

SHORT STORY

HAPPY SURVIVAL, BROTHER

by

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Nwankwo knew he would participate in the scheme long before Boniface came to the end of a convoluted explanation. It was therefore with half an ear he listened to him drone on in a peculiarly resonant Igbo-English:

"In the Cameroons, *gamaline* is sold at two pounds ten shillings* a tin by one Hausa-man who imports it from Nigeria. I tell my master I know the sole agent for *gamaline* in the whole of Nigeria, and we can buy it only from this agent, at one pound a tin. This morning, before I go to look for my brother, I go to the ICI and arrange for five thousand tins of *gamaline* costing two thousand five hundred pounds. I tell them I will bring the money this afternoon so they can deliver in the evening. If they do so we make a profit of two thousand and five hundred pounds without palavar..."

Nwankwo was essentially an observer of life. At intervals however, he emerged from the passivity of this role, and clothed in the trusting, tremulous innocence of a novice plunged into action. Bested, he retreated into himself and analyzed his previous moves and counter-moves. He made a correction here, a commentary there and a chuckling applause or grimace in areas where his perspicacity or stupidity stood out, and so healed himself. Then finally chalking up his losses to experience he emerged at some future date to play a similar but never the same action-role. And, always he compared and classified his actions after the fact.

"I wanted my brother to say he is the sole agent for *gamaline*," Boniface said, "so he can get money from my master and we can pay for my order at UCI. My master say he will pay money only to the sole agent. You see, the last time, he trust one Yoruba man in the Cameroons and give him money to buy *gamaline* from Nigeria. The man never return to Cameroons. Even yesterday his wife lost three hundred pounds in a bus. Some Yoruba man take the handbag in which she put the money and jump from bus when it slow down for Ebute-Metta railway crossing.

*For the purposes of this story one pound is equivalent to \$3.00 and twenty shillings equals one pound.

The bus driver refuse to stop till too late to chase thief. Sir that time, my master only trust Igbo. All his lorry drivers are Igbo."

"So you want me to pose as the sole agent for gamaline? Nwankwo asked as he accelerated quickly and changed lanes to beat the traffic lights. He barely made it and his thumping heart triggered a discharge of cold sweat around his plump joints.

"Yessah. You look like someone with money. You have a car. My master does not know any person that works at ICI. He will believe you work there if I tell him so. Me and you just go to my master. I introduce you. He give you the money and we come to ICI..."

ICI. The initials had gained currency although Nwankwo knew most of the users did not know what they stood for. "Imperial Chemical Industries," a manifestation of the Imperial haughty condescending British. The British! So proud of their achievements and capabilities. A race for whom God is and should be British. If He is not, then he is not God. Now that they were on their way down, was God also losing His grip? Being British must be now as traumatic as being Igbo. But Nwankwo did not really regard himself as a true Igbo because unlike one he trusted too much to luck and providence. You did not know where you came from nor where you were going so why try to structure the moment between the coming and going? The deeps were bottomless and could not be charted. Moments of despair were but mere shallows. Dig, if you dare! Like Lagos soil! Dig and all you find is bottomless water. And again during the civil war, was chance not God?

"It is God's work I meet you today. I almost give up hope finding someone I can trust. It is not every Igbo man you can trust. When I meet you I was coming from my brother's office. You say you do not remember my brother that works at the customs? I introduced him to you once at Portharcourt. Anyway I did not find him in the office. It made me unhappy. The business is not for one man only. But now I meet you I am happy. You will help me sah? It is very simple."

"Yes, it is simple," Nwankwo said. "It is simple; but I don't like that type of business. It is plain cheating."

"Ah, sah," Boniface cried, "It is true you are starting business new! In business if you don't cheat, you don't make profit.. Everybody in Lagos cheat. They buy thing cheap, they sell for high price. *Biko*, let us go to my master now, sah."

"As I told you previously, I'm going to an important place now."

"Yes sah, you tell me. Will you stay long there, sah?"

"No."

"Please sah, when you finish seeing the person we can go and see my master."

If cheating is business, then lets all join in the game. Sometimes one can fight one's fate to a stand still and then... what? Nothing, except that when others are driving a brand new Mercedes Benz, one curls up in a five year old Mbekuru Volkswagen. Well, be an Igbo for once. If you can not cheat, then join them.

The traffic had crawled to a stop near the Yaba College of Technology, as it always did. Nwankwo, who was prepared for this, forced a hole in the traffic wall of the next lane, shrugging off the curses, shouts and blaring horns of offended motorists as he relentlessly enlarged the space he had created. It was the only way. In Lagos traffic, road curtesy was a sign of weakness. By the time the traffic started moving again, his volkswagen had become a refuge for the hot, nauseating stink of the open storm drains...

Lagos, the capital of Nigeria, is a modern city of more than a million inhabitants and has a very exciting night life!..

"Where does your master stay?"

"With his brother-in-law, opposite Igbobi Hospital, on Ikorodu road."

"The traffic jam on Ikorodu road never ends."

"I know the way we can take, sah."

The quiet confidence in the tone made Nwankwo glance at Boniface and note once more his very dark black squatness, his cleanly-dirty pair of blue trousers and off-white shirt, topped by the typical, heavy Igbo face...

The civil war taught people one very good lesson they will not forget easily - the person you snob today may be holding the gun on you tomorrow, legitimately or otherwise. Another good lesson, this time from the days before the war, is that the agent of the bribe-taker, is often the poorest looking person in the neighborhood. Of course how the bribe-takers were able to control their agents was another matter altogether. There were stories of the swearing of fealty with human blood and chicken blood and alligator pepper, but it was difficult to tell when those were fantasies or reality.

"There is something I forget to tell you, sah," Boniface said suddenly.

"Eh..he?"

"When you talk to my master, do not forget to charge him commission."

"Commission?"

"Gamaline agent's commission. Two shillings in the pound.

Five hundred pounds profit!

"Will your master pay this commission and the five thousand pounds also?"

"Yes sah. You see, if you do not charge him commission, he will not believe you really the sole-agent. You take whatever commission you get. It is your share."

Nwankwo broke gently and swerved to avoid hitting a yellow-and-green taxi that had just cut across his front. A huge, filthy red *Scania* bus suddenly pulled out from the bus stop and straddled his new lane forcing him to stop with a screech of tires. He changed down quickly and followed in the wake of the fat bus. But these actions did not interrupt his thoughts.

So Boniface and his accomplices will share two thousand five hundred pounds! I am not greedy. Five hundred pounds was adequate compensation for the part he had to play. Compensations and play-acting seemed like what life was mostly about. Sometimes the compensation was more valuable than the role. Or vice versa. Oh-oh-h-h yes...

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"Let's play a new game," Ude said dusting his small, flat buttocks, so much like a moneky's in colour and texture.

"What game?" Nwankwo asked standing up and hitching up his shorts.

"Kneel down," Ude commanded. He took over the bag of roasted groundnuts they had been eating.

"What next?" Nwankwo asked. They were both five years old but he was almost twice as tall as Ude.

"No, sit down," Ude said.

Nwankwo obeyed. He trusted Ude completely.

"Close your eyes. Open your mouth. Now close your mouth again and open your eyes.

Nwankwo delightedly chewed the shelled groundnuts that filled his mouth. He liked the new game.

"Do the same thing for me and then I will do it for you till we have eaten all the groundnuts," Ude said.

At the third round, Nwankwo's mouth was filled with Ude's wind that smelt of very rotten eggs.

Ude ran away with the rest of the groundnuts...

* * *

"By the way Boniface, you did not tell me what gamaline is."

"I tell you before sah. Make I tell you again? It is the thing you use to catch fish. You put it in the water and the fish die and you collect them with a net."

"And you can get this thing from ICI?"

"Yessah we can. But my master does not know. He is a Cameroonian and we arrive from the Cameroons day before yesterday to get this gamaline. We come with a lorry to carry it. The lorry is now being serviced at Yaba. As soon as I get the gamaline we go back to Cameroons."

Five hundred pounds is not easy to come by in a day.

Nwankwo changed his mind about paying the visit he had planned before he ran into Boniface.

"Show me the special road you said leads to your master's house" he said.

Boniface guided him through devious, dirt-and-human cluttered side streets that threatened to end in cul-de-sacs every thirty yards. Suddenly, like daybreak, wide Ikorodu Road was around them. On the right, some yards away, was the Igbodi hospital.

"Turn left," Boniface said. "At the Mobil petrol station."

"There is no road."

"There is," Boniface said in Igbo. "You won't see it clearly till you are on it."

The road, initially part of the tarred compound of the petrol station soon detached itself and ran straight on into a heavily built-up area. Nwankwo's surprise at its smooth-surfaced existence ended when it degenerated into mounds and water-logged hollows. At Boniface's direction, Nwankwo parked as close as he dared to an open, smelly drain. To leave, he would have to reverse into a rutted side street on his left. The hard sun bounced off the car's white paint, making it stand out like a slum-trader's new sign board. He and Boniface walked towards a dirty-green house a few yards away.

"I will introduce you to my master as my brother that works at the customs," Boniface said conspiratorially in Igbo.

A plump woman, a lappa tied over her huge breasts, sat in front of the house, a squalling baby on her lap. Boniface greeted her in deferential pidgin English as the madam of the house and asked if the master of the house was at home. Her answer in the affirmative was barely polite. Boniface led Nwankwo down a dark passage and into the first room on their left.

There was no one in the typical worker's bedsitter. Four saggy-cushioned armchairs were set around a dirt-encrusted round table. A curtained-off section did not quite cover the head and foot of a high wooden bed. Opposite this, at the far corner of the room was a crude cupboard on top of which was an ancient mains radio and a record changer. The walls of the room needed fresh paint and the cemented floor was sooty and pock-marked. The only window was narrow, barred and curtained.

"This is my master's brother-in-law's house," Boniface said lowering himself into the armchair opposite the door.

Nwankwo took the chair nearest the door. "Where is your master?" he asked. "I thought the woman said he was in?"

"That woman?" Boniface said contemptuously. "She is my master's sister, but she does not know anything. Let us wait a little. My master will soon be here."

Nwankwo studied the room. Of the four almanacs decorating the wall the three most colorful were four or five years old, and the grandfather clock next to them was not working. They were some of the curious but frequent things he had seen in workmen's houses in the *North, East and West Nigeria*. He relaxed. As the scion of a workman himself, he recognized what he saw. He was on familiar ground. The conservatism and almost puri-

tanical morals of the grandfather-clock-owning workman was legendary. Now he knew Boniface had not lied to him.

After a while Boniface excused himself. He soon came back accompanied by a tall, emaciated looking man whose cheap, dark-green agbada accentuated the somberness of his sensually aged and corrupted face.

"This na my master 'im brother-in-law, Mr. Ovoruegbe," Boniface said in pidgin English. "Na 'im own this house and na for 'im house we and our master de stay."

Nwankwo shook the tall man's wrinkled hand. The man smiled, showing a few yellowed teeth in a salivating mouth.

"This," Boniface said indicating Nwankwo, "na dat my broder for customs way I say I de go bring."

"What is your name?" Mr. Ovoruegbe asked Nwankwo taking the chair between him and Boniface.

"Nwankwo Ezechi."

"I am glad you are Igbo," Ovoruegbe said leaning forward as though to emphasize this point. "My brother-in-law does not trust people from this place. I myself, I am from Ukpilla. Boniface has told you what we want to do? I must tell you now there is no risk in it. It is simple and straight forward. This my brother-in-law from Camerouns is very mean man. He is a miser and he does not trust anybody. He does not trust me. I am a timber merchant and contractor by trade. I can not cheat any man in any business. If I do now I am old, what will I tell my God when *He* call me? Old man like me can die anytime. The reason why I am telling you all this is to make you understand. I do not want your money. All I want is to chop my brother-in-law money because he too mean. When his father and my wife's father died he leave big banana plantation for him and my wife. My brother-in-law sell all the plantations and did not give my wife one penny. For Cameroon, all the children of a dead man share the property equally. Only my wife and my brother-in-law remain when their father die. But my brother-in-law just take all the money and trade and drink and chase women. Since two days he has been here, he has not given his sister one penny, to buy food. Instead he say his wife must go to market with my wife. Boniface tell you they stole three hundred pounds from his wife yesterday?"

"Yes," Nwankwo nodded. He felt like bursting into song. His instincts had been right! He was on to a good thing. Ovoruegbe's diction was that of a man who had some years of formal schooling, although his almost toothless mouth and consequent

spraying of saliva blurred the words.

"My brother-in-law no mind to lose one thousand pounds provided me and his sister do not get one penny. That is why I told Boniface to bring you and help us to chop my brother-in-law money. The man too mean. Yesterday some of his people at Apapa who heard he had come visited him and wanted to take him to Apapa to stay with them. But I spoil that plan because if he went with them he for ask those people to buy the gamaline for him and we for no get chance chop his money. That yesterday, I give him drink till he can not see, so his people said they will come again this evening to take him. You see Mr. Nwankwo, we must finish this thing now before evening. I must chop this man money and God know I am right to chop the money. Has Boniface told you everything?"

"Yes," Nwankwo said, his breath sending out a prayer.

Let it not be like the night he had spent in Soho during his undergraduate days. It had started out so promising and then...

"Are you ready to do this with us? It is not stealing. It is not cheating. It is simple business. Are you ready? If you can not help us, you can go now and we will look for another person."

"I am ready to help you."

"Good. You will not lose. And it is not a one time thing. If this one go well, my brother-in-law will come every month and buy the same amount of gamaline for at least one year. Boniface did you tell your brother about the agent's commission?"

"Yes, I tellam," Boniface said and turning to Nwankwo added in Igbo, "You see, I was not telling you lies. My master will never find out what we are doing since his brother-in-law is with us."

Nwankwo smiled. This was how an Igbo man operated. No patch of the soil was left uncultivated.

"Boniface did you also tell your brother that there are three of us and he makes us four?"

"No I no tellam. I forget."

"Tell him now."

"Yessah." Boniface turned to Nwankwo once more and said in Igbo: "The man that makes us four is my master's driver. He is an Igbo from Awka. He is at Yaba where they are repairing the lorry we came with from the Cameroons. He was with my master in the Cameroons during the war. This is the first time he has come to Nigeria since the end of the war. You are from Awka too?"

"No. My town is ten miles from Awka."

"It is the same thing. You can see that the three of us, except for this old fool and my master, are brothers. I am from Okigwe. So I beg you to see that this business succeeds. I and Augustine depend on you. As I said before, God said that we will meet and I am sure you will not let me down. We need this money badly for rehabilitation. You know what we all suffered during the war. My master is really a wicked man. I tell you, if this old man could have taken that money without our help he would have done so a long time ago. So I beg you again, do not let me down." Turning to Ovoruegbe he said in pidgin, "I don tellam sah."

"Good. Now, Mr. Nwankwo before I go and call my brother-in-law we must do one thing that is very necessary. This business is a big one, and a long one. If no one cheat we will gain from it. We must take an oath to be true to each other to the end of the business. I do not want one of us to go behind and tell my brother-in-law he can get the gamaline for less than one pound. Boniface, take this three pence and go and buy one large brown kola."

While Boniface was gone, Ovoruegbe brought out the paraphernalia for the oath taking: a glass, a virgin bottle of aromatic schnapps, and some bits of iron he touched to his forehead before placing them on the table.

"They gave you back your job after the war?" he asked sitting in Boniface's chair.

"Yes," Nwankwo answered after some hesitation. He had almost forgotten the role he was playing. It had been so long he played a role last, and this seemed too theatrical to be true. But then, so had the civil war which had caused him to lose his possessions, excepting his car, and his high placed position at the Ministry of Information.

"You are lucky," Ovoruegbe said his voice tinged with a sadness that was more compassionate than selfish. "Many people lost their jobs. Some could not even get back their houses. But as I always ask them, what about those who died? Anyone who came out of the war alive and well must thank God for saving

him. Life is the most important thing."

"Sometimes, it is not. Sometimes it is better to be dead."

"What of the people you leave behind when you die?"

"They can take care of themselves. A dead man can't worry about the living."

Ovoruegbe smiled a sunken-cheek smile. "You say this because you are young and you have your job. Are you married? No? No wonder. If this business goes well, you will have enough money to marry and start business of your own. There is no money in government work. I worked for 40 years and all I have is this house and a pension I can not feed my family with. This is why I want to chop my brother-in-law's money. I am too old to work. But with the money we will make, I will have enough money for my children. Two of them are in secondary schools, I believe in education. It has done terrible things to me and...ah, Boniface, I thought they capture you?"

"No, sah," Boniface said, his face wearing an extraordinarily happy smile. But there was a slyness around his eyes and mouth. "Dem no fit, sah. The tin way dem no fit do for war, how dem go fit do am for peace? Na the kola make me take long. I go for Ikorodu road before I find the kind you want."

Ovoruegbe broke the kola whilst Boniface was still talking. It fell into four natural pieces. He put them in the glass and touching the bits of iron to his forehead again he added them too. He opened the bottle of schnapps, and, after pouring a libation at the door he half-filled the glass. The distinctive aroma of the Dutch Schnapps was unmistakable. He dovered the mouth of the glass with his left hand and invited Nwankwo and Boniface to place theirs over his. He made a long invocation, punctuated with exclamations, at the end of which he asked Boniface and Nwankwo to make wishes aloud. Boniface wished for the success of the venture, and Nwankwo that dire punishment be visited on any member of the group that tried to cheat the others.

Ovoruegbe took a mouthful of the contents of the glass, fished out one piece of the kolanut, threw it into his mouth and chewed slowly. Suddenly sweat broke out all over his face. He mopped his furrowed brow and scrawny neck with a filthy handkerchief. He then gestured to Boniface to drink from the glass.

Nwankwo did not hesitate when it came to his turn and he soon understood why Ovoruegbe broke out in a sweat. Aromatic Schnapps was ordinarily a potent drink, but the sip he took

packed a power, a punch and a pepperiness that set his guts on fire. It took him some time to recover and chewing the kola did not make things cooler.

"We will leave the remainder for the driver," Ovoruegbe said. "He will drink it when he come back at night. Boniface, you can go and call your master now."

"Yessah."

II

Nwankwo could not say for certain that the man that walked in ahead of Boniface was a Cameroonian. He had not met one before. He was however sure the man was not Nigerian. The cast of his face, his dress - an extremely loose agbada made from light cotton material with a face cap jammed on top of a close cropped small head - his corpulence and easy, disjointed walk and his lack of English stamped him a foreigner. He carried a large brown plastic handbag he carelessly dropped by his side as he sat down with exaggerated care in the chair next to the bed. There was no doubt he was drunk.

After a moment's hesitation, Boniface asked Nwankwo in Igbo to exchange seats, saying it would be wrong for him to sit opposite his master. Nwankwo moved reluctantly. He did not like being boxed in.

Bon jour, monsieur," Boniface's master said.

"He said 'good afternoon,'" Ovoruegbe translated. "He speaks only French. He does not hear even 'come' in English."

"Good afternoon," Nwankwo answered with a smile.

Boniface's master said something what sounded like many *vu*'s strung together. Ovoruegbe again translated. "He asked if you were the sole agent of *gamaline*," he said with a smile. "You see, he doubts everything, everybody." Just say 'Yes' and I will translate it for him."

"Yes," Nwankwo said.

"He said you look too young to be the sole agent. He said the money in *gamaline* is too much for a young man to handle."

"Tell him that although I look young, I can handle any amount of money," Nwankwo said, without waiting for his primer

to prime him.

"You don't have to be annoyed with him," Ovoruegbe said to him smiling. "He is drunk already as you can see. Please keep your temper. We must chop his money today." He turned to Boniface's master, spoke to him and then translated the reply.

"He says he is sorry he annoyed you. That you must forgive him. That he has been drinking since morning, which is the only thing he enjoys very much. Boniface said you came in your car?"

"Yes," Nwankwo confirmed.

"I will tell him that and please smile as I say it." Ovoruegbe spoke and suddenly Boniface's master stood up, his huge right hand outstretched, his high-cheeked face split in a wide grin. Nwankwo stood up too. They shook hands. Ovoruegbe provided a running commentary as words, strange sounding words, poured out of Boniface's master's mouth.

"He says you are a wonderful young man to have a car. He says he is sorry he annoyed you that time. He says you should not blame him because he has been cheated before and so is very much careful about who he deals with money. He says he is happy now and he believes you are really the sole agent for gamaline.."

After this expression of good will and restoration of confidence, the negotiations went on apace. Ovoruegbe translated and more often than not, told Nwankwo what to say. The bargain was soon struck except that the sole-agent's commission had to be reduced by fifty pounds.

"That is for my drinks," Boniface's master was interpreted to have said. "It is the only thing I enjoy in life." Opening his carry-all, he brought out bundles of one pound notes, and place them on the centre table.

Boniface at a sign from his master, started counting the money. Nwankwo tried not to show too much interest in what was going on. Boniface was on the last bundle when his master waved him back to his chair, and made a long Frenchy speech. Ovoruegbe once again translated.

"My brother-in-law said you should not get annoyed please.. I told you he is a doubting Thomas. He doubt everything, everybody. Even he still doubt you. But never mind. Just be patient. It will not take long now and we must surely chop his money... Now, he says that he believes you are the sole agent for gamaline all right, but somehow he feel that...that you are too young to handle the type of money he is going to give you.."

Please don't be annoyed. Just try to humor him...He says if only you can show him some money, the money with you now, he will be sure you handle large money. I am sure that will not be a problem. You have money with you? All you do is just bring it out and show him."

"I have money with me," Nwankwo confirmed. "But it is not much. It is not safe these days to carry large sums of money."

"How much?" Ovoruegbe asked.

"Oh, about six pounds," Nwankwo said, although he had about ten times that amount.

"Can't you get some more?" Ovoruegbe asked.

"Certainly, from my bank."

"Shall I tell him so?"

"If you like. Really, I don't see why he should insist on seeing my money. After all he is the one buying the gamaline, not I. Anyway, if he wants to make sure I have money, he can come with me to my bank. I will drive him there, and my bank manager will show him as much money as he wants to see to convince him I am not new to money."

"He won't agree."

"Then I am afraid the deal is off. I won't carry a large amount of money to this place." Nwankwo was getting indignant.

"Alright, don't be annoyed and don't go. I'll tell him what you said in a way that will not drive him away too. Just tell me one thing. Can you bring up to fifty pounds with you if he says he must see more than you have now?"

"Ye--es. I think so."

"Good."

Nwankwo watched Boniface's master's face undergo several changes of expression--from disdain to disgust then back to disdain and disinterest and finally to amused tolerance as Ovoruegbe spoke to him. His reply was short and emphatic. Smiling, he took a sheaf of one pound notes and thrust them at Nwankwo.

Ovoruegbe, sweating once again, answered Nwankwo's puzzled look.

"He said that as soon as he started talking about your money you stopped smiling. He said he will like to see more than six pounds you say you have now. If you show him up to fifty pounds tomorrow, he will not hesitate to pay you the money for the gamaline. He also said he bets you the ten pounds he is holding that you will not come back tomorrow with the fifty pounds. Please don't argue with him, just take the ten pounds and put them together. No, don't pocket all the money. Remember we are trying to convince him that you have money. What you will do is to give him the sixteen pounds. Tell him to keep the money till you come tomorrow morning. This way he will really believe that sixteen pounds means nothing to you."

Boniface's master refused the money.

"He wants you to keep the money," Ovoruegbe said. "If you don't come tomorrow, he loses only ten pounds instead of five thousand. Don't mind him, he is only trying you. Put all the money in his lap."

Before Nwankwo could do this, Boniface's master swept all the money on the centre table into his carry-all and stood up. He allowed the sixteen pounds to be stuffed in the little breast pocket of his agbada, and with the briefest of smiles half-staggered out of the room.

"Drunkard!" Ovoruegbe said with deep bitterness and venom. "Don't worry my brother," he continued. "Everything will be alright. I will make sure he is here tomorrow morning. All you have to do is come with that fifty pounds. Boniface beg your brother not to let us down. Everything now depends on him. If he can't get all the fifty pounds I am ready to contribute up to ten pound."

That night Nwankwo had dreams galore, all money-coloured.

The next morning, Nwankwo was at Ovoruegbe's house, ready to end the business one way or the other.

"Where is Mr. Ovoruegbe?" he asked the strange face he met in the sitting room.

"E just go out. Make you wetam. 'E no go far."

He sat down on the chair nearest the door, his briefcase between his legs. After a long minute or two, the strange face asked in a typical Awka brogue.

"Are you Mr. Ezechi?"

"Yes."

Nwankwo beamed as he shook hands. Meeting Okafor now reinforced his conviction that the only villain of the deal was Boniface's master.

"Have they completed the repairs on your lorry?"

"No. It will be completed this evening." Okafor said in Igbo. "They have told me about the business we are trying to do."

"Oh - oo! You drank?"

"Before I went to bed. You know, I haven't been home since the war ended."

"They told me."

"I was in the Cameroons during the war. This is my first trip to Nigeria. I would have come earlier, but my master is a very mean and suspicious man. If I had made some money of my own I would have left him a long time ago. But, you know how our home is. How can a man who has been away for seven years come back empty-handed, especially now that things are not well at home? He will be the laughing stock of the town. I was so happy when Boniface told me about the business yesterday. He said your town is ten miles from Awka. Are you from Isiobo?"

"Yes."

"I thought so. You speak the way they do. My mother is from your town."

"I don't know the family."

"Then you were not brought up at home. They were one of the richest families before the war. God knows what the war must have done to them."

"So where has Ovoruegbe gone to?" Nwankwo asked to change the subject. Okafor's apparent knowledge of Isiobo town made him nervous as he was not from that town.

"I told you he will soon be back. I hope you know everything really depends on you. I am merely here to be counted, that's all."

Ovoruegbe walked in a few seconds later, vigorously mopping himself with his filthy handkerchief. "My friend," he said to Nwankwo, and dropped into a chair opposite him.

After a while Okafor looked at Ovoruegbe who sighed heavily and said: "My friend, when things look easy they are tough. Like this our business! I think everything will be finished this morning. But now things are not going the way I plan they will go. I am sorry I did not tell you immediately I come in but I was so disappointed. I think we better give the whole thing up."

"But what happened?" Nwankwo had rarely seen a man look so dejected. It was as though Ovoruegbe's bones had been pulled out of the thin body which had then collapsed on itself, making the limbs look inconsequential.

"Yesterday I told you about my fear of my brother-in-law's relations at Apapa coming to drag him away," Ovoruegbe said, and as he spoke his body seemed to re-inflate and the bones to slip back into place. "They came after you left. Boniface did as I told him. When they finish the drink I give him to give them he run to tell me. So I go there and I tell them it is bad to take my brother-in-law from my house without telling me. I bring out all the drinks I have in the house, six bottles of Schnapps, and they sit down and begin to drink again. I sit down next to my brother-in-law and make sure his glass is always full. I could not shut him up. Before long one of his relations promised to supply him with the gamaline at ten shillings a tin. Then I know our business was spoilt."

Nwankwo's emotions alternated between despondency and fatalism.

"What of my six pounds?" he asked.

Ovoruegbe fumbled in the pockets of his dark green agbada and pulled out a thick bundle of pound notes. He extracted six and placed them on the table. "Here is your money. I can see you do not trust us and we can not continue doing business with you."

Nwankwo looked at the money aghast. One mind told him to take it while another said not to.

"Look Mr. Ovoruegbe," he said firmly. "I don't like people who play with my intelligence. Is our business over or not?"

"It depends on you."

"What do you mean by that? I remember I only came here to help you."

"Yes, that is why I paid you back the money you gave to my inlaw. From now on we can not do this business with someone who is only helping us. There is too much in it. If you still think that we will cheat you just take your money and go.

Nwankwo thought it over, then pocketing his six pounds said, "Let us continue."

"As I have said many times I must chop my brother-in-law's money," Ovoruegbe said, "and I don't care how I chop it! Me, my inlaw and his relatives were drinking when Boniface call me. We came to this room and he told me my inlaw keeps all the money he came to Nigeria with in a tin box, and he can take it without any one knowing. I did not agree at first. It is stealing you know. But when I remember that it is our only chance of chopping my inlaw money I tell him to do it. I also tell him if he is caught I will swear I know nothing about it. Boniface then ask me to keep my inlaw drinking outside. I do so till my inlaw so drunk he need help to go to the latrine each time.

"About ten o'clock my inlaw's relatives wanted to take him to Apapa. The foolish man agree and when he go to his room to pack he run out shouting that I stole his key, and money box with fifteen thousand pounds inside. I deny it and his relatives supported me. They said I was with them drinking how can I steal the box.

"After we searched everywhere, we go to the police. The police did not believe my inlaw but take evidence anyway. Then my inlaw went to Apapa but he said he will come back today and put all of us in prison unless we find his money.

"After, Boniface tell me how he took the money box. He was going to hide it in a secret place when a certain man start shouting "Ole! Ole! Ole!" Fear make Boniface run, and many people chase him into a goldsmith shop. The goldsmith's apprentices stop the people from dragging him out, and their master, a good man, talk to the people. They did not even know why they were chasing Boniface. They hear people shouting and chasing a man carrying a box so they can join. After much argument the people agree to go.

The goldsmith ask Boniface about the box. Boniface say he and his master, that is you, just come from the East, and the box contain the particulars of your lorries, and that you have the key to the box. The goldsmith lock the box up in one of his cupboards till the next morning when he will come and see you. Boniface then come to tell me all about it and give me the key of the box. Here it is. You better keep it.

So now all we want you to do is to say you are Boniface's master, take the box from the goldsmith, dash him a few pounds and then we can share the money in the box. One more thing. This morning, the goldsmith complain that the crowd that chase Boniface steal some of his gold. I told him once you come and he give you the box you will pay him for anything the people thief, but the idiot said you must pay him before he give you the box. That was why I was so annoyed when I come in now."

Nwankwo, caught up with the prospect of making easy money, tried not to think of the implications of what he had just heard.

Quickly, he calculated what each of them would get if they shared fifteen thousand pounds. It worked out at almost four thousand pounds each. The goldsmith of course had to be paid for his lost trinkets. Nwankwo did not think it would exceed one thousand pounds...

"So what do you think we should do?" Ovoruegbe asked.

"Send for the goldsmith!" Nwankwo said, and Ovoruegbe went off immediately.

He was not gone for long. Soon he walked in accompanied by a short, sad faced, middle-aged man. The man, dressed in a brown *sokoto*, carried under his left arm a bulky object wrapped in a piece of sacking.

Boniface, bedraggled, his face that of one whose world had collapsed around him, brought up the rear. "Good morning, sah," he said to Nwankwo.

"Morning, Boniface. I have been told of the small trouble you ran into last night. Is this the kind gentleman that helped you?"

"Yessah. Na 'inl."

"Thank you my friend," Nwankwo went on with cheerful masterfulness. "You saved my Boniface last night. But for you I am sure I would have lost all the documents he was carrying. It is a pity that while you were saving me you lost your trinkets I hope what you lost was not much as I would like to help you replace them."

"Thank you, sir," the goldsmith said, his face lighting up. "When I come in here I know you are a gentleman. If not I for don go out since. Sir, I no wan' tell you lie, I loss plenty gold las' night. When this your boy come running in my shop...I jus' about close for the night...all those thief people chase him, I look him once and I know he no be common thief

type. Then when I talk to him and he tell me all about you and the moto documents I say I mus' try help am. Ibo man no fit come insi'e Yoruba place thief. Ibo man not foolish like that. So I help your man and I loss many of my gold like this one I hol' now." He pulled out a large gold-fish necklace from his pocket.

"What do you think is the worthy of the things you lost?" Nwankwo asked faintly.

"Not what I think, sir. This morning I count every piece in my workshop. All the gold my customers been bring for cleaning de for my work box. Na from the box the thieves take the ones they take. They take gold costing six hundred forty pounds. All the gold na my customers own. I mus' have them ready in two day time for the great festival, Ramadan."

Nwankwo could hardly contain his joy at the small value of the missing trinkets. After the goldsmith had put away the gold-fish, he said gravely, "I think I will be able to help you replace your missing gold. However before I do so I will like to check my documents and make sure they are correct."

Without the slightest hesitation the goldsmith placed a medium sized tin box, drab from long use, on the centre table.

Ovoruegbe and Nwankwo took it behind the curtained bed where they unlocked it. It was filled with neatly arranged packets of red five pound notes. Nwankwo's mouth suddenly went dry.

"Everything complete, sir?" asked the goldsmith.

"Yes," Nwankwo said in a small voice from behind the curtain.

"We are very grateful," Ovoruegbe said, his bad teeth on display as he and Nwankwo emerged from behind the curtain "for the great thing you did for us. It is not everybody that you will do this thing for someone he does not know. You acted like a Christian gentleman. Master will not let you down. Boniface, come let us take the papers to the lorries so they can leave in time."

The goldsmith jumped up with a cry of protest, snatched the box, wrapped it up once more with the sacking and placed it between his feet.

"No!" He was emphatic. "You no go take the box before you pay me for my gold. You mus' pay me now. I no want any trouble."

Nwankwo and Ovoruegbe who seemed lost and was sweating profusely again, exchanged glances.

"Look my friend," Nwankwo said in as conciliatory a tone as he could muster. "No one wants to cheat you. You did a wonderful thing for us. It will be bad for us to repay your kindness with ingratitude."

"Oga, my master go give you your money," Boniface chimed in. "'E no be the kin' man way de cheat. You yourself say'e be gentleman. And now way you don see am, you know me no de lie. If you go jus' give us the box, we go see the drivers and you and master go start talk about your money."

The goldsmith shook his head.

"These rogues," Boniface muttered to Nwankwo in Igbo. "All they think of is someone cheating them because that is what they do to others all the time."

"If you have the money let us pay him off immediately," Okafor whispered in Awka-Igbo. "If we continue to argue with him he might get suspicious."

"You are speaking the truth," Boniface agreed throwing a glance full of malice at the goldsmith. "Master if you have the money let us pay him and let him go. We will deduct the amount you will give him before we share the money. Is that not how it will be for Okafor?"

"Yes," Okafor agreed and continued in heavy Awka-Igbo with an English word thrown in here and there. "I don't like the man's face. Even if *nanyi ukwu* has not got the money now let us try and get it quickly and pay the man. It is getting late you know and it won't be good for our master to meet us all here. What I am saying is let us pay this man quickly."

"What happened," Nwankwo told them in Igbo too, "is that I have not got the amount the man wants with me. Only a mad man will carry that kind of money with him. Another thing is that I do not think I can get all the money. Perhaps I will be able to get half of it but not all. I thought the man will give Boniface the box so we can take money from it and pay him."

"That rogue won't agree," Boniface declared. "I know his kind. He will rather throw away the box than let us have it before we have paid him."

"It will be good if you tell our master's brother-in-law what we have been saying," Okafor reminded Boniface. "He is not happy we have been talking in our language."

"You better tell him."

"Oga, make we talk for outside," Okafor said to Ovoruegbe.

There was total silence during their absence. Everyone avoided each other's eyes.

On his return Ovoruegbe, now mopping only his scrawny neck commanded Boniface to leave with the goldsmith. "When we have his money ready we will come and call you two," he told him.

"*Nna mu ukwu*, everything is in your hands," Boniface appealed to Nwankwo in Igbo as he and the goldsmith walked out of the room.

III

Nwankwo and Ovoruegbe had agreed to raise the goldsmith's money on a fifty-fifty basis, by one o'clock that afternoon. Boniface and Okafor were in Okafor's words "merely there to be counted" and nothing was expected from them.

As Nwankwo carefully parked and locked his car in front of Ovoruegbe's house he made a show of locking up his brief case in the boot of the car. The four hundred pounds he brought with him was not in the brief case but in the back pocket of his slacks.

Okafor met him halfway between his car and the house. "Did everything go well?" he asked in his Awka Igbo.

"Yes."

"You have the money with you?"

"Yes."

"I am happy. I was afraid you would not come back."

"Why?"

"It might be because you said you were not sure you would come back. Ovoruegbe is not back yet. He is finding it difficult raising his own share.

"How long ago did he tell you this?" Nwankwo asked with a touch of sarcasm.

They were now seated in their usual chairs and in spite of their being only a few yards from a major thoroughfare the hush of the tropical afternoon could be felt.

"It is not up to an hour ago."

"Have you heard anything from your master?"

"No. But we expect to before dark."

"What of the police?"

"Nothing."

Nwankwo got up from his chair stirred by a sudden impatience. He wanted to get the business over. He wanted to lay hands on those thousands, to put them to work. He wanted to erase once and for all the ravages of the civil war on his standard of living. The first thing he would enjoy doing would be to exchange his volkswagen for a Peugeot 404 Station wagon. It would be the first outward sign of his having broken into good business.

Lost in thought he stared out of the window into the almost deserted dirt street. The rotten stench that was Lagos rose with the steaming heat and floated into his huge nostrils.

Suddenly he thought he saw a familiar figure. He would have sworn it was Boniface's master had he not been dressed like a *jaguda*, a small cap on his head, an open necked shirt tucked into khaki shorts and canvas shoes. The man bought sweets and two sticks of cigarettes and walked briskly away towards Ikorodu road. Nwankwo turned from the window to see Ovoruegbe walk in mopping his face and neck with his dirty handkerchief.

"I am sorry I am late," he said lowering himself into his former chair like one suffering from rheumatism. "I had trouble collecting my share of the money. If not for my sister who run hotel in Mushin my money for not complete. Now self it is not complete. It remains eighty pounds. Did you get your own?"

"Yes."

"What will we do about the remainder? Do you think the goldsmith will take what we have now and later I will give him the rest?"

"Let me see what you have."

Ovoruegbe dipped his hand deep into his agbada top and brought out a bundle of dirty one pound notes. Nwankwo counted

them carefully. There were two hundred and forty of them.

"Don't worry, I have four hundred pounds," Nwankwo said.

"Let me go and call the goldsmith immediately." Ovoruegbe's bad teeth showed in a brief smile as he put the money back into his pocket and hurried out.

"I like to do things with a man!" Okafor said in Awka-Igbo. "Give me your hand. You have not yet agreed to keep my share of the money for me. Please, it will help me a great deal if you agree it will not be wise for me to drive to the Cameroons with it."

"All right."

"Won't you get your money ready so we won't waste time once the goldsmith is here? I don't like the man's face. Don't you think it will be good if he just walked in and walked out so we can get down to our own business."

"Yes, it will certainly be good," Nwankwo agreed. "However bringing out my money will not delay us. It is all in five-pound notes which is easy to count."

"Hai, my man! You are a real man."

Ovoruegbe, followed closely by the goldsmith, empty handed, and Boniface walked in.

"Where is the box?" Nwankwo demanded sharply.

"The rogue refused that we should bring it," Boniface explained in Igbo. "He said he will see and count his money first before he will bring out the box. He is afraid we will injure him and seize the box."

Nwankwo noted that the goldsmith who had sat down in the mean time, looked unconcerned. To appeal to him would be a waste of time.

It was then the thought suddenly struck him that the goldsmith might be in league with the others. But Ovoruegbe was remonstrating with the goldsmith in loud, indignant Yoruba and in a violent move Nwankwo would not have thought him capable of, showed the man the bundle of pound notes.

The goldsmith got up reluctantly and went out with Boniface. On their return, the goldsmith now carried the unwrapped tin box under his right arm pit. After they settled down Ovoruegbe pushed his bundle of pound notes towards the goldsmith.

"How much is that?" the man inquired from the corner of his mouth. Ovoruegbe told him. "Where is the rest?"

All eyes turned on Nwankwo who said with hostility, "Why don't you count that one first and make sure it is correct?"

The goldsmith did so laboriously.

"Good," Nwankwo said, "Before we give you the remainder I want to check something in the box. There is a document I did not see the last time I checked. If you will allow me I will take the box to the bed and go through the papers carefully. If everything is complete I will give you the rest of your money."

"No!"

"What do you mean by no? Isn't that money big enough as a deposit?"

"You mus' pay me all my money before you touch this box. I no wan' cheat any person. I no wan' any person cheat me."

"But my friend..."

"I no be your friend. Jus' pay me my money and take your box that's all. *Abi?* I do wrong say I help your boy? En-he, tell me? I do wrong? I beg I no want palaver. Jus' give me my money."

"You see what I told you before," Okafor whispered urgently to Nwankwo in Awka-Igbo. "If the money is there please give it to him and let him go before he brings us bad luck. His face is bad luck."

"I won't give him any money," Nwankwo said loudly in English, "unless he allows me to look into that box again. How am I sure he has not removed something from the box since we last looked in it?"

"What you say?" the goldsmith suddenly shouted. "What you say en-he? How can you call me thief? En-he? How can you call me that? Because I do good thing for you? You wicked young man! You no know say na your man hold the key of the box all the time? No call me thief again..."

"Oga, my master no call you thief..." Boniface cried.

"I no care. He call me thief. Give me my money *ojare* make I go. If you no getam, say you no getam. No de make all this nonsense *inyanga*."

"I won't give you any money till I have inspected the box!"

Pandemonium broke loose.

Nwankwo left the house pursued by their insults, threats, sneers and curses. And Boniface and Okafor cursed him the loudest in the Igbo language.

He was suddenly afraid for his safety and angry at his naivette. He hurried quickly to his car. A young man who had tried to open the boot of the car backed away. As Nwankwo completed his three point turn he noticed that there were more young men milling around the house than at any of his earlier visits. They joined those in the house in insulting him and he was sure he saw Boniface's 'Cameroonian' master walk into the house.

* * *

Three months later Nwankwo suddenly came face to face with a very well dressed Boniface in front of one of the expensive department stores on the Marina. They stared at each other for a while. Lunch hour traffic was at its grinding, fume-disgorging jammed peak.

"Kedu?" Boniface asked with a smile.

"Odinma," Nwankwo answered tightly.

"Happy survival," he said and with a wave disappeared into the store.

That was exactly the exchange that had trapped Nwankwo three months earlier. And even now he still could not believe all that planning, acting and invention had been geared solely towards swindling him. They had been too elaborate, yet spontaneous, too well designed and yet coincidental, too close to the truth. Somehow he felt he had once again been unlucky and as he hurried away to keep an appointment with a prospective buyer of his car, a momentary pall of sadness descended on him.

* * * * *

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