

SHORT STORY

A HERO'S WELCOME

by

I. N. C. ANIEBO

Home was now less than three miles away. Sergeant Johnson Ume, filled with appreciation, got out of the car at the dirt crossroads. With a striking economy of effort, he off-loaded his three large cornmeal-sacked packages on to the grass verge. It was as though his actions were a parade ground drill.

Turning finally to the owner driver of the car, his narrow face lighted up, the taut lines softening into an open smile.

"Thank you very much, sir," he said. His voice in its adolescence, he was only twenty-one, had a hint of the weary wisdom of middle age. Its peculiar timbre often attracted attention.

"Odinma," said the owner driver. "Take care of yourself. I will pick you up here same time tomorrow."

"Yes sir," Johnson said. Still smiling he snapped off a military salute.

The owner driver who was not a soldier laughed a fat-encased laugh that shook his huge chest. "Johnson," he said between laughs, "I've always said you were born for the Army! Look, if I get here before you do, I will drive down to your place and pick you up."

Johnson watched the swirl of dust thrown up by the car recede and increase. He still stood at attention, though unaware. He felt shorn of a certain amount of protective warmth. He was suddenly cold and sad.

The road filled with and smothered by the hazy dust slowly reappeared in patches. Johnson wished he was in and with what was raising the dust. Then he remembered he was going home.

By the time he had balanced one of his packages on his head and managed to hug the remaining two to himself, he was filled with the warmth of pleasant anticipation. His cold and

sadness of a moment ago dispersed as he strode away at a right angle to the road with the settling dust.

His road ran straight as far as the eyes could see, abutting on a slight rise covered with lush green vegetation. Johnson knew this was not so. Just before the rise the road went into a series of convulsions to avoid compounds, an excavated-looking valley and a huge boulder that seemed dropped from the heavens onto a level area between the valley and the hill.

The boulder had a legend. It was said to have been placed there after a terrible flood, by the most famous priest Umu-oku had ever had, to seal in the underground ocean on which the lands and town of Umu-oku rested.

Johnson came to believe the legend of the boulder when he and two other children had taken refuge near it during a heavy storm. Thunder had seemed to emanate from it for the boulder rumbled and trembled long before the thunder was heard. From that day, Johnson took it as his personal charm. He touched it for luck each time he walked past it. And now on his first pass home he wanted to touch it.

The thought made him realize how fast the day was running out. The sun was already a fiery red. The heavens were a clear beige and merged with the distant green of the rolling landscape. Tops of tall trees and palm trees looked a mellow greenish-yellow. The cold evening wind of February was beginning to take the place of that of the hot afternoon.

Johnson lengthened his stride and got into the swinging gait that earned him the nickname *langalanga* in his unit 3rd battalion, 'S' Division. He was not that tall really - only five feet nine - but he had very long thin legs on which his short broad body rested abruptly. It gave him the appearance of great height.

He soon got to the boulder. It was on the right side of the road. The area was stony and the surrounding sparse grass was trampled on. A respectful distance away, farms of young cassava marched in confused but determined array up a gentle hill that then descended sharply into *Nwa-ala* river.

Johnson's town, Umu-oku, was beyond the rise he was now striding up. It was not served by direct public transport and everyone travelling out had to walk to the cross-roads.

Somehow, Johnson did not feel he had been away from home for two years. Two years! It meant he had now been a year and a half in the 'S' Division!

How the time had passed. He remembered the day he had volunteered for the division as though it was yesterday. Enugu, the capital, had fallen. Everyone had given up hope. The Army was in disarray, the fighting troops that is. Only the service troops seemed to have any kind of organization. Their various headquarters had moved from Enugu to Okigwi before the enemy had captured the city.

Johnson, then a Lance Corporal had moved with his unit, the Pay and Records headquarters. They had been ordered to leave Enugu when it was first threatened. Getting to Okigwi, they had the pick of the few houses and had settled in before everyone descended on the little town.

Confusion reigned for two days. Wild rumours about enemy troop movements broke in waves over the town leaving ripples of panic in their wake. Johnson and his fellow pay clerks could not concentrate on their figures. It seemed senseless to them to spend hours preparing pay packets for soldiers who might be dead before long.

Johnson spent the best part of those days moving from one knot of frightened soldiers to another listening to incredible tales of enemy prowess and fierceness and brutality. Everything was lost. Biafra was dead. It was only a matter of time before the enemy would start herding people into prisons. Although he was not convinced it would happen, the thought of it had left Johnson with a hollow feeling in the stomach, a sense of loss so immediate it was physical. Throughout that day he wandered rudderless as an empty boat adrift on floodwater filled with flotsam.

The news that the enemy had covered thirty out of the thirty-eight miles between Enugu and Okigwi soon filled the town. In the evening however soldiers trickled back one by one. On the third day the Head of State came.

Johnson could not recall the events of that day as one whole but as vignettes...

The hard shrillness of the siren cut through the mush of Okigwi's misty morning. Suddenly the air was filled with the roar of many vehicles sweeping up the steep tarred road to the town. Leading the convoy was a deep green with dappled gray Landrover filled with soldiers in green, light green uniforms with red caps, white neck-cloths belts and anklets and black barreled rifles with brown, deep brown wooden stocks. Then came two long American cars, followed by a shiny black arrogant

nosed Rolls Royce, a red-black-yellow striped flag with a yellow rising sun in the black fluttering on the nose. Behind the Rolls-Royce a stretch of cars, Landrovers filling the black ribbon of tar in the center of the wide roadway bordered by green grass and shrubs and green hills misty-headed...power...

The Head of State in a beautifully tailored camouflage uniform his full black beard a sharp contrast with the red, the white and the green of his cap stood on the raised white dias talking to all the troops. He was very eloquent, very moving, and his cultured voice rose and fell full of passion one moment and pathos the next. Johnson agreed with all that he said and when he asked for volunteers to help protect the fatherland, the women and the children, Johnson was among the first five to step forward...

It was night. Johnson was now a Corporal in one of the units of the newly formed 'S' Division - Special Division. The division was responsible only and directly to the Head of State. That night Johnson's unit was to carry out a reconnaissance to locate the exact position of the enemy at Enugu. He felt that for the first time he was dressed as a soldier at war should - three fragmentation grenades hung from his belt, a bandolier of fifty rounds 7.62 ammunition circled his waist, four loaded magazines were in his pouches and on his rifle was another, on his feet were real jungle boots. Waiting for his platoon commander to return from a briefing, Johnson felt exhilarated and an almost omnipotent power coursed through his veins. He felt invincible as he caressed his slim functionally light rifle. He wanted to be let loose on the enemy immediately. Never for a moment did he doubt his ability to use his weapon. He had absolute confidence in it. Weapons like his would never malfunction and would always obey the least touch. Yet he did not feel any impatience. He was simply ready to go anytime anywhere. It was a peculiar state of being and he had never experienced it before. He was totally aware of being alive and rearing to go but the rearing to go was mental. Physically he felt no tension ...

Johnson crested the hill and slowed his fast pace. In the distance were momentary glints of nine roofs. His town was really a village but as they were isolated from other towns that made up their clan they could not be lumped with any. Before the mass return from the North there had been less than twenty-five households. Now there were about twice that number strung out on both sides of the road.

Now he wondered which townsman would see him first. Whoever did would send up a cry of surprise as welcome and announcement. People would run out of their houses to greet him and

would take up the cry till everyone that was home joined the triumphant procession. This unalloyed welcome made him look forward to coming home.

And the crowning part of it all would be his mother running towards him crying "My son! My son!" and people admonishing her to take it easy and she retorting happily, "If it were your only child coming home you won't behave any better."

Johnson lengthened his stride once more. He wanted to get home before the short twilight was swallowed up by the night. He also wanted to see the smile of happiness on his mother's face. Two years ago all he had seen were the tears of anguish and fear.

* * *

"The terrible wine one has to drink these days!" complained Ume-Ogere. "Only one God knows when this war will end."

"Yes," Egelonu agreed. He emptied his plastic cup in one gulp like one drinking a vile tasting medicine. He placed the empty cup on the small crude aged table on which the gallon of wine sat. The wiry boy of twelve squatting in the corner of the room refilled the cup with the watery white liquid of day-old palm wine.

"Go and see what your mother is preparing for supper," Ume-Ogere said to the boy. "But first fill my glass."

The boy did so and walked out into the coming darkness of night. He was small for his age. However the texture of his rough black skin, particularly that covering his taut flat buttocks, kept up with his age.

"He is your son in truth," Egelonu said. He had watched the boy go.

Ume-Ogere grunted and picked up his wine. Since the exploits of his *other son* had reached and spread in the town and the arrogance and independence of his *other wife* had kept pace with it, he had spoken his doubts to Egelonu for the first time in years. They had argued about it then but they were now agreed.

Ume-Ogere gulped down half the contents of his cup. The thing was obvious he thought. He and his other wife were small dark and broad-faced while his other son was tall, fair and narrow-faced. In fact, the boy looked more like Egelonu's child than his.

"I agree with you, Johnson is not your child," Egelonu said. Again he downed his wine and smiled a rusty smile showing mildewed teeth and gums. He refilled his cup.

"You have done well." Ume-Ogere sounded sarcastic but his grimace of teeth-halves smothered it. He tossed off his wine and refilled his cup too. The circumstances surrounding Johnson's birth had alerted him to the boy's bastardy. For years he and his other wife had tried to have a child and failed. He started looking around for a second wife when suddenly she became pregnant and Johnson was born. He had proved to be the builder of the bush path. Others had followed him in quick succession but none survived beyond the third year. When the third follower went the way of the first two he had married a second wife.

"Johnson" he had jokingly said to his other wife one day, "is a greedy child. He does not want to share his mother with anyone."

His other wife had not laughed but he was sure she knew he had spoken the truth. She who used to wait for him to make the sexual advances now took the initiative. But it was no use.

"We need light," Egelonu said. His cup was empty and he wanted to refill it. "Our eyes are not young anymore."

"Nothing about us is young anymore," Ume-Ogere said. "Except your voice."

Egelonu let loose his high pitched and exacerbating laugh.

Ume-Ogere listened to it. They had now been drinking day old wine since early afternoon. They had gone through two gallons and were on their third. But the controlled pitch of Egelonu's laugh had not changed. The abandon of tipsiness was not evident and Ume-Ogere was saddened by its absence. He was not tipsy himself or even near it. However, he saw their sobriety as a failure to achieve their aim. Before the cursed war they got high very easily on good wine and at low cost. Now they were sober on head-splitting wine at fifty times the cost.

The small boy walked in holding a palm husk candle. Its yellow light intensified the darkness it was supposed to disperse. It covered the unpainted cement walls of the room with a yellowish-brown paint. It lent some mellow hue to the bare rumpled chests of the drinking men. It invested even the poor wine with a milky richness.

"What happened to my lantern?" Ume-Ogere asked sharply.

The palm husk candle irritated him. It reminded him of the war and its humiliating deprivations. Years ago, before he had even thought of marrying, he had bought his first hurricane lantern, conscious of the importance of the step he had taken. He had put his foot on the first rung of the ladder of progress, of civilization. With muscle-crushing, back-aching, skin-burning tilling of the soil he had gone steadily up from rung to rung.

The war had changed all that. He was flat on his back at the foot of the ladder like one whose *ete* had broken at the top of a palm tree. No that was not right. Only the *ete* of a careless man broke at the top of a palm tree. He, Ume-Ogere was not that careless.

"There is no kerosene," the small boy said.

"Why did...?" Ume-Ogere began and stopped. They had told him last night that the kerosene had run out. He had gone to the market this morning purposely to buy some. He had found none to buy. He had then gone to the town's profiteer, a former politician with many friends in the army, but even he had none for sale. "Go and ask Johnson's mother to give us some. She always has some. Leave the candle here. We are not in love with darkness."

"The earlier this war ends the better," Egelonu said filling his cup. He shook the wine jar with a bony hand. Its slushing sound was reassuring.

"Fill mine too," Ume-Ogere said with gentle awkwardness. Egelonu was his elder. One did not ask one's elder to serve one.

If Egelonu was aware of the situation he did not show it. After he refilled the second cup he sipped at his drink.

"I wish it had not started at all," said Ume-Ogere. "I am talking about the war."

"It was good it started," Egelonu stated. "Too many terrible things have happened. Blood has to be spilt in atonement."

"After the atonement then what? Will anything change? Will we gain anything? Will all our suffering amount to anything? Every day we are told to contribute this and that. We are told to spit out what little food we have in our mouths and give to the soldiers who say they are fighting for us. But some of the soldiers turn round and molest us leaving those they are supposed to be fighting. Again we continuously hear that the few soldiers that are fighting are starving in the holes they hide in to fight the enemy. You ask, where did all the food you contributed go? You are told to shut up. But while you starve and your children starve people have feasts and kill cows and even drink hot drinks!"

"But that always happens when you fight for something."

"Fight for something? Yes, especially when you are fighting for starvation. I used to eat meat once every two days and fish daily. Now I can't even find fish to buy. I used to drink good wine daily. It was part of my meals. Now I have to sell all the good ones I tap to have money to buy fish not even meat. And who sells the fish to me? The same man whose car was as big as a house when I was riding a bicycle. My bicycle is old now. I can't even buy spare parts for it. But the same man has bought another car. What type of something are you talking about? I can't see it. All I see is suffering and changes for the worse, disrespect for elders, prostitution of wives and daughters and an increase in the number of rich thieves and cheats."

"You are lucky you have no daughters to worry about. My Mary has not come back yet. She has been away for two weeks now. When I think of all the money I threw away sending her to school I want to go in search of her."

"What did she say she was going to do at Owerri?"

"To join the Red Cross."

"You should have stopped her."

"And feed her with what? When you can't feed your family you lose control over them."

"I know. That's why I said the war should not have started. You remember what the *qibia* said to our warriors when they wanted to go to war against our neighbours. "If from a stick of three dried fish, you can without touching the first and the last remove

the middle one unbroken, then you can defeat Umu-okoro.' I would have told our government the same thing if they had asked me about the war. It is not every thing you fight for openly. We got back our land from Umu-okoro without a fight. It is not every one you fight openly or directly..."

"Papa, Mama Johnson says I should tell you she has no kerosene."

"I know she is lying," Ume-Ogere said. "Johnson sends her tins of kerosene constantly. Has she any light in her house?"

"Yes. Her lamp."

"What is your mother preparing for supper?"

"Nothing."

"Come on child, don't joke with your father."

"Mama said there is nothing to prepare. She cooked all the food in the house for lunch."

"You mean you and your brothers ate up all that yam?"

The boy was silent.

"What of the plantains?" Ume-Ogere did not feel like going to the barn that night to bring out any yams. "Did you hear what I asked you?" he shouted angrily at his silent son.

"We ate it for breakfast," the boy answered his eyes on the mud floor.. .

"Get out! Get out I said! Go to your mother you good-for-nothing glutton! If you think I am going to the farm this night to cut the last plantain bunch I'm reserving for tomorrow's market you are dreaming! Monkey!"

"It is enough," Egelonu said.

The boy had rushed out long ago but Ume-Ogere's anger continued.

"All those children and their lazy mother do is eat! They can't think of anything else...eat eat eat like caterpillars and looking at them you won't know they eat so much. And my other wife hoards everything her son sends to her.

What a life! To think that all I have lived for is to see this, to be humiliated. Look at my house! I can't even complete it. The floor is not cemented. The walls are not painted. There is no furniture. And all because of this war. I don't get it. Have I done anything?"

"Come, come, come Ume-Ogere your rages are becoming too frequent these days! This is very unlike you. You used to explain things to us when they all go wrong. Hold yourself man. You did not cause the war..."

"Then why should I suffer? Tell me that! Why should I suffer because some idiots left their people and got killed? Have you forgotten it was always the failures that went to the North? Now I have to pay for their useless lives."

"I better leave you. There is still enough wine left to calm yourself with. If you are so hungry, come to my place in a short time there will be something to touch to our tongues."

Egelonu walked out into a night leavened by an invisible moon. His house was at the outskirts of the town and part of the way to it he worried about Ume-Ogere's towering rages. He knew well for they had grown up together.

"This war," he muttered to himself, "is changing too many things."

In the distance he saw a figure striding towards him.

* * *

The pandemonium was over. The welcoming party had dispersed except for a number of children playing in the compound by the waxy light of the moon.

Johnson had shown his mother the contents of the three cornmeal sacks he brought home with him. Her pleasure had been spontaneous and openly childlike. To see this unalloyed pleasure Johnson often gave his mother gifts. Although his father was equally appreciative of gifts his display of his appreciation was self-conscious.

Once again Johnson's mother had not been taken by surprise by his return. It was as though each day for the past two years she prepared for his return.

Johnson had now bathed and with a *lappa* tied loosely round his waist he felt he was truly home. The rich aroma from the simmering pot of agbono soup and stockfish made him hungry.

Looking round the sparsely furnished sitting room - two cushion chairs and a table - he thought it was time his mother had a bigger house. There were at the moment the sitting room, two bedrooms and a small kitchen, but they were all small-sized rooms. Anyway all changes or improvements would have to wait till the end of the war. He did not think one could get any building materials now.

"Mama," Johnson called to his mother whom he heard pottering in the kitchen. "Mama, come let me ask you."

"Yes?" she asked her hands pressed against the kitchen side of the door to support the upper part of her small body as she leaned through it.

"Don't look so worried," Johnson said. "I am not going to eat you."

She smiled, shedding some age. "What is it?"

"Did Papa go somewhere?"

"I don't know." She had become tight lipped. "Have you been to his house?"

"Yes."

"When?"

Johnson laughed. "When are you going to give him his share of the things I brought?"

"Tomorrow is time enough." She turned away and said over her shoulder. "But for you I won't let him smell any part of the things you brought home. He and his wife eat all that he gets from Caritas. Your father sold himself to the Roman Catholics for okporoko."

Johnson remained silent. He rarely commented when his mother complained about his father. It was their business, their marriage. The only time he took direct action was when one of them was being explicitly wicked to the other. He stepped in then as the arbitrator.

Sometimes after finding his father guilty, which he often did, the old man's eyes rested on him in a very speculative way. He did not mind the speculative look but during such periods his stepmother and stepbrothers became hostile. Complaining to his father then was impossible for the old man maintained a certain distance, a listening distance that was

actively disinterested in his complaints. He felt like a child left outside at the mercy of the masquerades.

He had moved out of his room in the cement house because of this. He had also joined the army earlier than he had planned. His drive for personal freedom had intensified there, and found expression in his exploits as a platoon commander in the "S" Division.

"Do you know," his mother said placing plates of steaming food on the table in front of him. "Your father has not given me any plantain since you left?"

"Why?"

"He and his wife and their children eat it all."

"Are there any left?"

"Only one bunch and I hear he is planning to take it to market tomorrow."

"I will ask him about it as soon as I'm through eating. I'm sure when he knows of all I brought him he will allow me to cut it for you."

"Cut it first, then ask him later. These days he does only what his wife tells him to do. I told you sometime ago that woman bewitched him, but you won't believe me."

Johnson concentrated on his eating. He did not believe in witchcraft and the war had proved it did not exist. The *dibias* who said they could stop the enemy from capturing Enugu failed. Enugu fell in spite of their incantations and the enemy gained ground daily, capturing holy places of fearful gods without suffering any untold reprisals.

He had told his mother all this but her belief in the gods had remained unshakable. It was one of the things he could never understand about her. She combined her fervour for the Protestant church with her belief in the gods. It was like combining a belief in Biafra with a belief in Nigeria.

"Mama, what do you think of the war?" Johnson asked her as she removed the plates.

"The war?" She went on with what she was doing. After she had wiped the table she said, "It is all right." She went into her bedroom and came out. It was an aimless trip and Johnson thought she was confused and worried.

"Mama you have not told me what you think of the war."

"I have told you." She stopped in front of him. A smile was coming to her face. "Why do you want to know what I think of the war now?"

"I just want to know."

"Let me eat first then I will tell you." She went towards the kitchen. "It will be good if you go and cut that plantain while I eat. Then you don't have to go out after our talk."

Johnson changed into a pair of trousers - part of his uniform - and boots.

The children were still playing in the compound but desultorily now. In contrast the moon had come out full and strong as though to silence them with its overwhelming clarity. They shouted at Johnson as he went by using a praise name which had a tragic beginning...ogbu na dozen.

Johnson waved at them and smiled. He let himself out of the compound through the rear gate swinging his machet like a stick. The path he was on ran snake-like as most garden paths do. The illumination from the moon was so great the brown surface of the path and the green of the surrounding shrubs and plants sparkled and most of the night insects were silent.

Under his breath Johnson hummed one of the popular new tunes that told of the invincibility of the Ibos. He was soon at the family garden and with three practiced strokes had cut down the bunch of plantains. It was very heavy, showing that the field had improved steadily since he planted the original cuttings in school-learned prepared grounds five years ago. From the cleanliness of the place he could see that his father took great care of the farm.

With two heaves, Johnson hefted the bunch onto his bare shoulder. He picked up his machet and began the slow walk home. Once or twice he thought he heard a rustling in the bush but the bunch was too heavy for him to stop or turn around.

Suddenly he felt a deep stabbing pain tear into his right side.

Clutchless - his machet dropped as with a gasp he whirled round. The bunch of plantain fell to the ground.

The little man in front of him tore repeatedly into his left breast. Surprise at who it was pre-empted his feeling of pain and speechless as he slumped to the ground.

* * *

The fat owner-driver stopped his car in front of Johnson's house. It was late afternoon and the ripe-corn coloured rays lent sad air to the seemingly deserted street.

Getting out carefully from his car the fat man walked into the sitting room of the cement building. There was no one there.

"Dalu nuo o," he shouted and waited. "Dalu nuo o!" he shouted again.

A small boy in only a ragged underwear came out of one of the side rooms and stared at the fat man.

"Where is your father?" the fat man asked.

The small boy walked out through the door opening into the compound. The man hesitated and then followed. They stopped in front of a mud house with thatched roof. Again the man hesitated and then pushed open the door and went in.

Initially, he thought no one was there. When his eyes grew accustomed to the closed gloom he saw a small woman huddled against a wall.

He walked back and opened the door. The woman whimpered and he quickly closed it.

"Nne, is it all right?" he asked.

There was no answer. He bent as close as he dared to the woman. He recognized her as Johnson's mother.

"Nne Johnson," he said sharply. "Is it all right?"

The woman burst into loud wailing which soon changed into whimpering and finally silence.

The door opened and a tall man silhouetted against the blinding light for a moment came in.

"I am Egelonu," the man said. "Nwokem who are you?"

"Okereke, Samuel Okereke," the fat man said. "I drove Johnson home yesterday."

"I wish you hadn't," Egelonu said. "Come outside, let's talk."

Okereke followed him out and for the first time the silence of the compound took on a special dread meaning. In his fat-layered chest he felt his heart stir. He placed a hand over it as he stood in front of the mud house and listened to Egelonu who resembled Johnson, or, rather, whom Johnson resembled.

"You came to see Johnson?" Egelonu asked. The steadiness of his voice belied the tears that rolled down his wrinkled cheeks.

"To pick him up," Okereke said in a quivering voice.

"He is dead!"

Okereke remained silent. His unasked question hung between them.

"His father killed him." Egelonu looked away for the first time and up at the skies as though searching for something. The tears rolled down unheeded, splattered onto his leather-like chest and stomach and were absorbed by the dirty old pair of shorts that barely covered his nakedness.

"Because of a bunch of plantains," he said, his eyes suddenly returning to Okereke's broad plump face. "A bunch of plantains," he said over and over again as though testing the sound, the meaning of it.

"Where is Johnson's father?" Okereke asked hesitantly.

"What?...Oh he is hiding somewhere. He ran away after he told Johnson's mother what he had done. 'I killed your son,' he said to her and laughed. He laughed, he laughed. But what is he hiding for?"

"Yes, what is he hiding for?" echoed Okereke in horror.

"He is dead. Dead men don't hide. The army will find him."

"Was he mad?"

"What?...Oh mad. Mad? Ume-Ogere mad? This one has done terrible things. Are you in the army?"

Okereke shook his head. "I am a food contractor."

Egelonu turned away from him. Muttering inaudibly to himself he walked out of the compound.

* * * * *

I.N.C. Aniebo is a widely published Nigerian short story writer. His first novel, *Anonymity of Sacrifice*, will soon be released by Heinemann as no. 148 in their African Writers Series. He is presently studying at the University of California, Los Angeles.

CONTRIBUTE TO UFAHAMU
