The Ariran's Last Life
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The Ariran’s Last Life

When the first big boats arrived, I had not yet married. Along with all the girls in my age group, I was learning what I would need to know to go to market, court a mate, and, for me, initiation. For months I had been told to be patient as my parents worked hard selling herbs and woven cloth every four days to traders. Every morning after prayers, they both instructed me in things I should know about the history of our village and our family lineage. Sometimes, they would let me help in the weaving of cloth that would be used in the ceremony. I liked, especially, the white with gold threads at the hem. My mother was a master weaver and sewer, and every lappa, boubu, shokoto, and gele had a small fish on the inside hem to let it be known it was she. There were three of us to enter the egbe right before the festivals started. We were excited, but frightened and curious. We had heard only of what was done but couldn’t believe it.

In the village, the wind blew warm air through the tops of our homes. We lived in a compound surrounded by outer walls which had two doors. Between the walls and our homes was six feet of space where warriors were always on guard. A family lived together in one area with several connecting rooms. If a man had more than one wife, then each wife had her own room and kitchen for herself and her children, but there were common areas where everyone ate and talked during the day. You saw everyone once you stepped outside. It was better that way. When one of us needed something, we asked the person nearest. Not like I see the world has developed where you have to travel miles to reach another family member, or where you suffer in...
silence because you do not trust the person next door. In the compound, I knew who my aunts and uncles were, which ones would chide me or let me get away with something. We didn’t always agree with one another, but we did not go to bed angry.

When the wind blew, the dirt in the compound covered everything. When it rained, we moved our pots to the back room and sat inside to talk. The chickens and goats found shelter where they could. There was not ever the silence of loneliness or fear as there is now.

The girls in my age group all worked together. We were really young obirin then, some of us being taller than our parents. Some of us had already filled out in our bodies, and we had started ase. I seemed to be taller and bigger than everyone and my mother began speaking to me of marriage, but I was not interested. We learned many new things every day. How to cook, sew, make our own containers, and how to care for ourselves. How to weave and bargain a good price for what we sold and bought. We learned how to bead so we could make our own belts and necklaces or do our hair. So many centuries have gone by that I do not remember all, I only remember wanting to learn because I saw what joy it brought my family.

The day the first big boat arrived, I was sitting on a ledge above the water. I had finished my morning duty of straining herbs to be used in medicine. When they were ready, my mother would show me the next step of forming the compound. If I was lucky, she’d let me watch her work and assist as I had on other occasions. I had swept out the front room where my mother, father, and I gathered at night with my aunts and uncles. I had rolled our mats and placed them in a corner of the main room. My father had no other wives, so my tasks were simple but many.

I wanted to be away from everyone. We were between the coast and nearest inland village. It took me half a morning to walk there, and half the afternoon to walk back. I did not always come so far, but that day I had longed for the water. My parents did not like me going to the sea, and whenever I mentioned the water they looked at each other and said nothing. In fact, they seemed to increase the speed of whatever they were doing at that moment.

That day, the first boat came in slowly, just enough so I could see it meant to stop here. The sails were white with red crosses. There were three. From where I sat, they could not see me. After a while,
men climbed down ropes thrown over the side. They rowed to shore in the smaller boats. I ran home thinking I had seen ghosts leaving some type of coffin. My feet were hurting from the long sprint and I was out of breath when I reached the front of my house.

“Ago, Baba!” I called to my father.

“Wole!” He answered, and I ran inside quickly.

“Hear what I have seen, Baba.” I was talking too fast to get out all the words I was thinking.

“Slow down, Abi,” my father said and came to rub my back. He was smaller than my mother but strong. He often made me laugh when he pretended to be unable to carry anything and would begin piling things in my mother’s hands or on her head while he bent over and held his back as if in pain. His hands were twice the size of mine and I enjoyed the warmth on my back as he continued to calm me. The inside of his hands were almost the same cocoa color as the outside. “Seen what, Little One?” He smiled when he called me this, like it was our private joke.

“Big boats, Baba. Boats with red marks and oyimbos climbing—”

He had called my mother before I could finish. She ran to meet him from the back bedroom and they both left heading toward the Babalawo’s house. I ran after them, dodging women’s pots and children’s sprawling bodies. They waited outside.

“Ago, ile, Baba.”

“Wole.” They entered and I followed.

“It is time, Baba. We have a few days,” my father said after saluting and embracing the Babalawo. My mother sat quietly. They looked at me without looking at me directly.

“Has everything been done?”

“Beni, Baba,” my mother responded softly.

The Babalawo stood up and looked at me very sadly. “Now would be good.”

At once, both my mother and father grabbed my hands and pulled me farther into the Babalawo’s house. They covered my head in a dark cloth so I could see nothing. They sat me on the ground and told me to wait and to keep my eyes closed. Had these people been other than my parents I would have cried out for help. But, I remembered they always joked me about “being prepared” at any time.
But, I was scared. The boats. The Babalawo. What about the other girls? I heard feet move around me. One pair shuffled. Another set walked hard around me. Then someone came and put down a mat, and asked me to sit on it. The cloth over my head was dark but I could see a little out the edge. I opened my eyes and looked down. There were more people now. I heard them greeting one another and then sitting down.

Suddenly, I was picked up and moved to another room. My head was uncovered but I was told once again not to open my eyes. My lappa was torn from the bottom up. My head was shaved quickly and closely. What happened next knocked the breath out of me but someone kept telling me to breathe. I was then moved to another room and redressed. The cloth against my skin was soft, but unhemmed. It was not something my mother would have made or given me to wear.

I remember standing for a long time, not knowing if I was being watched or whether I was alone. I was afraid to open my eyes in case someone was there. I tried to focus on where I was standing.

“Why are you here?” It was the voice of the Babalawo.

I did not know. Someone leaned over my shoulder. My mother’s voice whispered in my ear. All night, I was tested on things I had been learning. The hardest things to remember were the sacred stories. When I stumbled, someone helped me. I recognized the voice of my father, other priests from the compound, and my aunts and uncles. There were voices I did not recognize, but they were kind and encouraging.

Finally, after what seemed like hours of standing, I was moved again to another room. On the way there, I smelled chicken roasting. I had not eaten since before seeing the boats. Someone guided me toward the floor and I was told to open my eyes.

“So you will remember who you are and never forget us, even in the face of iku, even as egun.” The Babalawo leaned over me and finished the last part of the ritual. I was then brought out to my elders, who did not applaud. They stood quietly around me; some were crying. Others did not look at me.

One of the women I did not know led me to the back room. “Sleep the best you can,” she said, pointing to my body. “It may be difficult, but the marks will heal in time.”

I settled on the mat, careful how I placed myself. There was silence.
Everyone seemed to have disappeared more suddenly than they had arrived. I turned to face the wall, still afraid and wondering if the other girls would join me soon.

_I am standing on the beach by myself. The moon is high and the reflection casts a long path from the water straight to me. I move to dance in the light, not caring if anyone sees me._

Then, _I am not sure how I have gotten here. I am in a small boat being held down by men who are speaking things I do not understand. My eyes are covered tightly with cloth. I cannot breathe. The edge of the cloth presses down hard on my nose._

_They are tying my feet and with all my kicking, I cannot stop them from tying my feet with rope and then sitting on top of me. We are moving slowly on the water. Some of it comes through the bottom of the boat and I am certain I am going to drown because the more they sit on me, the more the boat sinks. I begin screaming because they have not covered my mouth. I cannot stop screaming._

“Abi, Abi,” my mother and father yelled. “Get up. You are dreaming.”

I did not move from the mat. My body felt heavy and I began to struggle again. My mother stepped back from holding me. “You were only dreaming,” she said and walked away.

“Baba, there were men tying my feet and carrying me away.”

“Don’t worry, Abi, everything will be OK.” He walked to my mother, held her hand, and then gently squeezed it.

I shook my head and tried to get up, but my body hurt very badly. My mother rushed to help me up.

I do not remember all that happened the rest of that day. I ate well. My mother fixed all my favorite foods and let me sleep during the day. I did not have to complete chores. But no one came to visit. For a period of time after initiation, you were kept quiet. I had been told this gave the young initiate plenty of time to think about what had happened and how your life was now different or would be different. From the beginning when I was called, I had made up my mind that I would do as asked, and began learning from my parents immediately. I realized early that there was a lesson in everything, and never wasted a moment playing when I could accompany my mother to
market or a patient, or sit at my father’s feet as he recounted the pataki or remembered things he had seen as a boy.

At the end of the day, the Babalowo came to the door. “Ago!” He shouted this in a rather harsh way as if demanding entry instead of asking permission out of respect.

“Wole, Baba.” My father’s response was slow and tired.

I approached the entrance of the room. The Babalowo stepped in, and then behind him, two oyimbos. “Baba,” I whispered, “What are these oyimbos doing here?”

Instead of answering, my father gently pushed me away and walked to the oyimbos and began talking. I turned to run to the back of the house, but my mother put out her hand and stopped me. It was then I looked down at my feet and remembered the dream. I did not move. I turned to face my father and the Babalowo. I had no idea they could speak the language of the oyimbo. My father turned and put his hand out for me to come toward him. I looked up at my mother, who gestured with her chin that I should go.

It was only now that I became more frightened than the night before and more frightened than I had been in the dream. There was an odd silence in the compound. It was midday and yet there was no noise outside as if everyone had vanished. There was no wind, yet dust was everywhere as if the strangers themselves churned the air. As I looked at the window, another oyimbo appeared but this time with a gun.

“Iya! Do not let them take me!” I fell on the ground and began pulling her lappa. I knew what was to happen. I had heard stories of villages disappearing or families losing a member to strangers who took them away. Sometimes there was an attack. Or worse, yet, sometimes the chief or family sold a prisoner or someone who was too much trouble, or because the village was starving. Usually, the ones sold or disappeared were not family, but someone who had been bought or captured from another village during war. We always seemed to have enough to eat. We were not at war. We did not live inland.

Had I been too much trouble? I began screaming and running around the room, trying to find an exit, but there was someone at every doorway. “Baba, please, do not let them take me. The dream, Baba! They will take me away!” I fell at my father’s feet and held on.
“Forgive us, Little One.” My father reached down to pick me up. Our faces were together and I could see where he had lost the back teeth on the right side of his mouth. His breath smelled like the mint root he chewed every day after eating. “But you are the one who must go. You will be the only one who will live to tell the story. It is the only way to save what will be left.”

I beat his chest so that he opened his arms and dropped me. My mother did not come to help me up. Instead, she leaned over and pressed a small piece of gold into my hand. She placed my beads on my neck and knelt in front of me. My father put his hand in mine and lifted me.

“You will be taken care of. It has been divined as so. You will survive. You will not forget.”

The moment the oyimbo touched me, I knew the world was inside out. Even in our dry, hot climate, his fingers were cold through the fabric on my arm. Yet, he was sweating and his skin had turned a pink or brown in certain places. He pretended to be gentle so my father would send me. Baba held me in his arms as if he were sending me off to be married in a strange village instead of sending me off with strangers. He did not know, like my mother knew, that women suffered differently at the hands of strangers.

The oyimbo took my hand and guided me out. The compound was quiet, but I could see elders looking at me from inside their homes. I wanted to run back, but every time I turned around, I saw my father indicating that I should go. My mother did not join my father. She ran to the back of the house and tore her clothes. After a while, my father left the doorway.

Once outside the walls, I began to cry. My mother tearing her clothes from her own body meant only one thing: she was already mourning me.

As I turned to look back, hoping someone would come to help me, the oyimbo slapped my face so hard that my neck snapped to the front. He uttered something from his mouth with spit. He kicked my left foot from underneath my body. I hit the ground, and landed hard on my right arm, but managed to hold my head up. Blood was warm on my lips. I struggled to stand. My foot throbbed where he had kicked me. Before I could stand completely, he dragged me up and pushed me against a tree. His mouth was directly at my forehead.
kept my eyes down not knowing what else to do. I could fight. But it was apparent my parents, maybe the village, had made a bargain. They would not take me back.

His hands pulled at my lappa until it was off, and then he pulled everything else off except my beads and the small gold chain I had tied to them. He did not touch me as I had feared. Instead, he took a heavy rope from the sack that he was carrying. The other two oyimbos watched. The one with the gun stepped closer and said something and then they all laughed. I tried to cover the front of my body. I could see that this amused them and the one who had kicked me bent my hands up and pulled my arms down. The other oyimbo who had been silent came and pushed me away from the tree, kicked my legs apart. The kicking-oyimbo bent down and tied my feet with the rope and then brought it upwards to wrap my wrists. When that was done, he took out a metal collar and locked it on my neck.

They stood back and watched me. I put my head down because I was too ashamed of being naked and tethered like a common animal by strangers who could not speak my language. In the back of my head, I decided to keep focused on my feet. I could not think about the compound. I could not even think about what was going to happen to me. Just as I was beginning to feel that I would be planted like a tree and left to die, gun-oyimbo pointed the rifle at me and then in front of me. Kicking-oyimbo pulled me and they began to talk among themselves as I was led through the forest.

Even if I wanted to recall now what I saw on the way I couldn’t tell you. I did not see much except my own tears. Every time I looked at something other than my feet, there was nothing but water. Each time I breathed, the metal around my neck tightened. The heat around my neck at times was searing and the only reason I stopped crying was that I became certain the clamp around my neck would choke me to death if I even whimpered.

I heard nothing except the changes in the voices that might indicate they were going to do something to me. And silence. No matter that the wind blew. Silence protected me from believing what was happening.

After about five days we met a large group of other oyimbos. I was led into an area that contained at least a hundred people, all tied like I was. I was pushed toward the females where I was connected by my
collar to another woman, making me the last in the line. When the oyimbos walked away, she turned her head left as far as it would go, and smiled. It was a welcome, I knew, but I could not feel welcomed here. When I did not return the smile, she stepped back a little, pulling the other women with her, and rubbed her foot on top of mine. She turned and smiled again. This time, I nodded.

I was exhausted. I had not eaten since I had left the village. The bottom of my feet had been torn open and I could feel small rocks and twigs trapped in my heel. I was afraid of infection but could do nothing about it. My wrists had bled the first two days from the rope, then stopped. I could no longer remember how to get home even if I could escape.

I was grateful for the woman in front of me. It was not much comfort to know other human beings had met the same fate, but at least, someone had thought enough to smile. When she stepped back, the other women did not appear disturbed at the movement. It was as if they had an unspoken agreement that someone would connect with the new ones brought on. I noticed the men doing the same thing. None of these people looked like my people. This meant no one spoke the same languages or they understood only a little of maybe one or two languages. We could not help ourselves because we could not understand each other. But, the oyimbos understood one another, making them already more powerful because they could communicate.

I had not been standing long, when we heard the sound of chains and whips. I looked cautiously in the direction of the noise. There were at least ten men and four women being dragged by those who looked like us. They resisted movement, but every time one did not move, one of the oyimbo fired his gun at his or her feet. This did not make them move any faster or even out of the way, and I suspected that they wanted to be hit. However, the bullet always missed their feet. The whip and chains, however, did not, so that when the oyimbo had emptied his rifle, he took up the whip and chain and began beating the backs of their legs.

As they walked past us, I recognized ‘Bunmi, a younger cousin from my mother’s aunt’s house. My throat was too parched to whisper, so I looked at her hard, hoping that she would turn, but she did not. Her body was covered in dirt and she was thin. Her lips were
cracked and her wrists bled where the ropes had been tied too tightly. There was blood on her legs. Her village was at least a five-day walk from my own. Suddenly, she stopped moving. The whip snapped across her back and with it a sound like a heavy branch breaking during dry season. Instinctively, I moved to help the cousin I had once bathed in the river. My body was instantly pulled back into line. The woman in front of me turned, this time without a smile.

They beat ‘Bunmi hard. When the oyimbos finally stopped, she did not move. They disconnected her from the line and tossed her body to the side in view of everyone.

I cannot tell you what I was feeling at that moment. Even now, as I recall it, there are so many things going through my mind. I cannot grasp one long enough to speak about it. For a long time, things were like that: moving like waves and wind through my head. Everything too fast at one time. As quickly as something happened, even more quickly a heavy dullness settled over my mind. I could not speak. And then with whom would I speak?

We stood for a long time after that doing exactly what they wanted us to do. We looked at ‘Bunmi’s body and reminded ourselves that we should live. An oyimbo began walking down the line with two pails and a cup. He tipped our heads back at the throat with the butt of his rifle, and we opened our mouths to gulp down water and mashed yam. Afterwards, they watched as we struggled to eliminate what our stomachs didn’t want without watching or dirtying each other. We wiped ourselves with what leaves we found. When all this was done, they lined us up again and began to march us into the forest.

On the way out, each of us looked at ‘Bunmi’s body once more. Leaving her must have been too much for one of the men who had come with her and before we finished our silent prayers, he lunged at the first oyimbo he saw, taking his chained companions with him. He pounded the man and wrapped his chains around his neck. Soon the other men joined him, taking any oyimbo standing near them. The one who began the attack stood at least a full head higher than all the oyimbos and clearly had the advantage. The other oyimbos not involved looked on amused for awhile, then one I had not seen raised his gun and fired. The big man stopped, looked at his chained companions, and fell over. Another shot was fired and the man next to him fell.
Not one of us moved. And those who only a few minutes before had been eager to fight, stepped back as the two dead men were removed. They joined the coffle silently. But I could see they were waiting for another chance.

As we began walking again, I did not want to look at the two dead men, one bleeding from the heart, the other from the eye. We were not allowed to bury them or ‘Bunmi and would never know if the forest took them back or whether some animal had eaten them. Worse yet, I feared some unsuspecting neighbor or family member would walk here on another mission only to discover the horror of their bodies, bloody and twisted, left for everyone to be reminded that we were now strangers in our own land without protection.

From the number of times the sun rose and set, I knew we had walked another five days by the time we arrived at our next destination, a small outpost where more of us were exchanged. Although most of the women in front of me were unchained and hurried along to a tent, I remained where I was. I did not dare look around, afraid I would see more than my soul could store.

After a while, though, your only concerns are when you will stop walking, when and if they will give you water, if they will kill or rape you, when the whip will cross your back. If you will ever stop to eliminate instead of doing so while walking. And how to walk without falling. The woman in front of me walked too slowly. As if her pace would give the situation a chance to change itself. Instead, I tripped every few steps. My badly bruised feet could not heal and each time I stumbled, a closing cut reopened.

The second day after leaving the first stop I, like many others, was limping from the pain of holding stones and branches inside our cuts or between our toes while they bled. I was certain that my toe was broken. The first night out I had tripped over a large stone. Every step I took was a tentative one, putting my feet out until I could feel the proper placement. But that night, the oyimbos were in a rush and made us run in the dark with only a lantern in the front and back to guide themselves and their horses.

As I moved forward, I felt my right toe hit something the size of a coconut, but harder. I could not stop as the woman in front of me had missed it and kept running. I stumbled, but did not fall down. Instead, my entire big toe placed flat against the sole of my foot, like someone...
would fold over a piece of cloth. The next morning, I could not step on my toe or the inside of my foot. Each time I placed pressure on the toe or the ball underneath it, the pain moved up my ankle and into my knee. There was no swelling. Just pain and a little darkness around the toe where I could tell a bone had been chipped.

Had I been in the village, my mother would have used this time to show me what herbs to use. She would have also continued her practice of teaching me the ways of the healer, the kind that she was who could mend broken bones, draw out illnesses, or set spirits at rest so they wouldn’t trouble a particular person. I knew enough to use my hands, but could not remember the herbs and plants that would benefit. I did not yet know all the prayers and how to use them.

The woman who had been in front of me remained as we began to walk again. I remember her not only because I tripped over her feet. She was silent. She did not cry when they beat her. She did not murmur when I whispered something. Her eyes were unforgiving, distant—like so many of the other women. There was no place for comfort.

I had begun to feel as if all my tears had abandoned me after leaving Bunmi’s body for the animals. I felt them rush to the rims of my eyes then suddenly pull back into a tight sack like a small udder right beneath my heart. Sometimes, it was as if they were caught between my heart and my rib cage. When I breathed, the pressure made me feel as if my heart and ribs would break at the same time.

After leaving Bunmi, we had been herded into two lines and this is how we traveled. Men on the left, women on the right. The men were tied with their arms behind them, a rope or chain extending from one wrist to the neck of the other, all the way until the last man had his chain held by one of the horse-riding oyimbos. Any misstep, any sign of trouble and the chain was pulled hard. This automatically tightened the neck rings, choking everyone and making them stop. Then, the men were beaten for stopping.

The women were linked by neck collars alone. Our hands were free to allow some of us to carry baskets of food and water gourds from one place to another. Every few hours, the weight on our heads was shifted back. The woman in front passed her bundle to the woman behind. The last woman, who was me, had her bundle taken by an oyimbo and passed back to the front. In this way, we were equally beaten and tired.
My children, I tell you, I was afraid of the life that was about to be given to me. Something worse than death, without preparation, choice, or ritual for the transition. I cannot tell you that I spent much time thinking about the reasons I was suddenly sold away from my home. I did not. At the start and end of each day I was too tired to do anything but move or rest. And it would only be after I had lived for many years in my new life that I was able to allow myself to believe what had happened.

I am ancient now. I have lived that life and many others. But it is the life of the young girl, sold without an explanation by the man she loved and trusted most that haunts me unresolved. For a long time, I wished I had not been born. For longer still I wished my father had never been born. And then I made myself forget him.

But even my anger fades. These last twenty to thirty years as ancestor to several who have returned to some of the ways I knew as a girl, I feel my heart softening as they salute my family and ask for healing to begin.

Dying does not free you. Without the body and the attachments to those things that keep you alive, the spirit changes. But sometimes, your anger and an unfinished destiny trap you. The anger is like a spirit itself, surrounding you, seeping from you and into those you care for. Sometimes, if you are unable to release it before dying, it takes hold of you and you find yourself forcing it on others being born or too weak to resist.

If you die angry as you are completing your destiny but death finds you of iwa pele and suuru, good character and patience, your elevation is sometimes easier. You rely on the ones after you to recognize and acknowledge your life so that you may be freed from the box of hatred and anger that binds you—and sometimes has trapped them.

During the horror, I did not think of anything except my own exhaustion. After the last exchange, more of us traveled. We did not know where we were going. We seemed to be moving in circles to the edge
of the coast, then away from it. Unlike me, many had come from the interior. Had never seen the sea. I had never seen so many people. I would catch sight of tents and boats as we passed on higher ground. But except for short stops to restock our supplies, we never stayed long enough to rest. Usually, one of the black hires and one oyimbo went to trade. The supplies were really for the oyimbos. They seemed to tire and thirst very quickly and assumed that we, the natives of the land, did not. I would come to understand, however, that they did not care whether or not we were tired or thirsty. They wanted only for us to make the final point. And their black helpers did not care either. For all of them, we were gold, reals, pounds, livres, brandy, cloth, and other such things that would make them and their descendants wealthy over centuries.

When we did stop, I sometimes heard gunfire in the dark, uncertain if it was an animal or one of us that had been spared this new life. Always, the morning told which. If food roasted, then they feasted. If, instead, the end of a rope hung to the ground, we knew that it was one of us, headless for some minor infraction.

They thought they knew everything about all of us. Kill and dismember us to teach the rest a lesson. If they had known, that kind of killing only makes a spirit wander. Makes it angry and bitter so that as long as it can’t reach home it will terrorize everyone responsible for its sacrilegious death. For as long as it took to make it right. But, they did not ask us about our rituals and the proper way to kill or bury an unwanted enemy so he did not rise up centuries later to seek revenge, or be reborn through some unsuspecting line.

Instead, they cursed the world with a despair and hatred that has no apparent root cause. They decimated a race of people for acres of land that belonged to no human being.

Yes, there were those who stayed and married us, or served kings and chiefs. But what kind of man leaves his own home and resides in another just because he can have more wealth and more women who do not speak his language and do not even respect him. If they had known what would become of all their comfort in the coming centuries and how bloody the fight to keep it, they would have left us alone. Perhaps. All men are greedy. No matter what land claims them. They will go the ends of the world—all the way to Africa even—to get what they want.

On the day we reached what would be our final stop before the
boats, I saw it everywhere. Greed. Cowries exchanged hands like water pouring into sieves. All over the sand, tents were pitched with different flags. There were black men and oyimbos unloading canoes. There were other men giving orders. There were men with guns shoving lines of men, women, and children onto small boats or through doors.

I was pushed with the rest of the women into a doorway. Before entering, I could see that the place we were to enter was made of stone, with one set of floors above our entrance. Cannons jutted out of every section of the wall it seemed. A flag which matched one of the tents flew from its highest point. There were bars on the bottom windows with faces looking out, crying and frightened.

Inside the black men with guns stood on two sides at the end of the pathway. On either side, there was little light. One pulled the first woman to the right. The other shoved the first man to the left. This is how they divided us. The men were handled first.

Being the last one in the line, I could see the men struggling and those who did so got whipped with the butt of the rifle. There were rings attached to the wall. One of each pair was attached to this ring by his collar. When the rings were full, the next man was attached to the next available man. Their leg irons were then fitted with a heavy ball between them. As I walked past, I could see the room was full. Flies covered some of the men who had been there longest. One man who could not get out stooped in the corner to relieve himself.

The entrance to the women’s room was farther down. We walked about twenty steps to a door then stepped down into a long passageway. There were no rings here, just women squeezed tightly. They unchained us, and we all stood silently for a moment, looking.

My eyes moved slowly over the crowd. Women crouching down hid their faces in shame. Young girls combed the hair of older women with their fingers. Some sat in the corners like tight fists, crying. One laughed out loud and walked the tight spaces between us. I looked and they stared back, the ones who were not ashamed to search for the same thing. We did not recognize each other.

“Abiodun.” I pointed to myself, and slowly spoke to indicate my village, and my lineage. There was a shuffle, but no response. Then very quietly, I heard someone say, “Iya, ba wo ni? ‘Dele.” She pointed to herself.

“Dele. Da da ni.”
I walked toward the voice to find a young woman my age sitting in the corner. Her legs were pulled close to her body, and blood was dry on her thighs. I sat down next to her, afraid to look at her, but without thinking, I touched her shoulder. She grabbed my hand, pulled herself close to me as I have seen newborn monkeys do.

Not long ago, she would have been someone with whom I might have played or entered an egbe. Her hair had been shaved off. I noticed for the first time that a number of the women were also clean shaven. Her shoulder blades jutted into the palm of my hand, making me uncomfortable and forcing me to release her despite her reluctance. But, it gave me a better opportunity to study her. Her feet bled, especially from the heel and her ankles, where metal had cut down to the bone.

When I took the right foot in my hand, I could see that the big toe was black. She would certainly lose it if nothing was done. And nothing would be done because as long as we could walk, we could be used. I opened my hands, placed them on her foot. She clung tighter still. Since no one came to feed us, we slept like this: me listening to her rasping until I could no longer keep my eyes open, and until the pain of what was ahead flowed from her feet into my hands and completely overwhelmed me.

I was awakened by the sound of thunder and by rain pelting through the barred windows onto my head. I was stiff as I tried to get up, and one of the women came and gently unfolded us. They were looking at me and looking at her feet. As a woman came forward, we heard the door open and the yelling of the oyimbo, which I could not decipher, being in the back. But, I noticed the women stand up and begin jumping up and down, and then gradually the line began to move out. The woman who had slept in my arms all night encouraged me to do the same.

At the passageway, the men had set out buckets of lime and black soap. I followed the women as they each dipped their hands into the bucket and pulled out as much soap as they could gather. They washed themselves and I knew I was to follow their lead.

When it was my turn, I put my right hand into the bucket, pulled out a handful of liquid black soap. I divided the soap into a smaller segment by pouring some into my left hand. I then dropped the soap onto my body at different sections so that a little was everywhere.
I was fortunate to be near the end of the line again. I began with my ori. In small tight circles I moved my left hand across the crown of my head until I reached my face. If this was my destiny, I prayed, give me strength to complete it. I prayed for a clear, cool head, even as I felt blind and angered and frightened. I washed behind my ears, asking that I be made alert to hear what could not normally be heard. I washed my eyes, my nose, mouth, all with the prayer that I be given senses that protect me from dangers, seen and unseen.

I noticed that the other women were nearly finished, and hurried to wash my feet. My hands rubbed my toes and the spaces in between gently. I massaged the soles of my feet, allowing the soap to seep into the cracks that had not healed, and ignored the burning. As I touched my broken toe, I held my hands over it longer, spitting in my palms and rubbing the mixture hard into the toe, all the time praying quietly. I could feel the warmth flow from my hands into my toe, and then up to my ankle.

As quickly as I could, I then soaped the rest of my body, crouching as low as possible when I washed between my legs. I felt a slight cramp in my abdomen and was alarmed that in a few weeks’ time I would begin bleeding with no way to cover myself.

When I stood up, the women nearest me were staring. As I caught each of their eyes, they lowered them respectfully. One kunled, touched her right hand to the ground and then brought the inside of her hand to her mouth to kiss it. Another brought her forehead to the ground quickly. I shook my head sharply and she stood up.

We were then herded farther into the rain where we were allowed to wash off. The soap ran into my eyes and into my mouth, but I did not care. I had not bathed since I had been taken from home, and I welcomed the sting and bitter smell of the soap we used for healing and washing away the unwanted.

Today would be the beginning and end of my life, and for a moment I stopped washing myself and looked at the women around me. Some had found the courage to wash each other. Others just stood in the rain, looking at the water and boats around them. One began to run toward the water, but the two women next to her pulled her back, held her briefly, and then let her go. They stood quietly around her, moving intermittently to not attract attention.

The woman I had held all night came gently to me and washed
my back. Her hands were warm and rough, and she was careful not to break skin where I had been hit with the whip several times. She began slowly rubbing my scalp.

The sack that had stored itself under my rib cage floated to the center of my chest, up my throat, and finally, I felt it in my mouth, my teeth opening so as not to puncture it. But my tongue could not move out of the way fast enough and before I could turn to offer the same kindness, my tongue began moving furiously around my mouth, uttering and shouting and spinning me until the women gathered around me. They formed two circles. The outer circle continued to wash themselves, letting the rain fall onto their backs. But, in the center, there were other women, older than I, holding me, rocking me between them and singing, “Orisa, do not abandon your daughter now,” until I could no longer hear myself. Until their songs had calmed my shouts into a humming. Until I could stand straight trembling, half carried back to the room where the woman I had held all night held me.

After that, the women began their mornings by each coming to my feet and saluting me. No matter how many times I tried to dissuade them, they would not stop. In the corner that I had taken, they began leaving small pieces of food on the ground. They would take my hand and put it over the food, then sprinkle it with water.

In the evenings, the ones who could not walk or whose backs had been torn open, placed themselves at my feet again, lying or sitting down. At first, I was uncertain of what they asked. But then, the woman who had remained at my side since the rain, took my hands and put them on her feet. Her big toe was brown now, and she did not limp. I did not limp. And by the time we were ready to be moved into the boats, not one of the women limped, and their scars had healed without infection.

The woman who had laughed to herself the first few days of my arrival was quiet. At each meal, she set aside a portion of her food and her water for me. And every night, she slept standing up, leaning against the wall closest to me and making herself a barrier between me and anyone or anything that would dare walk toward me at night.