



THE LIQUID EYE OF A MOON

UCHENNA AWOKE

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The Liquid Eye of a Moon

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**THE
LIQUID EYE
OF A MOON**

UCHENNA AWOKE

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In memory of

my father, Edogo Nicholas Ugwokeja Awoke,
my mother, Obloko Rosaline Obeta Awoke (née Ijere),
my younger brother, Chijioke Awoke,
and my aunt, Monica Onyishi.

Till we meet to part no more.

One

YESTERDAY IN MY MIND I REBURIED OKIKE, MY AUNT, in a proper grave, in a coffin my memory grabbed from Aku Road, a beautiful white box edged with a blue stripe, a patterning of hibiscus with yellow blossoms embossed on its lid. Sometimes I sneak out to Aku Road to see the coffins sampled outside carpentry workshops, edging the fine arc of the road, in all their colours and shapes. The road is a piece of artwork that I walk with my eyes, rising where it rises and curving where it curves. Even the Bishop Shanahan Hospital fence is artful in the way it curves then rises elegantly as if determined to hold those coffins back from strolling in and claiming their bodies waiting in the mortuary. I picture the coffin makers standing in their dusky workshops behind piles of their coffins with ambitious stares that call for patronage. Their bare bodies covered in fine powdery wood-dust and a sheen of muscle-gloss. But passersby always look the other way. Always focused on the curve of the Bishop Shanahan fence opposite, fear and repulsion rimming their eyes, like the dark lines of kohl around my mother's, as if by merely looking they are summoning death.

Okike's actual grave, in a garden near our house, has been overtaken by weeds, half buried in wild growth, umbrellas of mushrooms and small climbing-grasses sprouting wildly over it. My mother tells me that today marks a decade since her death. I am going to weed the grave neat in commemoration of her passing, and, one day, I will make Okike a tomb. My mother says Okike lived with us when I was a child. She looked after me. She and I enjoyed a special bond, my mother says. "Ahutubeghi m," she wonders at such closeness. "I have never seen a child that close to an aunt, even more than he is to the mother."

Sometimes I close my eyes and imagine Okike bathing me, soaping me all over, oiling my scalp and patting my baby neck and tender back with talcum powder, folding me in diapers and tossing me up in her arms, a happy, smiling, fat thing. But did I wear diapers as a baby? I can't seem to connect my small village of Oregwu, a remote, rural place in eastern Nigeria, with the

townshipness of diapers, talcum powder, and coconut oil. Or this starved-looking boy that I see in the mirror to the round baby of my imagination.

Okike was my grandfather's lastborn. My mother tells me she drowned in the Ezenwanyi cave on the eve of Palm Sunday. According to my mother, she was plucked out of the water and hastily buried without a proper funeral. Her grave lies unweeded. Time has blurred its edges. I want to build a tomb over her grave, a beautiful tomb, to thank her for caring so much for me. But that will have to wait until I can afford it.

I was four years old when Okike died, and eight years old when my father took me to the attama—the priest—of Ezenwanyi. He took me there in secret because my mother, a Catholic, forbids her children from going near Ezenwanyi's shrine. My father might be the last proud worshipper of Ezenwanyi in our village. His face is probably the only one unfamiliar to the parish priest of the local church, Holy Trinity. But my father says the parishioners are hypocrites, not minding that my mother is one of those competing for the front pew during Sunday Mass. He says they bring nocturnal sacrifices to Ezenwanyi to seek his favours, and then they wear long scapulars to the morning Mass the next day to please the parish priest. "Pietists," he sneers.

"You must not tell your mother that I brought you here," my father whispered.

I nodded, excited to share a secret with him, a secret between men.

The attama is a tall, stooped elderly man who lives a few houses away from us. When he is not at the shrine he looks like any dried-up old man from our village, with a nose that dribbles snuff mixed with snot, who goes to work at his farm in the morning and spends the afternoon sitting on one of the huge old trunks in the village square. But he is a different man when he is seated at the shrine, distant and withdrawn, shrouded in dark mystery.

"My son here has been acting strange lately," my father said from across the square floor of the little thatch hut where we sat on a short bench. "He has been unsettled in his sleep. I want to know the cause of his strange affinity with my late sister, his aunt Okike."

The attama asked my father to get a stick, and to break the stick into the

number of my father's siblings, and then name the broken sticks after the siblings. This my father did in secret outside the shrine. When he returned, he handed the broken sticks over to the priest. Holding the sticks in his crooked palm, his nose unusually clean and dry, the attama spoke a few words of incantation and cast the broken sticks onto the earth floor. They fell in a line, the seven of them broken into uneven lengths. He touched the broken sticks one by one with a short staff, back and forth a few times. And then he stopped, picked up the one to his right, and gave it to my father, who acknowledged that it was the very one he had named for my aunt Okike.

"She has reincarnation ties with your son," the attama said. "In other words, she is your son's ancestral benefactress. Their souls are tied together from the land of the spirits. Do not try to separate them or forcefully stop his predispositions towards her, no matter how strange they may seem. The connection between them is very strong, stronger than you can imagine, and that is why she comes to him in the dream, as a sign of that everlasting bond, a sign that she will be there for him if called upon in times of need or distress."

It seems the attama was right. For as long as I can remember, I have often seen a young woman drowning in my dreams. In these dreams, I always see myself standing by a riverside. The woman approaches the river in a bright yellow dress with floral patterns. She bounds up onto the rocky track, hesitates at the riverbank, her shoulders quivering, her face glistening with tears, frozen white. And then she trembles and walks into the water. She walks on until the water reaches her shoulders, her chin, her nose, her eyes. Finally, it covers her.

Later, my father took my younger brother Machebe to the shrine of Ezenwanyi for his mood swings and belligerence. The priest took one look at Machebe and revealed to my father that his second son was reincarnated from our forefather through the energetic village spirit Agubata. This is why Machebe is strong and hot-headed, and withstands me in a fight even now that I am fourteen years old, three years older than Machebe.

"The forefather he is reincarnated from was descended from the tiger spirit animal," explained the attama. "When the totem appears to Machebe, the

tiger's passion and energy are released to your son the same way it happens to the masker." He gave my father a knowing look. "You understand what I mean."

My father nodded, but I was lost, and it wasn't until much later, when I learned about my father's masking prowess, that the cryptic message that passed between the two men unfurled to me.

"At least I am not reincarnated from a woman," Machebe sneered.

We argued hotly. I did not like the jeering note in his voice that suggested that being reincarnated from Okike was a stigma. Machebe and I were like water and oil, and I knew that he would act even more arrogantly now that it had been revealed he was reincarnated from the tiger.

My father walked in then and shouted us down. Such matters were sacred, and must not be profaned, he said. "And you must not mention it to your mother. You know her views on Ezenwanyi."

Two

MY VILLAGE MUST HAVE BEEN FULL OF NAKED TODDLERS without birthdays, or enlarged photographs of their childhoods taken in studios and displayed on smooth painted walls. I probably grew up the same way, naked and running around with poop in my buttocks. One of those potbellied, food-loving imps whose mothers would beckon the family dog over to lick them clean. I smile each time I indulge myself in those thoughts. But my mother talked about my childhood without nostalgia. She said I was a snot-faced child with nameless longings. I'd cry loudly, squealing like a squirrel baulked of a ripe palm nut. "Ibekazi," my mother would tease me. "You always preferred to be tied to the back of your aunt, and when anyone tried to take you away to ease the poor girl's burden, you cawed and fought like a crow, nearly clawing out their eyes."

When she said this, I hid my face and said nothing, feeling slighted that of all the pretty birds in the village, it was a crow my mother likened me to, but in her good mood I could ask, "What did Okike do when I squealed?"

My mother smiled. When my mother smiles, you catch a glimpse of distant beauty. It flickers and is gone, *fiaam*, like the dash of a glowworm. "When you squealed because you needed to suck my breast and I had gone to Ogige market," she said, "Okike plugged her nipple into your little mouth and sang for you until I returned and kissed away your snot and tears."

My mother said I sucked her like there was no tomorrow, and even suckled Okike's milkless breasts for comfort.

"Like seven famished puppies," she chuckled. "After you fed, you insisted on going up again on Okike's back, leaping with happiness."

So much for my mother's similes: first a crow, then seven famished puppies. But I was a big sucker, and that's the truth. I am amused, and sometimes angry, when my mother retells this story. Angry because I am embarrassed, amused because it is my love story, my childhood, the beauty that lies in not knowing the difference between breastmilk and breast, and because my mother never gets tired of it, this serial retelling.

“What kind of songs did Okike sing for me?” I’d ask my mother each time.

“She sang you baby songs.” My mother would smile again even more broadly, and I’d catch a glimpse of the ghosts of her dimples, long receded into her sunken cheeks. Now they ornament my younger sister Usonwa’s face.

“Sing me the song,” I’d insist.

My mother would clear her voice, laugh a little as if shy, and then she would sing the song about the little bird: *Nwannununwannununta turuzanzaturunza nwannununwannununta turuzanzaturunza tukenekisiatu tunwokenikenike tunwanyinikenike tutumeropipiro piropirororo pi.*

It reddens my cheeks when I think of all this, now that I am an all-grown skinny boy who finished primary school at the age of fourteen after I lost one year to pneumonia. My mother says it was pneumonia, but now I think it was malnutrition, too much cocoyam and tasteless cowage soup. Some people say I laugh like water. Curiously, I find myself going to the creek in my village to listen to its ululations. Others say it is my father I laugh like, that it is his most telling feature, but most people agree that I look like my uncle Onumonu, my mother’s brother, a primary school teacher, a man who reminds me of a squirrel. I can’t imagine myself growing into a diminutive man in clothes that outsize me.

Let me tell you a little about my family. I am my parents’ third child and their first son, if a boy like me being anyone’s first son is anything to be proud of. So you know, about a year ago, I did pass my Common Entrance exam and raced home to flaunt my result.

“You are not going to secondary school,” my father said in a parched voice. “Unless you will have me trade my manhood for school fees.”

Heartbroken, I went to a corner to sulk. My mother came back and found me there, like a cat starved of affection. You have already met my mother, my heroine, the vibrant force in the family.

“Get up.”

Her voice warmed my heart.

“Tomorrow you are going to the new school to begin your registration.” My mother untied her wrappa, washed threadbare, one of the few pairs left on the clothesline. She reached for a grey pouch-like cloth bag she ties around her waist and emptied its contents, all her life savings. “I am sure I have enough in here to start you off,” she said.

The next week found me walking the street proudly in the white and indigo of Community Secondary School. But after one term, my family could no longer afford the fees and I was forced to drop out.

“Nnam, don’t worry. You will go back to school if I have to work my fingers to stumps,” my mother reassured me.

I have six siblings—two elder sisters, Oyimaja and Eketé; my younger brother Machebe, my younger sister Usonwa; and the twins, a boy and a girl, Ebube and Ihebube—and you already know about my aunt Okike, my benefactress, and that I am her reincarnation. My father is my greatest critic, and I often feel he stands in my way. He has five siblings, but I know only one, my aunt Ogbom; the rest are either dead or lost. Sometimes my father talks about his father, my grandfather, a man my father says lived a lonely life. Ngwu is a white-haired little man in my father’s last memories of him. He did not live to a very old age, and he was drunk more often than sober. My father talks of his late mother, my grandmother, too. He describes her as a tall, stern-faced woman with a glossy dark complexion and a strong will, the opposite of my grandfather. My father smiles brightly whenever he talks about his parents. He leaves me with a sense of guilt, because I don’t think I smile, let alone brightly, when I talk about my father. He used to accompany my grandfather, a roofer, to work.

“A very good one when he was sober,” he said, “but he was often getting into strife with those he disappointed.”

I sense that my father had been proud following his father and making roofs with bamboo, raffia, and thatch, but ashamed of his father’s drinking habit, as I am of his. I also don’t believe making roofs is a great employment, even if my father treats this story as a delicate heirloom that, if allowed to slip and fall, would shatter like glass.

My father is now the second-oldest man in our village. He is not so old, but he has many strands of grey hair and a rough salt-and-pepper beard. He definitely looks too old to have fathered the twins, my last two siblings. I think it is because he hunches over in the sun to mould bricks. Maybe it was because his older brother Alumona chose to become a roofer like their father that he chose to make bricks instead. I hope that one day he will become the oldest man and thus the Onyishi of our village. Then everything—the hills, the caves, the land, and the trees—will be ours, and everyone will have to do as he says. He will superintend the slaughter of funeral cows at the village square and bring home a big lump of meat. And he will be respected. We will have farmlands to grow crops and drive hunger far away. My mother will become the Obloko, with more palm trees in her custody than any woman in the village. There will be money for me to return to secondary school, and to be reunited with Eke, my childhood friend. We desperately want to go to university and learn to speak big English words that fall from heights like breadfruit heads. And there will be money to build Okike a proper tomb.

But then I dream that my father dies on the day of his coronation.

“Dreams are nothing. They exist only in your imagination.” My mother waves my dream away. But I know that my dreams about Okike are material, and I am overcome with a sense of foreboding.

The university I want to attend is just on the other side of the hill, so near that when the wind blows it fills my nose with the smell of learning: that hot, metallic scent of paper fresh from the mill. It is so close we can hear the sirens and see the helicopters bringing famous people to the Founder’s Day ceremonies.

As children, we were afraid to enter that community of well-dressed English-speakers, where we were expected not to utter the Igbo language that is our mother tongue; their ground seemed too clean for our dirty feet. But our mothers would send us there anyway to fetch tap water in iron buckets during droughts. The cave dried up during those times, water trickling out of the rocks like breastmilk, but in the campus it gushed from the taps. We started to enjoy our visits. We helped the students carry water to their hostels. We cleaned their rooms in exchange for gifts. We gleaned their bins for

morsels, but found nothing. “The university cannot afford groceries anymore, and it is the fault of government,” my father said. “The students don’t have enough to eat themselves, much less things to throw away.”

Nowadays they fetch their own water and wash their own clothes, too. My father says it is the fault of government, and that tuition fees have jumped on top of the iroko tree. But that is for Eke to worry about. He is the one most likely to go to university.

To tell you a few truths about my small village of Oregwu, it is nice throughout the year, but sometimes December is brittle-dry, and March is warm, too warm. It is wet and cold in August. I like it in spring when the weather is cool and the grass is fresh and green, a time when it smells of nothing but new leaves and sweet loam. There are no storied houses in my village, but there are as many cement houses as there are those built of mud brick, the ugly type of brick my father makes for a living. The houses are usually squat or L-shaped. Most of them are unpainted. Hideous. Some have cracks where house lizards and geckos live and dash out now and again to snap up an insect. Nothing disgusts me like the guts of a gecko stained on a wall when the younger ones stone them to death.

In my village, every household with a man has a goat pen. In it you find more goats than sheep. The chicken coops belong to the mothers. The villagers mostly farm. Men plough and plant, women weed and cook, and children eat and play. But my father makes bricks, because he doesn’t have many acres of land like his fellow men. There are a few drinking joints where men go to relax their muscles, enjoy palm wine, and chat about community happenings when they come back from the farm, like Madam Bridget’s bar, with its crooked little signboard that says PALM WINE AND BUSH MEAT READY. A man might get drunk and slumber by the side of the road. He might wake up the next day soaked in his own urine and vomit. In the cold drizzle of the early morning dew, he might then sidle home to his irate wife and children. My father has done this many times. My mother does not speak to him for many days after.

When a baby is born in my village, children eat the insides of unripe palm nuts, and women yellow their foreheads with *odo*. They sing, and men drink palm wine and laugh in loud voices. They laugh like hyenas if the baby is a boy, even if he might grow into a village drunk like *Oko*. When a person dies, women weep and men cross their arms. A hole is made, and the person is covered with red soil. Dances are made, and after that everyone goes home. A tomb may be made for one out of three-score deaths and ten. I am not sure if we have ghosts in my village. People tell tales of them in *Amalla Nkwa*, a neighbouring town where human beings and ethereal entities interact between the spiritual and temporal worlds, but I am not sure if there are any here.

It's probably just moonlight playing with shadows.

Three

WE HAVE A FEW TOMBS IN MY VILLAGE. BUT THEY ARE nothing like what I want for Okike. They are the usual blocks of ugly dull masonry. I want the best tomb for her, a big, shiny tomb, so I go in search of something similar. The villages that make up our region of Ishiayanashi are all set up the same way. They are connected by a twisted matrix of paths that loop around farmlands and compounds. I know of many people who've died: of old age, a fall from a palm tree, complications from childbirth, convulsions, measles, malaria, or road accidents. But I find no more than a few graves as I walk through the cluster of villages. Most of them have been ploughed over and planted with crops.

I remember a grave in the village where people go to Mass in a stone-walled building named Holy Trinity Catholic Church, where catechism classes are held outside under a mango tree. On weekdays, the building is used as a primary school. Ticks used to live in the broken floor back in my school days. My mother would open up my big toes with a thorn to free them of the large egg-white parasites imprisoned inside. On Sundays, the classrooms disappear and an altar is set up. The wooden benches are rearranged to create an aisle for the bony parish priest to pace up and down. Sometimes, when angry for reasons known to only him, the erratic priest will hoof around in a fit of bad temper. "Like a hyena that smells blood," I overheard someone say. The priest mandates the parishioners to shun Ezenwanyi's shrine. "It is a heathen practice, and you must not allow yourself to be yoked with unbelievers," Father Matthew directs his congregation.

The damp morning is airless with the stench of rotten mangoes as I cross the church, which faces the cream-and-brown parish residence the congregation laboured to build for Father Matthew. My mother is saving for a general congregation levy to replace the priest's old, smoking 504 Salon car.

I finally locate the tomb I am thinking of on the roadside at the entrance to a long pathway up to a house painted in browns and dark reds. It is a plain,

flat slab of cement whose occupant is depicted by a statue sitting at the head of the grave: a pretty young woman, showing a bit of flesh. Her skin is glistening with mist—a wet, plain-of-Bournvita brown. Her hair is plaited in a series of loops like the slender coils of akidi, the black bean pods planted in farms.

“Why are you touching that statue?” a harsh voice bawls behind me.

I had moved closer and stretched a hand to feel the statue’s wet clay skin before the voice pinned me to the spot. I turn around to find a boy my age standing right behind me in a frayed black shirt and combat shorts. He is glaring at me. He looks troublesome, that I see at once.

“I am just admiring the tomb,” I say in as polite a tone as possible, my eyes settling on his intimidating pectorals.

“Don’t you know it’s my mother’s tomb,” he says, bunching his fists and coming closer.

I take a step back. Anyone passing could stretch out a hand and touch the statue, that’s how close the tomb is to the road, but for the sake of my teeth I do not want to argue with this boy in combat shorts with a strong chest and a bunched fist. He quickly steps up to close the gap between us. We look at each other, his eyes flashing with anger and violence. I don’t know what to say to him or do, if I should apologize or turn and take a sprint for it. He doesn’t look like he cares about apologies.

Finally, I drop my eyes, my feet shifting uneasily. Maybe he sees my fear. He steps up and shoves me backwards, so hard I almost trip over. He waits to see how I will react, but my hands hang limply by my side. The insult rankles, but I know I don’t stand a chance against him. If I want to do anything, it is to turn and tear off like a grasscutter doubling back from a predator, and then to show him my five fingers from a safe distance or even throw the whole ten at him in contempt. As if reading my thoughts he closes the gap between us again, so that I can feel his breath on my face like flame, his hands still tightened into fists.

“Hei, Ehamhule!” A man emerges from the house, his voice deep and rumbling.

The boy stops, loosens up, but his eyes are still on me, regretting the

beating I may have been spared. It must be his father. I can see their resemblance. The boy has the man's healthy brown face and springy gait. In grey shorts and bare torso, the man looks well built, with good muscle tone, a clean-shaven face, and thick calves.

"Why are you fighting him?" the man says.

He approaches with brisk, springy steps.

"I caught him trying to dirty the statue," the boy says. His lie comes off so glib, like a clean breath.

"I didn't," I protest, my voice suddenly very loud and defiant. "I was only looking at the statue."

The man considers me briefly. The brown imperious eyes move back to his son. "I have told you, if you keep fighting anyone who touches the statue, you will end up fighting everyone," he says in a voice full of reverence for his late wife or the artwork or both.

The boy walks away, still scowling at me.

On my way home, I run into Eke in the company of a dark-skinned, angular boy. Eke is my closest friend, and we are from the same village. We used to walk to school together, barefoot, eating unripe mangoes we stoned down and African olives we plucked from their trees like madmen. Eke is in his second year in the secondary school now.

The boy in his company looks like a snake, with small, loose limbs. He probably said something funny, because Eke is laughing in his dry, crackling way that reminds me of a quick bushfire. We shake hands like young men, the three of us, and then Eke and I watch the boy twist and dance down the road, his thin back arced like that of Bingo, our malnourished dog.

"Who is he?"

"My cousin. I was seeing him off. He came all the way from Lejja to visit us."

I glance back again at the boy's elongated form as we begin to stroll the other way, to Eke's family house.

I tell Eke about my run-in with the boy over his mother's statue.