

THE WANDERER

by

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It was a clear bright day. The sun was high and sweat was pouring freely from the women's faces and arms. A sudden cry went up. "Li-li-li-lile-e-eeee!" The women scrambled about calling their young ones. "Tunde! Ayishat! Lulu!" The children came fast and in the blurr of dust and lappas, a few chickens scurried for fear of being trampled. The cooking area emptied. By the time he got near, the pots were smoldering and unattended.

His sadness shrouded him. He flicked worrisome flies that followed- bothering his face. It was almost the only exposed part of his body. Slowly he walked by, aware that the sudden hush and muffled children's voices were directed at him. So he began to speed up his pace.

The man went on to a large compound. "Ya, Mbeng," an old woman called. It was his aunt. He loved her dearly. She came toward him- placing a basket on her head. Stepping as lightly as a woman half her age. Her lappa outlined her full but firm body. As she neared he could see her smile spread over her black face. All of her teeth still shining in her mouth. Her lips were dark and her gums were purple. Something about her full soft laughter reminded him of Sali ... The way she stood at the bar ... looking at him. Her face, her body ... mocking him. Oh no! He thought ... Go away will you ... evil spirit.

"Salaam Mami," said Mbeng. "Salaam, child of my brother," replied the woman ... adjusting her cloth. "How do you dis day?" she asked. "Well, ah try, but, ah be tyah," he replied. "Tyah don be dere fo young," she said shaking her hands. "Com, mek we two go fo hous. Ah dey get peppeh soup fo you. Dat yoh ol man dey com soon fo chop."

They walked along the path that his aunt always kept smooth with long hand strung sisal brooms. There were flowers growing almost wildly around the path. "Go! Lef dat!" she shouted to a chicken pecking at a new shoot near the door. "Wait fo Ramadan dey com. Ah go mek wid you," she said as the chicken half flew, half ran away.

They went inside and the house was cool. "Rest," she said taking her basket from her head. He sat making sure he stayed covered. She fetched him some sandals, and brought him

some water to drink- then left for the back of the house to the kitchen.

He sighed letting the room and wooden rocker envelope him. If only he could remain here hidden. No one to stare at and taunt him. No children throwing stones. Even though he was all scaly, his strength had not failed him. But he couldn't bring himself to hit anyone ... not the children. It wasn't their fault. It was his. Had he heeded the warnings of his elders he would have never gone away. Was he not fortunate to return from the war unharmed? Even the nightmares had ceased ... just as Auntie Aminatou had said they would. Yet discontent swelled inside him. He tried but he was tired of making fishnets and driving taxis.

That day he took his portmanteau from under his bed and counted his money. He had saved for almost a year and one half of the money he was left with after giving his mother some was his. Dividing what he had saved, Mbeng prepared to go. He got in his old motor and towards Lagos he headed. His mother buried her head in her hands- screaming to her husband to stop him. She shouted stories of wild parties and evil doings to wind. But he would not turn around. His father stood silently. He turned to his mother sharply telling her to cry when there was something to shed precious water.

Mbeng remembered his excitement as he bumped along the road. There were many other cars going in the same direction. Everytime he passed a village- each time he stopped for bread or a handful of newspaper wrapped package of meat and rice- he wanted to shout ... "Ah dey go fo Lagos!"

It was almost sunset when he saw the border and the signs of Nigeria. He turned on the radio. After some static he heard ... Juju music. Finally, he was there ... in the City. He had never seen so many people ... not even in Europe. Cars were lined up and bicycles were having problems passing. Occasionally, a driver would get out of his car and go over to a water vendor, or get in a car stalled to talk with a friend. But his excitement took it all in happily.

With her hands folded- "Mbeng!" she shouted. "Psssh! You eyeahs no hyeah. Me ah de call-call. Ah com fo see dat no Shaytan don pass de hous en mek off wid you." Ah dey sleep Auntie ... Ah beg, no worry. Ah fin," he said. "Com we go chop. Dat ol man dey vex me," she said ...

As they sat eating his uncle came in ... "Salaam-Aminatun, Hussein." His uncle always called him by his first name. The old woman cast a mean eye to his uncle. He felt warm being around them ... their age, their love ... Hussein felt good. The old woman fussed ... "You tink ah go fix chop

twenty times fo you ... You sef, wen ah fix ahm- you dey chop."

"Hussein, are you well?" his uncle asked. His voice was filled with concern and sang in the air, adding comfort to his hungry body. "Well, my uncle- these scales which afflict me are so bothersome. My mother does not want me to go near anyone. She says evil spirits have entered me and that if anyone looks in my eyes or is touched by the scales, they too will fall sick."

"Hussein that is silly talk." His uncle reassured him. "I have been thinking about you and after supper I will pray for an answer- a way to make you well." Mbeng listened but thought of all the visits to the healers and even two different white doctors in Cotonou. None helped. Despite her prayers and money--all sacrificed chickens, his mother looked at him each to see the same scaly body. They both gave up.

They talked pleasantly during the meal. He repeated his aunt's favourite story of how he single-handed as she put it, saved the whole of France. Actually, it was a small place-Avon. One of the officers was from Fontainbleau and knew a farmer who always hid wine behind his chicken house. It was decided that in view of them not having had any fun for six weeks- they would "liberate" some wine and a few chickens. Mbeng was selected and chose Ade- Ade chose Kwesi.

The three of them started off. It was a cold but clear night. Ater walking about two kilometres they saw a house ahead. There was smoke from the chimney. It was immediately decided they would stop in to warm up before continuing. They looked around and concluded that no Germans were in the area. Mbeng was chosen to knock on the door because he spoke French and most of all-he was fairer than the other two.

Mbeng knocked softly ... Once ... twice. "Oui," a woman's voice responded. "Excusez-moi," said Mbeng. A woman wrapped in a black shawl came to the door ... Cautiously, she opened the door. When she saw the three black men on her doorsteps she cried, "Mon Dieu! Protege-moi!"

"Peu pas!" Mbeng reassured her. The woman opened the door. She beckoned them to sit. Her shawl slipped from her blonde hair as she ran to poke the fire. Briefly she disappeared- then came back with a tray- three glasses and a bottle. "Buvez-vous du cognac?" she asked putting down the tray. Mbeng started to protest but, Ade stopped him. "Listen Muslim man, you don drink. Me ah do. Kwesi?" The two of them descended upon the bottle.

Meanwhile, the woman standing, was wringing her hands nervously. She looked from one to the other. Finally she said, "D'accord. Viens, couchez." Mbeng was startled. "Wey ting she say man?" Mbeng smiled and said, "She dey say time fo nyama-nyama." Ade and Kwesi smiled and said, "Well, get on with it old boy. Get on with it."

Mbeng was embarrassed. He had never seen a white woman's body before. As she undressed he wanted to stop her. But she continued to disrobe. Mbeng lay beside her. She touched him and said ... "Oh la-la!" Auntie Aminatou was shaking softly with laughter as he spoke. She loved hearing this part. Mbeng got up quickly and went to a small room to wash. Ade smiled when he reentered the room. "Me next Kwesi." Ade went up the stairs quickly.

There was a loud crash. Then silence. Soon Ade came down. "O, oh, me back. Nah white woman. Nyama-nyama dey so-so," he said. Kwesi asked ... "Wey ting you brek?" "De bed man. Ah no play-play. Anyway, dey ting weak, wen ah step, it snap."

Kwesi prepared for his turn but there was a noise on the road. They ran to the window. There was a small jeep on the road. They said- "Germans." Kwesi said ... "Yes, and they're headed towards Avon." "What shall we do?" Ade asked buttoning his clothes. "We better head back to warn the others," said Mbeng. "But what of me?" said Kwesi looking at the room upstairs. "Too bad ol' chap," said Ade.

The woman came down with a housecoat over her naked body. She beckoned to Kwesi. He started towards her but Mbeng stopped him. "Ask her if she has a car or a bicycle so we can get to the others." Before he could translate the woman who understood 'bicycle' went behind a curtain and brought out one. "Look, only one of us can go since there is but one bicycle," said Ade. "Well, I say you should go Mbeng," said Kwesi. Mbeng understood. He took the bicycle and left from the back of the house.

He rode as fast as he could taking a short cut and avoiding the main road. "So, me ah dey reach befo de Germans and the troops were warned. And that's how I saved France." Auntie Aminatou clapped her hands gleefully. She was laughing so hard tears streamed down her cheeks. "Dat woman was so much happy fo dat night - I know," she said. "Look here, old woman," said his uncle. "You shouldn't listen to such stories. Instead you should be in your room looking for a leaf to help our poor son. After all - he is our brother's child. Are we not the children of Allah?"

Laughter faded on her face and her eyes shone. Mbeng looked at them both wonderously. If only it was possible... He had heard of her cures that she made with bush medicine. But his faith was gone.

Auntie Aminatou got up slowly and cleared the table. "Come, my son. Let us go inside and pray." His uncle was an Al Haji, and was deeply religious. They performed ghozl and went in the room which served as his mosque. "Bismilahi Rahman-Rahee." His uncle began.

Mbeng bent and prostrated himself... Each time he knelt he saw the horrible scales on the floor. His uncle zikkered. "Alhamdu lilahi." Mbeng sat and watched. "Adieu mon coeur." ... A voice sang in his ear. "Astaghfrullahi." He zikkered too, hard. "Rabbi, if You are there...help me!" Mbeng cried.

When they finished and went to sit in the rockers, his aunt entered the room... She had a small jar in her hands. "Suphana wa-tOallah. I get somting in de room," she said. Mbeng started. "You go wash fo dat tin tub. Ah mek palavah soup fo you. Den bring yousef. You drink dis. It dey be plenty strong. Ah go mek dat Shaytan lef you An you be pretty soon."

Mbeng rose from the chair. He walked through the house. There near the cooking pots was a big tub. He tested it with his hand and pulled it back quickly. It was boiling. "She plans to scald these scales off me," he said to himself.

"Drop you clothes," said his aunt coming up behind him. Mbeng turned looking for some place to undress or to cover with. "You sef- Don ah dey see you befo Akika? Dat my husban cut you fin wen you be small pickin. Wey ting you dey get ah no see... De armpit is not higher den de shoulders." This was one of her favourite sayings when she wanted to put age before youth.

Mbeng undressed slowly. As he took off his cloth, scabs and scales fell. The cloth was soaked with pus and blood. He put one foot in the water but it was too hot. His aunt gave him something to drink. He put his other foot in the water and she poured cold water on his leg. He stood in the tub and she continued to throw water on his leg. Mbeng tried to jump up and down, to sit- to put his bottom in the water. His penis dangled lifelessly between his legs. He aunt bent over and touched it. "Chsssssup," she chipped. "Don worry. You go get plenty pickin fo me fom dis you stick."

Mbeng felt the sting of the water. His eyes smarted. The scales were covering the top of the water and there as always, were the flies. They were eating his sores. Each

time she poured water, the shock of it made his penis jerk and his body twist. Finally, the water became bearable. "Stay-Ah go fetch a cloth fo you."

He sat in the water. A light headed feeling came over him. Sali's face sifted in the sunlight coming through the trees. "Adieu mon coeur." The song faded. He remembered her soft body... So pliant, so mobile. Her breast bobbing in a swell of dancing palm leaves. The wet warmth of her tongue on his cheek-in his ear. And the insistence of her hands on him. She opened to him- wide spread, like tables during harvest celebrations. Her breath sucked in as they melted into each other.

Sali's face faded and he saw Kwesi- his body flying up to the top of the tallest tree and fall. It lay twisted jerking...lifeless on the cold hard grounds of France. And Ade, shirt a-gaping bloody...a hole..."No! Aoothubilahi-mina shaitan-nirajheem," he prayed.

He was holding onto the rim of the tub as the ground began to spin. The shape of his aunt and uncle widened and grew. The scene changed. He was in the market square. There was a traveling circus and he took Sali for a ride on a whirly whirl. She screamed. She laughed and clung to him. She clung so tight. Tight the way Ade clung to Kwesi's torso... His arm detached, hanging. Sali's mouth puckered to kiss him. And he saw Ade's face- a wide scream painted on his mouth. Pain like the burning of the scales from his skin.

He was feeling sick. The blood was everywhere and bits of his flesh were strewn all over the snow. Ade was groping all over his arm. "Medic! Medic! Damn you!" screamed Mbeng. "I am going to be sick." He vomited. Mbeng saw the colours of her dress that she wore the last time he saw Sali. The vomit poured out of him like demon snakes on the rocks during hatching time on the shoals. "Please, Rabbi! Rabbi!" he called.

Auntie Aminatou was singing as she rocked when he heard her sounds. "I must have slept," he thought. Slowly Mbeng looked around. It was a different room- not strange...not unknown, but different. He closed his eyes and then opened them again. A face, a familiar smile beamed on him. "La illaga- illahlahi," said his aunt. "My husband, na look!" The old man came in and said... "Salaam, my son. How are you?" Mbeng tried to raise up but couldn't. He head buzzed slightly and his tongue felt too fat for his mouth. "Don try to sit. Hol on... Drink watah. Wash you mout, den drink tree times. Slow-slow." His aunt held his head and put a cup of water to his lips.

"What day is today?" Mbeng asked. "Friday," his uncle replied. My god! Mbeng counted. It must be four days since I have been here. He got up slowly. Since the scales- he long stopped looking at himself. He wrapped a cloth around his body and stood shakily. Mbeng wanted to relieve himself. He walked slowly to the back. Of to the side was the Big House. His water squeezed out slowly but not as painful as it had been.

When he returned his aunt was clearing his sleeping mat. "Com, chop na deah," she pointed. He went to eat. How hungry he felt. Something was wrong. The buzz of flies was not there. He noticed his hands uncovered. His fingers were not stiff. Mbeng lifted his cloth. The scales were gone! Spots where they had been was all that remained. "Wahlahi!" he exclaimed. Looking around he saw the old lady at the door... smiling.

"Dey go. Allah mek ah do ahm. De Shaytan go!" Auntie Aminatou came to him. "You sef, dat ouman dey put Ku fo you haram juice. Ah mek ghokanton fo you. Allah mek ah see dat titie sef dey tief you money en raise she lappa fo una man. Dat man no lak you. He vex caus she sing to you. Now ah tek de bush an Ahmadou- you faddeh, com to an he tell me. He say dat he boy mek bad sin in Lagos en he show me bush fo medicin," Auntie Aminatou said. "My son, Allah has restored your health. He sent your father to my wife in a dream," said his uncle. Mbeng listened as his aunt made noises. "Humpph!" "This is your aunt, I have tried to help her to be a good Muslim woman. But for some, there is much work." "Wah lahi! Wey na you abuse me so?" Auntie Aminatou protested. "Don ah cure my son? De juju man com den lef. De white man dey look so. Him dey scratch-scratch him head. He sef, he don heal. Me, Allah en me dey do ahm."

They continued to feed him. Daily the old woman washed and then rubbed some salve all over his body. One day after he had been there for a few weeks- his mother came. She was crying. "My sister. Ah beg you no be vexed wid me." "Salaam, my sister," said his aunt coolly. "Ah heah dat you get my son bettah. Dat de flies no follow him. Dat he maness back." Mbeng listened. His mother meant well he knew. Auntie Aminatou repeated the story of her dreams to her. His mother thanked her and begged his forgiveness. She asked him home for supper.

"Tell my sisters and all, I will be home for supper. Then we will talk to old women. I wish to take a wife." His mother said, "Alhamdu lilahi!" and left.

Mbeng walked around the compound. He tried to remember Sali's face. The look in her eyes when they awakened but

couldn't. She was fading away into darkness. Ade's face appeared- but it was smiling and Kwesi was dancing wildly. Paris was throwing confetti on them. They were heroes! All was well.

He ran to the edge of the compound and saw Alhaji Adamou making fishnets. His long arms threaded and kotted the cord. The sound of children, birds- and the water sounded peaceful.

He too would sit on a dead tree trunk making nets. He too would watch the sea and tell stories of the white man's war to his sons. His hands went slowly to his penis. It was full. He pressed it and felt the wet seed stick to his thigh. Mbeng turned back and headed home...to his own compound. To see the woman his mother would choose for him. Seeing Auntie Aminatou bending and tilling her farm... he prayed... "One like you Auntie! One like you... Please Allah."