

LAMPLIGHT*
(A Short Story)

By

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"It was the least I could do," Nelson said for the fourth time.

"Papa, you did well," Okechukwu reassured him again. His father had never exhibited such a depth of feeling. It was wonderful and at the same time somewhat frightening. To think that beneath that plump, loud joviality, that instant masquerade-like familiarity rested a fine-tuned sensibility! It was unsettling.

"I must thank you again for loaning me the money."

"Papa, I told you it was not a loan."

"I know that's what you said. Tell that to me again when I give you back the money tomorrow. The banks are open tomorrow?"-

"Yes, Papa." Okechukwu sighed and shook his head. Stubborn old man, he thought, and immediately looked away not to meet his father's eyes.

"Oke?"

"Yes, Papa."

"I know what you are thinking, but certain things must be done right."

"Papa, I agree, but...."

"Let me finish. Endings and beginnings are the most important things in life and even beyond. Middles are not that important. They are usually the road to or from an ending or beginning. People always remember endings and beginnings. So also do the ancestors. After all it is only an ending that separates us from the ancestors."

"But Papa...."

*Prologue to the author's forth-coming novel: The Journey Without, being sequel to his The Journey Within, Heinemann, 1978.

"Don't interrupt me now. You can't learn what I am telling you now from a book. So open your ears wide. You don't know how long you will have this opportunity to learn things from me. I won't be here forever like your books. Why don't you learn all you can from me now. When I am gone you go back to your books."

"All right Papa."

"Now you are giving in, instead of agreeing with me. Why do you always give up on me son? Have I been such a bad father to you? Are you ashamed of me? Or do you think I am so stupid, stubborn and uncaring you don't need to bother with me?"

Okechukwu was taken aback. Bereft of speech he simply stared at his father.

"Well?"

Okechukwu smiled. He wondered what the old man would say if he told him he did think of him as an uncaring, stubborn, stupid and brutal father. The old man would raise the ancestors, that's for sure. And they would come running in the person of the elders and the umuqkpu.

"What are you laughing at?"

"The things you just said, Papa"

"What things?"

"The bad names you called yourself. You know I won't ever think of you in those terms."

"I wonder."

"Papa, do finish what you were saying about endings and beginnings."

"I had finished."

"But I interrupted you. I am sorry."

"No trouble. It seems we can never talk to each other without annoying each other. And yet...I never knew my father well and now my son won't know me well. I am sure it is in the beginnings. You know, Oke, although endings and beginnings seem to be at opposite ends, they are really one and the same -- a manifestation of our mother Ajala? We come from the earth and we go back to the earth. The rituals we surround endings and beginnings with are really renewals of our covenant with

Ajala. When my time comes to go to her, make sure the appropriate ritual is carried out to the letter as I have done for Onyeama."

"Please Papa, don't talk like that."

"When you get to my age you will find it is the only thing worth talking about. I want you to pay particular attention to what we are doing for Onyeama, so that when the time comes you will know what to do. Putting Onyeama in the ground was just the beginning. The more you concentrate on what we are doing, the less your mind will dwell on your problems with your wife. At the moment you are paying too much attention to her which is not good. It leads you to make wrong moves which in turn affects your mood. And women are very good at noticing fluctuation of moods because it is the way they operate. So, when they see you are now behaving like them they know they are winning. You can't beat them at their own game. But if you play a man's game by focussing on the objective you want, and refuse to be affected by the outcome of intermediate moves you present an unruffled image. And women hate that. In their attempt to affect you, to shake you up, they overplay their game and make mistakes. So if they had wanted to control you, you end up controlling them and achieving your end which is what matters. Tell me son, do you really want your wife back?"

Okechukwu hesitated before saying slowly, "I don't know Papa. Sometimes I want her back badly, at other times I don't. One thing I do know, I want my son back."

"You wouldn't be an Achu if you did not want your son back."

Okechukwu smiled and bit his tongue to stop a joking retort.

"Now, you see why I said two days ago you should not have allowed her to go with the child. You now have to scheme to bring the child back without letting her know you want him at all costs."

"Papa, do you like my wife?"

"It is too late to ask that kind of question."

"But it is not too late for me to know."

Nelson smiled briefly. "Spoken like an Achu. Your wife is the type that needs strong handling."

"And I am too soft-hearted?"

"You can be strong if you concentrate on endings."

"And beginnings Papa?"

"Sometimes you talk like a child. At times I wonder if you are truly my son."

"Mama said I am like grandfather."

"How does she know? She is always saying things she has no way of knowing."

"She said you told her."

Nelson made as if to retort but instead squirmed in his chair looking for a more comfortable position. Failing, he sighed and said, "This chair is not good."

"I'll get new ones once I start work."

"When are you starting?"

"Next month."

"One would have thought with your Army experience people would rush to give you work."

"I thought so, too."

"Once you start working, all your quarrels with your wife will be over. Women are only difficult when things are hard."

"But they were good during the war, Papa. Without them the war would have ended very quickly with all of us slaughtered."

"The women were good because things were hard for everyone. And what was happening was what they liked...we were fighting for them."

"Mba Papa, we were also fighting for ourselves. In fact we were fighting more for ourselves. We would have been the losers had the Hausas got hold of them."

"Are you trying to tell me they would not lose too?"

"Well, as one young Nkwere girl told a Biafran soldier that tried to impress her with what he was sacrificing for her, 'If Hausa soldier catch me and you who you tink say igo kill.' 'You,' the soldier said. 'Na lie,' the girl said, 'na you igo kill, then igo make me him wife.' 'You go gree?' the soldier

asked. 'Why I no go gree? Nobi man like you?'"

"Nkwere women," Nelson said with a laugh, "are not like other women."

"Quite a few of our young girls befriended the Hausas after the war. And you remember one from our town married one."

"That is true. As you would say, things have changed."

"Now, you are laughing at me, Papa."

Nelson laughed and squinted into the sun-clothed evening outside. "Is that the Ibealo, I see coming? My eyes are not as good as they used to be."

"Yes, with the palm wine you ordered."

"Good. Get the jug and glasses. When did your mother say she would return."

"She didn't say."

"Onyeama's death really affected her. Did Josephine go with her?"

"Yes. Let me get the glasses." Okechukwu walked into the dining room and quickly came out with the jug and glasses on a tray.

"Agu," Ibealo said as he came into the sitting room.

"Dingba," Nelson said. "You did as you said."

"When money speaks, everyone listens. How are you?"

"How do you think I am?"

"Like your praise name....like a lion. Give me your hand."

They shook hands solemnly.

"You did it," Ibealo said. "You are a man."

"Good evening, sir," Okechukwu said.

"Evening my son," Ibealo said. He lowered himself gently into the armchair next to Nelson. "How are you all?"

"We are well."

"You did not bring a glass for yourself?" Nelson asked Okechukwu.

"No, Papa. I don't feel like drinking."

"Better get a glass. The things we are going to discuss are things that will sink in better with some wine in your stomach."

"They will have to sink in without the wine, Papa. I did not eat this afternoon and wine on an empty stomach gives me a headache!"

"Why didn't you eat?" Ibealo exclaimed. "A young man must always eat when there is food whether he is hungry or not. You never know what is going to happen."

"Why did you not eat Oke? Didn't your mother prepare your favorite? I know you don't eat when Josephine cooks."

"Papa, I was not hungry so I did not eat."

"You mean your wife got into your stomach and turned it upside down."

Okechukwu picked up the jar of wine and shook it angrily. Ibealo laughed. "Oke, stop shaking that wine like that. It is not the wife that destroyed your appetite."

Grimly, Okechukwu filled the two glasses and handed one to each man. Knowing how fast men down their first glass of good wine, he stood waiting to refill the glasses. This done he sat next to Ibealo.

"Dingba, this is good wine," Nelson said sipping his second glass appreciatively.

"Nwankwo Ada ma eti nmonwu."

"Yes, he does. There is nothing like a man doing what he knows best and doing it well each time."

"Tell that to the young people."

"Dingba we know that," Okechukwu cut in.

"When you say we who do you mean?" Nelson asked.

"My age-group, Papa. The people who don't know it are your age-group...."

"Don't be insulting young man!"

"Agu, let the boy finish. Go on Okechukwu, you said it is our age group that do not know a man should be doing what he knows best. Explain."

"Papa, when I said your age-group I didn't mean you and Dingba." Okechukwu stopped and smiled, but his father's scowl did not disappear, so he continued. "The people I am referring to are the members of your age-group who left what they knew best and joined politics and then took over the government. People like Zik, Awolowo, Abubakar and many others like them. None of them was trained as a politician or government leader. None of them knew how to run any part of the government but because the White man handed the government over to them, having made sure that those who had experience running it remained servants, they believed they were the best qualified. But were they? Zik was a newspaperman, Awolowo, a lawyer and Abubakar a teacher. In fact because of Abubakar every teacher wanted to join politics. So now we have people who know nothing about government running it and the civil war shows how well they did. And that is exactly what the White man likes. As long as idiots are running the government, the White man remains in control."

"I have never heard you speak like this before," Nelson said. "Are you sure you did not drink something?"

"Papa, you are always doubting what I say. Tell me, how happy are you that after all my schooling I find it hard to get a job, yet there is a standard six pass from the next town who is in charge of a University."

"In charge of a University?" Ibealo asked.

"What he is saying is that the man is a member of the committee that runs the university. Look my son, I am not happy you do not have a job. I know that worries you, but remember I did not want you to join the Army in the first place. If you had listened to me you would have been a doctor by now and wouldn't be looking for a job. As for Zik, Awolowo and Abubakar they were doing what they knew best when they were running the government. After all they won independence for us...."

"How, Papa? You know as I do they did not win it. It was handed over to them which is why they do not know its value."

"That's not true. They fought the White man! You were a child then so you don't know what they went through. They suffered. They were even jailed, and their lives were constantly in danger because they said the White man should go."

Okechukwu your father is right. I remember when they were going to arrest Zik in Lagos for talking too much, and he simply disappeared and then reappeared in Enugu. Then once, one man paid by the white people, shot at him, but the bullet did not penetrate the mighty Zik's body. If Zik did not go to school to learn how to run a government, he learnt it when he was trying to drive the white man out."

Ibealo drained his cup and asked for a refill. Okechukwu obliged and also topped up his father's.

"This thing you said about our age-group," Nelson said, "May be true about those who followed Zik into government, but it is definitely not so about Zik and Awolowo. Abubakar I don't know. But if he was a qualified teacher then he knew something. But what do you say about Ojukwu who we can say belongs to your age-group and who was trained as an army man and a government leader? He did not do so well did he?"

"Things were too much for him."

"Too much for him?" Nelson snorted and continued, "Yes too much for him, which was why he ran. That I can understand, the running away that is. But don't you think things were also too much for Zik and the others?"

"Maybe."

"Now don't start giving in. I told you, what you are learning today, you won't find in any book. Alright, if things were too much for Ojukwu and Zik, which of them left us in a worse position?"

"Ojukwu of course."

"At least you speak the truth when it stares you in the face. You see that is the difference between your age-group and mine. No matter how bad or tough things are, we do not leave them in a worse state than we found them. If we can not improve them we leave them the way we found them. But your age group claims to know a great deal about the white man and his ways; you claim you have no fear of the white man because, as we say it, you have watched their women urinating; you claim you know that a man should be doing what he knows best, and yet we are all worse off than before. How do you explain that?"

"But Papa...."

"No, let me finish. Let me tell you, you can not explain it. You know why? Because you don't know. So I'll explain it.

You see your age-group and those that follow you, God forgive us, are half-cooked. You are like akpu kwuru udo, overcooked in the first stage which is your schooling period. You do not know the traditions well because we chased you all off to school very early. Look at you just beginning to learn about endings and beginnings! Then the schooling we chased you into, you did not really complete. Your own case is especially bad. You ran off into the Army instead of finishing or at least learning a profession. As for the others that got a profession, they always claim to know more than they actually do. As we say, if a traveller does not lie, who is going to correct him? It is one thing to see where a woman eases herself, it is another to stay in her womb for nine months! Your age group and those that follow are bats....you are neither land animals nor birds. Now that is where I find fault with my age-group. We did that to you and it is unforgivable."

"Now I understand why your age-group has always distrusted us, Papa. You chased us off to school in our infancy, depriving us of the opportunity to learn about our people, our customs, ourselves. Then when we return from our schools you say we did not learn enough, we are not equal to the white man. So whenever one of us and a white man competes for a job in our own country, the white man gets it because as you put it, we did not spend nine months in a white woman's womb, we only saw her ease herself. Papa, if your age group believes so much in the white man, worships him I should say, why did you ask him to leave?"

"You asked well, my child," Ibealo suddenly said. "I never wanted them to leave. While they were here things were good. Everyone went about his business and as long as you didn't commit any crime, you were safe, and I mean safe. But now everyone is interested in your business. We kill each other. Innocent people are robbed and killed and the thieves are made chiefs and take all sorts of titles. You know Agu it was a tragedy when the white man left. At least while they were here we had someone to blame it all on, someone to fight with. Now we have only ourselves. Refill my cup, my son."

"But Dingba, you will agree that no matter how good and strong a father is, he has to let his child walk on his own sometime. If the white man had not let us go, we would never have grown up."

"I know Agu," Ibealo said sipping his fresh glass. "What I am saying is that the white man left too early. It wasn't time for us to walk yet. Now, look at what the Church Committee did to Onyeama. After promising him while he was alive he would be given a church burial, and that his corpse would be brought into the church and blessed, they changed their mind when they

heard he was dead. That wouldn't have happened during the white man's time. Onyeama would have been told the truth before he died. But even the church these days lies to make money. If Onyeama had known his corpse would be rejected he would not have given the church all that money last year."

"Papa, you haven't told me why the Church Committee refused Onyeama a Christian burial when he was such an ardent Christian."

"My son, that is why I wanted you to take note of endings and beginnings. The Church Committee, a bunch of frustrated, bitter old men claimed Onyeama was a polygamist."

"But his second wife died a long time ago without an issue."

"Yes," Ibealo broke in. "That was why they had promised him a Christian burial in the first place. But as soon as he died, the new Catechist from Nsukka said since he had never married in church and once had two wives he was not really a Christian."

"And the Church Committee agreed?"

"They were the carrier of the bad news. And you can't keep a dead body waiting too long while the living argue about how and where to bury it. It soon demands immediate attention. That's why your father took over. With the cow, the goats and masquerades, Onyeama had a more fitting burial. Agu, give me your hand."

"I hope his spirit will find peace and join the ancestors," Nelson said after he shook hands with Ibealo.

"Ise" Okechukwu and Ibealo said in unison.

Endings and beginnings!"

Okechukwu felt the prickling of tears behind his eyes and blinked several times to keep it in check. Luckily the eyes of the evening were being closed speedily by night and so none would see him cry. Another day was ending and the ritual accompanying this ending as his father would put it, was being enacted. Then a few hours later there would be a beginning. But what happened to those hours between the ending and the beginning? To the man who slept, nothing. They did not exist. And to the man who did not sleep? The day had not really ended to begin, but rather continued. Maybe, Okechukwu thought, the old man did get one thing right there. Endings and beginnings were indeed one and the same thing.

"Oke, what about lighting a lamp?"

"Yes, Papa."