowhere is the road to hell. What are you doing, working on the road to hell? You're not just stuck on it, you idiot, you're helping to lay it. That's what Weird Eyes meant by 'if they could laugh'. If he could, the foreman would have laughed his head off when some fool walked up to him and asked for a job laying the road to hell. But none of us working on this road can laugh because the pain of our labour is too great.

A terrible thought struck me.

The boy confirmed that I'm not dead, but he said that the men are. What happens if I die here? I could be stuck here, like them. I've got to get off this road. I don't know what happens if I die in the bush, but I know I mustn't die here!

I staggered into the bush before my feeble courage failed me. Flailing through the undergrowth, not knowing in which direction I was headed, I picked out the moon shining through the leaves. It represented light in a world that was otherwise filled with darkness, and a direction, so I headed towards it. I thought I was doing okay until I tripped and fell. With

hindsight, looking up at the moon while walking through the bush in the dark wasn't a smart thing to do. The desire to give up and stay where I'd fallen was very strong, but then I remembered that I'd wake up beside the road with another day's agonising toil before me, and I couldn't do that again. In agony, I raised my head and froze. I'd seen those feet before. The water boy had found me.

'Are you coming?' he said, like he was inviting me to a party, and I was taking my time getting dressed.

I nodded, but he didn't wait. By the time I'd got to my feet he was almost out of sight. I stumbled after him, desperate not to be left alone but whimpering in pain from cramp in my legs. I only caught up with him because he stopped, which was when I noticed that we'd come to a clearing, and we were no longer alone. I might have run away if I'd had the energy, but I was spent. The shadow people parted and my eye was drawn to an ominous patch of freshly tilled earth behind them.

'They have prepared something for you. Lie there,' the boy said, pointing to it.

I didn't want to lie there. It looked like a grave. It appeared I had made a big mistake in trusting my instincts. I *had* done something wrong, and here was where I'd pay for it.

'What did I do?' I pleaded to know.

He shrugged.

'We don't know. Maybe you are here to bear witness.'

'Bear witness to what?'

He did not say. Instead, he pointed again to the freshly tilled earth.

'Lie there and close your eyes. It is easier that way.'

Easier for who?

All I could think was that he meant dying would be less stressful if I couldn't see death coming. I was surrounded, so I limped timorously towards the patch and lay down. I had no choice. Soon I could sense the shadows pressing in around me. I thought of my parents, my mother in particular, so that my last memories would be of love and happiness, and as I did so, I felt hands pressing down on my chest and forehead, then my arms and legs. I wanted to scream, but soil fell into my mouth and filled my nose. I was being buried alive!

I tried to resist breathing, but eventually I had to try. It was impossible; my mouth and nose were filled with an immovable quantity of earth. The pressure on my body was immense; I kicked and struggled, to no avail, and then there was no obstruction and no pressure. My lungs filled with clean, cool air. In shock, I opened my eyes wide to find myself alive and lying in a field.

And that was how I came to meet the Oyinbo man. His was the nearest house to where I'd emerged. I walked towards the light on his porch and knocked on the door to ask for water and directions to town. I was filthy and bedraggled, but he invited me in. Afraid that it was a trick, I refused to enter, and he noted my agitated, exhausted state. It was only natural that I'd be skittish; only a minute or so earlier I'd thought I was being buried alive.

'It's all right,' he said calmly, gesturing with his palms held outwards for me to relax. 'You don't have to come in. You can stay outside on the porch. Okay?'

He let me sit on his porch and, with the water, brought me a plate of rice, stew, and plantain, heavenly plantain. Afterwards, we had a beer, and he brought me a blanket and a pillow, and told me I could sleep on his porch provided I helped him tidy his garden in the morning. It was a very fair trade.

He didn't ask, but I told him my tale anyway. I felt a powerful urge to explain my dishevelled state, and I guess I had to tell someone just to let the tension out. When I was done, he stroked his chin and was quiet. He went inside and came back with more beer and a photograph. He waited until I'd started on my second bottle before showing me the photograph. My eyes were on stalks when I saw who was in it. I wanted to run away, but the Oyinbo man detected my nervousness and quickly reassured me.

'It's only an old photograph,' he said. 'I wanted to know if it had any meaning for you. You see, I find your tale quite unbelievable. I think you've been here before, or you've been told about this place and given some hallucinogenic drug. Either way, you know what happened here and you've turned it into an interesting horror story.'

The photograph was of a woman and a boy, who was the weird-eyed water boy. In the photo he looked every inch a regular, human boy, and though his expression was of one who was wise beyond his years, he was not the sage who seemed to lead the shadow people. I calmed down and asked who he was.

The Oyinbo man cleared his throat and wiped the corners of his eyes.

'His name is Tunji. He was my cook's son. That's her with him. Her name was Mary. Lovely woman.'

He pointed to a tree in the distance that was barely visible in the moonlight.

'Tunji died out there, about half a mile beyond that flame of the forest.'

We looked at each other. There was nothing to say about Tunji being dead, nothing except the obvious.

'How did he die?'

The Oyinbo man's eyes narrowed as he looked for signs of deceit. Either he found none, or he decided he'd tell me anyway.

'The governor wanted to build a highway to his hometown. Unfortunately, the route passed through an ancestral grave in this area. The locals protested. Mary was one of the leaders of the protest. The road builders were from an army engineering corps. The governor was illegally using men he controlled to do work they weren't supposed to do. Confronted by a crowd of angry villagers, the soldiers did what soldiers do. Maybe one person was shot accidentally, and then they had to cover up the crime. I don't know. All I know is that the group that went to confront the soldiers vanished, and the soldiers denied ever having seen them.

'Tunji was maybe ten at the time. I remember he was playing with my son when we heard gunfire. At the time we thought someone was letting off fireworks. What we found out in the days that followed made my wife grab our kids and get the hell out of here. I'd have gone too, but she had other reasons for leaving. Me, for one.'

The Oyinbo man rubbed his chin and continued to eye me suspiciously, but after a brief pause, he continued.

'Tunji's father was long dead, so he was taken in by an aunt. I was too distracted with my own problems, so the first I heard of him after that was when his aunt came to see me all teary-eyed, to ask if I'd seen him. I joined the search, but we found him too late. He'd gone into the bush and had refused to answer our calls to come out. The doctor said he'd died of exposure. As far as I was concerned, he'd died of a broken heart. When we found him, the dirt under his broken nails suggested he'd been digging, trying to find his mother, poor boy.

'The crime might have gone unremarked, but something happened to bring the story to national attention. All the men working on the road were poisoned. I suppose the problem with being a soldier in a hostile environment is that the locals provide your food and drink. There was an investigation, but nobody would talk, and the army was happy to brush it under the carpet. They'd found out what their men had done, so they covered up one crime by exposing another. The governor was no friend of the president, and he was seen as a political rival. He was found guilty of embezzling public funds and misusing military resources, which sucked all the oxygen out of the scandal. He resigned in disgrace rather than risk jail time, and his vanity project was abandoned. There's a road out there that I imagine is slowly falling to bits, but it goes nowhere.'

You know, I've just remembered the words the Oyinbo man used to describe me. He said – 'You turn up out of the blue to tell me that Tunji is out there keeping the men who killed his mother working on this road to nowhere. If it's true, I'm glad to know justice is being done. I say, *if it's*

true, because if it is true, then you're the first claustrophobic clairvoyant I've ever met, and you should take your storytelling on the road.'

The being that Tunji had become said that he didn't know why I'd found myself on the road, but maybe it was to bear witness. I think he was very wise, and he spoke the truth. I was meant to feel the pain in that world so I could bear witness to the dispensation of justice. The Oyinbo man described himself as a writer, so maybe there is a book somewhere that carries a message far beyond its pages, the workings of fate being too opaque for us to see through.

'Claustrophobic clairvoyant,' I say to Geronimo as I ease myself to my feet, 'that's what he called me.'

Geronimo couldn't care less if he'd called me an astronaut. He's ready to get back to whatever lizards do, and he saunters off into the hibiscus to do it. It's time I too left this spot. I see a sliver of tarmac shimmering in the distance. It's the direction I was headed in, but I'm not so keen to go that way anymore.

Hide in Plain Sight

One of the problems with being homeless in Nigeria is that my country's institutions treat me as if I'm insane. That my lifestyle is a deliberate choice is deemed further proof, if proof were needed, that I should be placed in care. Nigerians fear madness, no matter how mild, so being eccentric puts one on a slippery slope that starts with an alternative lifestyle and leads inexorably towards boiling babies for breakfast unless there is timely intervention. Where Nigerians excel is in the variety of 'interventions' they can dream up, only a small number of which are legal. Of that number, even fewer would be recognised by any professional body. Mine is a country where witch doctors treat epilepsy and schizophrenia by shaking bones, and pastors who can barely read pulp fiction, let alone a bible, easily persuade their congregations that for a fee they can pray any malady away. And they say I'm crazy.

I've been picked up for vagrancy, though I have never begged or done anything that would constitute a public nuisance, dumbfounded the magistrates with the eloquence of my defence, and for knowing more about the law than the bench, thrice been institutionalised. The logic seems to be this – if you know more about the law than the local magistrates, and you've not applied for a desk job in an air-conditioned office but have instead chosen to wander the streets in tarmac-melting heat, *you must be mad*. That mindset regards sending a man to an asylum as an act of kindness.

Oga Judge, ọ̀ṣẹ́ o. His family will be grateful to you for helping him find treatment. Hopefully, the doctors will know what to do with him. It's a pity, for a mad person, he's surprisingly clean, and he talks well, even though it's a lot of nonsense.

My short-term incarcerations have never been problematic. Once I have demonstrated that I fall into the non-violent category, these institutions have all proved easy to escape from. In fact, the word 'escape' gives the wrong impression, implying a serious attempt to detain me or some dynamic action on my part. I should have said 'leave'.

The first time I was committed, I had toothache, and they had a dentist come on Fridays, so I stayed until the weekend. The second, I lasted just a day and a half. The food was so awful, I left after lunch, still hungry. The third time was different, so different that I have considered returning several times to see if the amazing man I met is still there.

In most of these places, non-violent inmates are encouraged to work in the garden or on a farm if they have one. This place had a farm, so I volunteered to work on it, knowing I could walk

straight through the fields and out onto the main road. No gates, no guards, just a narrow ditch a flea could have hopped over.

As I was passing between rows of yam seedlings, absent-mindedly waving a hoe over the ground, I saw a man sitting in a lotus position at the base of a banana tree, holding his head in his hands. I do a little yoga, and I thought he might be into yoga, so I made my way to him while pretending to be weeding. I didn't want to disturb his meditation, so I initially kept my back to him and didn't speak, which was how I came to find that he was muttering to himself. I wanted to know what he was talking about, and when I could bear the mystery no longer, I turned and stared. It was impossible to understand what he was saying even when I watched his lips move. To supplement his continuous grumbling, he'd roll his eyes or screw up his face in an expression that conveyed disbelief. This latter habit would often be followed by a series of softly spoken expletives. His invective was never vicious; it was more regretful, like he'd just realised that in closing the front door he'd locked himself out of his house.

I judged him to be harmless – if not, he wouldn't be out here unattended – so I sat next to him and introduced myself, but he did not reply. I tried talking to him a couple more times before I decided that he was locked in his mind and unable to communicate. I'd have got up and left him to his own devices had I not asked myself – *if he can't communicate, who does he think he's talking to, and what's the gist of the conversation?* I kept very still, closed my eyes, and listened. By the time a nurse came out to round us up, I had changed my mind. This man could communicate, but it seemed he was talking to and listening to so many voices in his head, you had to work out which bits of his discourse were for you and ignore all the rest.

Over the days that followed, I followed him around the place, standing next to him in line for food, sitting next to him whenever I could. I even bribed the person who had the bed next to his in the dormitory with all my breakfasts so I could be close to him at night, because he carried on almost twenty-four hours a day. I did all this because I convinced myself I could tune my ear to his way of speaking. Eventually, I had a breakthrough. I discovered a 'tell'. Shortly before he directed words at me, the index finger of his right hand would tap three times on his leg, the table, on the back of his left hand… whatever his right hand happened to be resting on at the time.

I felt this man wanted me to know something, so I begged a nurse for a pencil and paper and began to write down what I thought was meant for me. Over the course of a nine-day sojourn, I took down his story, intermingled with Lord knows how many snippets of other people's stories. I can't relate it as I wrote it because a straight reading of my notes made little sense, even to me. As the saying goes, you had to be there. I won't tell you all of it either because

it was a long, rambling tale that went down many rabbit holes and veered into some dark places of the mind. All I can tell you is that a week after I left, I had figured out Jimi's tale to my satisfaction, and I'm going to tell it to you as I understood it because there's a lesson in it for all of us.

…Jimi knew the drill, or at least he knew the theory behind the drill. Knowing what you should do under pressure and having the self-control to do it are two different things. The rule of flight in urban settings is simple. When alarm bells are ringing and sirens are wailing, and your heart is racing out of control, don't run. Nobody recalls a casual pedestrian; everyone remembers a running man. Stop and look around you. See how other people search out the cause of the disturbance. Note how they drift like moths to a flame, heading towards trouble instead of away from it. See them, and choose to be like them, with one difference – while showing the same cautious but casual interest, slowly back away.

Jimi had started off running. They'd all run in different directions. It had taken an act of willpower to slow to a walk, the sort of willpower a wounded zebra would need to show if it had to limp past a pride of lions while pretending it could outrun them. Walking was like an alien skill he had to re-learn on the spot, and harder to master than he'd ever thought it could be.

You're going too quickly. Slow down!

To reset his tempo, he made himself stop, stepping into a shop doorway to check his reflection in the glass. He relaxed his face and shoulders until he thought he could pass for unruffled. There was a small quantity of blood spatter on his jacket, but it was already turning brown. He folded one arm across his chest, held the rucksack's strap, and nodded with satisfaction. The blood was hidden from casual inspection. He looked at his side-on reflection to make sure that the gun tucked into his waistband showed no bulge at the back. He didn't want the gun – it represented a life sentence – but he was too smart to dump it just anywhere. It was useless to him in his situation. He couldn't shoot his way out of trouble, and taking hostages could only end with a sniper's bullet in his brain. The gun had to be disposed of in a place where it would never be found.

He stepped out of the doorway, falling in step with a group of curious tourists who'd decided they had better things to do than watch a police cordon being set up. Jimi had only one clear thought in his head – *get to the middle of the bridge, wait for a quiet moment, and drop the gun in the Thames*.

As he walked, he weighed his options for escape. The getaway car was long gone. The driver had heard the alarm and put his foot down before the police threw up a roadblock. Taxis were no

good because they all had LiveFeed cameras that right now would be feeding data into Scotland Yard's facial recognition system. Buses were out of the question for the same reason. The tube was a non-starter; it would be swarming with armed police. He thought about hijacking a car, but it would be just his luck to pick on a nervous screamer. That would put him in a hostage situation, and he'd already guessed how that ended. There was only one thing for it, and that was to defy logic, stay nearby, forget about getting to the river, and let it all wash over and around him.

This was how Jimi came to be sitting on a park bench watching blue lights flashing on the road just beyond the hedges, while pretending to be watching ducks and the children feeding them. He'd thought about throwing the gun into the pond but ruled it out as a bad idea. Someone would see him do it, someone who'd volunteer that information to the police after an appeal for witnesses. They'd trawl the pond, find the pistol, locate him on film, and he'd be caught.

He was preoccupied with the thought of how he might look on a televised appeal to catch a fugitive – what photo of him would be used and who might give one to the authorities – when someone sat at the far end of the bench. Jimi glanced over at him – an old African man, though Jimi considered anyone with the slightest hint of grey to be old. Not wanting to be drawn into conversation, Jimi took a longer, sideways look to confirm his initial impression. The old guy was wearing khaki fatigues and cheap rubber slippers!

Rubber slippers? In this weather? He looks like he escaped from somewhere. Stupid old loony's going to attract attention dressed like that. I've got to move.

'Nobody's going to notice me. Just wait, you'll see.'

The old guy had spoken. Jimi wasn't convinced he'd heard him correctly, but he was sure the old guy hadn't been speaking to him. He began to plan his next move, wondering if it made sense to stand on the far side of a willow tree that would shield him from view and throw the gun into the pond from there.

Will it make a splash? Noticeable might not matter, but it mustn't be memorable!

'It's a silly idea. Some kid is bound to say – Mummy, that man threw a gun in the pond. She'll say – Don't be silly, dear, of course he didn't, but she'll remember it when the shooting at the bank is on the news. You'd be better off hiring a pedalo, going to the middle of the pond and dropping it in. Of course, that'll take you past the camera you've done well to avoid so far, and the pedalo man will probably remember you quite well. A beanie hat and a moustache you can shave off can only take you so far. Those reconstruction artists know what to focus on. I reckon pedalo guy will come up with a fairly accurate likeness, something people who know you will

recognise all too easily. There's nothing like a reward for information to end all that "honour among thieves" nonsense.'

Jimi turned to the old guy on the bench.

'Are you talking to me?'

The man shielded his eyes in a mocking, theatrical attempt to find an audience.

'I don't see anyone else. Do you?'

'Never mind that. Did you say something about a pedalo?'

'I said, if you want to get rid of the gun, you could hire a pedalo, take yourself to the middle of the pond, and slip it into the water. A little plop as it goes over the side, and no one will notice. If you were paying attention, like you should have been, you'd also have heard me point out the problems with doing that. First, the CCTV camera will pick you up, and second, the pedalo man is bound to remember the man in dark glasses on an overcast day, carrying a rucksack. He has very few customers who want to participate in a group activity without a friend or child in sight.'

Jimi's hand slipped under his jacket to the back of his waistband. It wrapped around the gun butt, and he surveyed the area. He didn't know what kind of elaborate sting this was, but he was ready, and they weren't going to take him this easily.

'Relax. Take your hand off the gun.'

'I'm not taking my hand off anything until you tell me who you are and give me a good reason not to shoot you.'

The old guy laughed.

'Go ahead. Shoot. See if I care. Honestly, some people don't even realise when their thoughts are being answered, not their words.'

Jimi's puzzlement showed on his face. It amused the old guy.

'Think back. I couldn't have seen the gun because it was always under your jacket. I might have guessed you were thinking about disposing of it, but you never mentioned the pedalo. I got the problem of the CCTV camera and the danger of being remembered by the pedalo man from your passing thoughts. Those were things you were thinking about, weren't you, Jimi?'

Jimi's eyes narrowed. To those who knew him, it was a dangerous sign. His associates knew him as an angry man who'd start a war without first counting his ammunition.

'How do you know my name? Who are you? Tell me now and make it good, or I just might shoot you and take my chances.'

'Take your chances? That's rich. As your Auntie Jo said, if you took your chances, you wouldn't be here.'