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An extract from the memoir

BLACK PELICAN

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Omoba, Nigeria

1986

*Ada stumbled – steadied herself in the darkness that engulfed her. Her hands traced the uneven clay walls of Ezukala cave. Hemmed in, her eyes adjusted to the blackness. Her hands and ears became her eyes as she inched her way through the dark. She turned right in this catacomb-like tunnel. The air felt damp and cool. Suddenly she heard a voice call out to her: *ị na-eme ngeni eba?* She stopped. Was she imagining things? She listened, waited. Nothing. Looking up, she searched for clues as to who had asked: What are you doing here? Above: a swirl of purple-blue mist. Where was this place? In the stillness, nothingness peered back at her, snarled like udele circling its prey. Ada carried on, but before long she tripped, cutting her elbow on something sharp. The wound sliced deep and she winced. Warm blood trailed down her arm. Wiping the blood on her dress, she dragged her feet through thick mud. She moved slowly, outstretched arms leading the way. Again, she paused and listened for anything that would give an indication of where she was. There was nothing. The atmosphere hung heavily. She walked until she reached the end of a passageway. There, she stopped, and slumped against the wall. She felt sick. Her head throbbed and the cramps in her stomach were causing her to gasp for air. Her throat dry, she licked her lips, and pressed a hand on her tightening chest. For a moment she couldn't move.*

"Come on – keep going," her mind repeated.

"Keep going to where?" she muttered.

Ada's legs were heavy but she pushed herself to carry on. She eventually came to a door. Her hands sensed the change in texture: cold, solid wood. Her fingers searched for a handle and after a few minutes, she found it. She pushed hard on the lever several times. It refused to budge. She looked for an outline of a keyhole. It was blocked. Sinking to the floor, she noticed a gap, barely a slit, underneath the door. Through it, she saw grey shapes. Pressing her ears along the opening, she heard muffled sounds. The shuffling of feet? A running tap? Or hushed voices? She listened. She stood up and pounded on the door. "Hello, hello – can anyone hear me?" No answer. Ada pounded again; hard, in a drum-like beat. Still no one came. The tears welled up as she sat down, exhausted. She bit her lower lip to stop herself from crying. She could not give up. Not now. Using the hazy light from the opening, she squinted to make out the time on her watch. It was all a blur.

Walking on, Ada blinked at the sudden flash of lightning. Her feet hurried towards the glow ahead. As she bridged the distance between herself and the light, she was confronted by a large luminous porthole. It radiated a dazzling stream of scarlet and pumpkin-orange rays. Her body temperature rose with the heat. Its warmth beckoned her. Should she jump in? What would she find on the other side? What choice did she have?

Ada jumped.

Down

down

down

She travelled through the funnel and emerged into a thick lush forest. The light closed up behind her, sealing the enclosure.

*Under a fading moon, a solitary bat hung off a mango tree. For a while, Ada lay motionless gazing up at the silhouette, and listened to the faint rustle of leaves. Without warning, the creature dived low and perched itself on another branch. It was then she spotted the dark lotus-shaped lanterns dangling from the trees. Except these were no lanterns, but a colony of *usu*.*

"Don't just lie there. Get up. You need to get out of here." A sharp voice spoke as she slithered down the tree trunk.

"Who are you?" Ada asked, rising to her feet. She brushed off twigs and leaves, moving closer to the python.

"Keep your voice down. The in-between people should not be disturbed," she hissed.

"Where am I?" Ada asked, taking in the appearance of the creature. Gold and black, with searing orange-fire eyes. "Who are you?"

"Idemili," she said. "You must be the ogbanje child. You've been the talk of the whole kingdom."

"Really...?"

"We've been waiting for you. The sea oracle prophesied you would be looking for your spirit kinfolk."

"I'm not supposed to be here," Ada said. "I saw Mama Ukwu leading me into the woods and all of a sudden she disappeared. I was all alone."

"The sea oracle was right," Idemili said, her flame-eyes staring hard at her. "There is work for you to do."

"I don't understand any of this," Ada said. "I don't belong here."

"You belong here and from where you came. You will always be one of us. And, when the time comes you have to respond to the oracle's call." She moved her head from side to side as if troubled by the whining of a mosquito. "Your grandmother, your Mama Ukwu, led you to the porthole."

"She knows about this place?"

"Of course," Idemili said. "Come along. We don't have much time. We must get you back before dawn. It's the curse of being an obanje."

They trudged through the forest as night fell around them. The low calls of lions and whooping of a hyena seesawed back and forth. In the distance, the ghostly outlines of antelopes. Ada's heart beat fast as she wondered where they were going.

"Don't be afraid, little one," Idemili said. "We will soon find the moon."

It didn't take long before the green canopy opened up to reveal a milky glow in the sky. It hung so low, Ada felt sure she could reach up and touch it.

"I'm thirsty," Ada said.

"We're almost there," Idemili replied. "Not much farther."

After a while they came to a narrow stream, flowing southward. Ada stooped down, cupped her hands and scooped some water.

“No! You mustn’t drink that,” Idemili said. “You can’t taste anything from this world.”

Ada pursed her lips, stood up again and followed the writhing figure of Idemili. In the moonlight, her skin glowed silvery blue and she seemed to float above the ground.

“Do you see it?” she asked, stretching herself in an upright form, leaning toward the horizon.

Ada squinted. Ahead of her, a snow-capped mountain range. A halo of red surrounded its peaks. They walked quickly until they came to an entrance. Ada hesitated, then followed Idemili. She stepped onto a large stone which raised her above the water that filled the cave. The coolness of the cave refreshed her. The water — clear and inviting. This time she splashed some on her face. Glancing at her reflection, she hardly recognised the person that peered back at her. She took off her shoes, sat down and dangled her feet in the water.

“We don’t have time...” Idemili said. “The oracle will be waiting.”

Hopping from boulder to boulder, Ada followed Idemili, entering deeper and deeper into the hollow. Now in the womb of the mountain, she was overcome by a deafening noise. She soon discovered its source. The darkness cleared and gave way to brilliant sapphire. A waterfall. The heady fragrance of wet moss and crayfish soaked the air.

“How are we going to locate the oracle?” Ada asked.

Ph-ooo-eee-ph-ooo-eee! Idemili let out a series of piercing calls. In seconds, the call commandeered a large phoenix. It swooped Ada onto its back and launched upwards. Ada held on tight, ignored the lurching in her stomach. As they rose higher, the landscape became a speckled canvas of green, brown and blue dots. At the peak of the mountain, Idemili was already there.

“Let’s go in,” Idemili said, leading Ada into a cavern. “They’re waiting.”

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Twelve wizened women sat on a mat, their backs rested against the wall. The largest of the women spoke first. She raised her head slightly, eyes narrowed, as she tapped a crooked stick on the ground. Ada wondered if she was always so grumpy.

“What took you so long?” she said, staring hard at Idemili. “We expected you hours ago.”

"It's the little one," Idemili said. "She doesn't have my pace."

"We thought Nne Mmiri had captured you," another said, chewing hard on an atu. "That would have been a problem. A big problem."

"What have you told her?" The large one spoke again with an air of authority mixed with impatience. "Time is running out."

"I've revealed nothing," Idemili said.

"Sit," another with looped earrings said. Ada hesitated, felt Idemili's length curl round her ankle, nudging her to the ground.

"Ada, as an obanje, you have work to do," the large one said. "Nne Mmiri is after your soul."

"It's a long story," the looped earring one said. "A deal was made when you returned to your earth parents."

"But we heard the tears of your earth mother," the atu chewing one said, and spat out a clump of the chewing stick. "Losing child after child..."

Ada wasn't sure what to make of all this. It sounded nonsensical. Sure her parents had always told her that the world of the gods, spirits and lost ancestors existed in parallel with their world. And it was only on rare occasions that these two worlds intersected. What did all this mean?

"Child, are you listening?" the looped earring one asked. "The misfortune of your family must be averted. And it's only you who can stop it."

I wake up with the sound of the cockerels. It's still dark outside, but I hear Mama Ukwu sweeping the yard with an aziza. For a few minutes, I listen to the bamboo swish-swish across the dusty compound. I imagine her stooped frame, pausing now and again to tuck the edge of her wrapper, mumbling to herself. I close my eyes, try to fall asleep again — sleep refuses to come. Sitting up, I pull out the bedside cabinet drawer, reach for the bracelet Dede Azubike gave me some time ago; green beads, now black in the darkness. I will wear it today at the masquerade, but it will stay hidden until I'm out of mother's sight. I can't bear the questions she'll ask and I don't want my uncle to get into trouble. Just this week there was a loud argument between my father and his junior brother. The quarrel lasted for hours. Muscular, tall, with a scar above his left eyelid, Dede Azubike was the nwa aturũ of the family. He'd managed to finish secondary school at the age of

twenty and had subsequently been kicked out of the local vocational college. My father would often complain bitterly in conversation with my mother of his brother's wayward ways.

He spent the money my father had given him to set up business after business on women of all shapes, sizes and tribes. Car maintenance, taxi driver, selling hardware — my uncle had tried his hand at many things. Often dressed in a starched white shirt, white linen pants, and white shoes, Dede Azubike was the proverbial prodigal son and playboy. He was in constant trouble, but like *anụ* to a honeycomb, people were naturally attracted to Dede Azubike.

The day of the argument, Dede Azubike had suddenly returned to the compound after going M.I.A. for a few weeks. We'd just finished having breakfast as a family. My sister and I had cleared away the dishes, and my brother was outside playing with the neighbourhood children.

"Where's my money," my father shouted, "i ma ihe isi ike di na obodo onye ocha?"

"Do any of them know what we suffer overseas?" my mother said, kissing her teeth. "Gbaghara, gbaghara, gbaghara," she pleaded.

"I cannot forgive," my father raged. "Enough is enough."

Dede Azubike said nothing, sat on the verandah wall, shoulders slumped.

"I told you that girl was nothing but trouble. An Ibibio woman. Since when..." My father couldn't bring himself to finish his sentence.

Dede Azubike had come back inside, as if ready to confront my father.

"The money is gone?" my father shouted. "Is that what you're telling me?"

Dede Azubike now sat across from him at the dining table. I hovered in the doorway, between this conversation and my mother washing dishes in the kitchen.

"If you've used that money to sort out another pregnancy..." my father roared, banging his fist on the table.

"Please, Dede..." Dede Azubike said. "Dede Adiele, please..." He rubbed his fingers, head bowed low. "We're planning to get married."

"With what?" my father said, the most incredulous expression on his face. "Does a person get married with no job, no money, no ambition?"

Many years later, I would understand the difference between my father and his brother. My father whose parents had only managed to support his primary education to Standard Six, had begged a Port Harcourt uncle to pay for his secondary and part of his university education. He had fought hard to secure administrative roles, learning on the job, until he landed work with the United Nations Secretariat in Lagos. This had been the making of him and his job had taken him overseas. My father's life was characterised by hard work. Dede Azubike, on the other hand, given the opportunities my father never had, refused to make anything of them. He just couldn't seem to turn his luck around, or so my parents said. Dede Azubike was a hustler yet with all his schemes and scams, he was still stuck in the village, penniless and jobless.

"I've talked to her family," Dede Azubike said. "Her father has given his blessing."

"No more excuses. No more..." My father half stood up, then sat back down again. "You will never get another kobo from my pocket. Do you think money grows on trees?"

"Calm down!" My mother nudged me out of the way, wiped her forehead with a handkerchief. "It's enough," she pleaded.

"I will disown him — flesh and blood or not," my father said. "He will be dismissed from this house."

It was at this point, Dede Azubike stood up and left. Through the kitchen window, I watched Dede Azubike make his way to his room in the house at the back. This was the house my father had built for his parents, my Mama Ukwu and Papa Ukwu.

I felt sad for Dede Azubike. Whenever he was home, he would let me spend time with him. He taught me how to ride a bike, gave me my first sip of palm wine, and would often plait my hair as we listened to Bob Marley or Fela Kuti.

This weekend is the Mmanwu festival. I'm so excited at my first experience of a traditional masquerade. Exhilaration, fear and curiosity fill the pit of my stomach as we cross Omoba market square. Dede Azubike leads me beyond a rusty iron-wrought statue of a farmer and a bull. We move through a bustling thoroughfare and find ourselves trailing behind a parade of men dressed up as ancestral spirits, wearing red trousers, straw bodices and red masks. The air is thick with the fragrance of barbecued chicken and beef, roasted corn and steaming ugba in palm oil. In the distance, the incessant honking of car horns, bleating goats and cackling hens.

I hold Dede Azubike's hand tight. Looking up at him, he smiles — his lopsided grin flashes a set of tobacco-stained teeth. In his signature whites, he looks semi-godlike under the glare of the sun.

"Chi-Chi," he says, "don't be afraid, nothing will happen to you with me." While he is still speaking, a masquerader — his mask, a grotesque dragon beast — jumps out and blocks our path. He rattles a tambourine loudly in our faces. I step behind my uncle. Dede Azubike yells something in Igbo, yanks me in the opposite direction. We are soon in the middle of another swelling crowd.

Now and again, we pause to take in the boisterous scenes. A dance troupe on a raised stage, tumble and jump and climb — a mix of acrobatics and dance steps. This group of masqueraders squat, kneel and stamp their feet in sequence to a beating drum. At times, they step forward, propelling machetes, and cause the crowd to scream and flee. At other times, they slide backwards or sideways. Fear and hilarity fill the atmosphere. Without warning, a tall dark troupe member blows a whistle, produces a basket. He jumps off the stage energetically, and rattles the basket from person to person. People toss in their kobos or Nairas, all the while conscious of his partners carrying buckets of water. A woman who refuses to give money finds out firsthand the consequence of not donating to their cause. She screams when an entire bucket of water is emptied on her head. When they move towards us, Dede Azubike picks up the pace and we half-walk and half-run away from the scene.

There are all manner of masqueraders in the local market area. Masqueraders on stilts, acrobatic masqueraders and fire-eating masqueraders. Suddenly, there is another piercing scream and people scatter, running away from a blackened masquerader splashing paint on anyone who gets in his way. Another masquerader, dressed in a crocodile head carved from wood, with a whip fastened around his waist, bellows an ugly laugh. His eyes meet mine. He brings a finger to his lips, before wagging the finger left, then right. Again, I sidle behind Dede Azubike, watch as the masquerader moves towards a group of gushing teenage girls wearing threaded hairstyles. My gaze trails some children following another masked group, dressed in bamboo outfits, with painted faces.

Dede Azubike and I are under an ube tree where a group of women, dressed in white blouses and purple wrappers, dance in a circle. Stepping in, and bowing — stepping back, they wave a white handkerchief in their right hands. Singing and chanting, beads of perspiration on foreheads, they resemble a church choir floating above the ground as a plume of dust rises around their slippered feet. I lean against Dede Azubike's squatted frame while he smokes a pipe. I inhale the woody, earthy scent, not sure if I like it or not. I'm mesmerised by the women's song as Dede Azubike translates for me.

Ibu Chukwu Onyedike

You are a powerful God

Ibu Chukwu Onye dinma

You are a good God

Ibu Alpha na Omega mo

You are the Alpha and Omega

Onye nbu na Onye Ikpazu

You are the first and the last

Suddenly, a fight breaks out between two boys — a slender boney boy and a taller muscular boy. A crowd gathers around the scuffle and laughter ripples.

“Nnamdi, are you losing the fight?” someone shouts.

“Big for nothing,” another says. “Look at that.”

“I-beg, leave the boy,” yet another says. More punches are thrown, and the two boys tumble to the ground in a tangle, rolling around like a deflated football. I squeeze Dede Azubike’s hand.

“Let’s go and get a drink,” Dede Azubike says. We make our way to a wooden shed, painted bright yellow. The signage: Blessings Shack. I smile. Every time we visit home, it always amuses me, the Bible verses and motivational memes scratched or painted on billboards, buildings and buses. *Discover your destiny. Be anxious about nothing. Expose the devil. God is good all the time.* On a panel under the small window of Blessings Shack: *Eat, pray, live.* Dede Azubike greets Mama Blessing, a round woman with a slight limp, with a hug.

“It’s been long,” she says, drawing back from him and wiping her eyes.

“My niece,” he says, glancing at my direction.

“Your international brother dey around?” she asks. “Tell me, what I go offer you?”

“Pammy and...” he looks at me, “what do you feel like?”

“Fanta,” I say. He gestures for me to take a seat on a stained blue plastic chair.

“How you dey?” he says, his attention back with Mama Blessing.

“As you see us,” she says. “Pammy and Fanta, make I go bring em.” She disappears behind beaded blinds. When she returns with the drinks, she’s not alone. A young woman follows her. Shapely and in a low-cut patterned dress, she runs straight to my uncle and wraps her arms around him.

“Kelechi, leave Azubike alone,” her mother says. As she slowly unwraps herself, I notice Dede Azubike give her a wink.

Ada walked for hours. Through boggy woodlands. Finally, she took a rest and sat for a while on a tree stump. She was thirsty, but she hadn’t reached the stream. Closing her eyes, she heard Idemili’s thin voice: “You must keep moving, get out of the forest before it gets dark.”

Ada got up, as an elderly couple arm-in-arm walked past her, followed by an elongated grey dog sniffing at every stone, twig and balled earth. It’s as if they hadn’t seen her. Ada watched them disappear into the blanket of green and brown. She carried on through the thick forest, walked for what seemed an age, until she came to a shabby shed nestled at the end of a line of trees, just beyond the stream. Ada made her way to the shed and walked round it. Under an osisi anunu ebe tree, a dead bird. Intact, lying on its back, nothing in its eye-sockets.

Idemili’s voice interrupted again. “The most sacred tree in Igbo land, the osisi anunu ebe (birds don’t perch) is a powerful tree. Feared and respected, it deals with evil. Nothing found underneath it can live.”

Ada placed rocks and stones around the dead bird, got up and knocked on the shed door. There didn’t seem to be anyone around.

She entered.

Inside: wooden walls, zinc ceiling and clay floor. A straw mat was rolled up in the corner. On the other side, beneath a small boarded up window, a flat plank on crates like a table. A large pot, a mortar, and an aluminium mug. Ada took a whiff. Palm wine. Beside the mug, a tobacco box. Ada walked the length of the room a few times. Another smell: kerosene. She turned and spotted the lantern under the boarded window. Peering through the gaps of the window, she saw a bird flying around and around, before it took off out of her eye line. She heard footsteps and before she could decide what to do, the door swung open.

A woman stood in the doorway.

They eyed each other.

Long necked with cropped copper hair, dressed in a long faded coat, bare-footed, with a looped nose piercing, she looked otherworldly. When she entered the room, in the thin sunlight, Ada noticed a black pelican tattooed on her neck.

“Why have you come?” the woman asked, her bright hazel-coloured eyes staring at Ada.

“Idemili said I had to find you.”

The woman moved across to the plank-table. Her movements, slow and unburied. She poured out some palm wine from a tall beaker, unrolled the mat, and sat cross-legged.

Silence enfolded the two for a while. Until Ada coughed and cleared her throat.

“Idemili and her trouble...” the woman said. She scratched the ridge of her nose, took another sip of her drink. “What’s your name?”

“Ada...”

“I’m known as Nwa Okpuru, the Black Pelican,” she said. “Well, now you’ve found me.”

Catherine Okoronkwo

Catherine Okoronkwo holds an MA with distinction and PhD in Creative Writing from Manchester Metropolitan University. Her collection of poetry, *Blood and Water*, is published by Waterloo Press (2020). *Black Pelican* is a memoir reflecting her Third Culture upbringing in the Middle East, Nigeria and the West.