

The Epidemic

Adeolu ran as fast as his legs could carry him as the news of the illness of his twin sons reached him. Fero, Adeolu's half-sister from a different father, had run to give him the message in his cave hideout, a two-mile distance from Adeolu's abode in the western part of the city. He ran past Muniru and Albert, Islam, and Christian converts, respectively, who had volunteered to help dispose of the dead, pushing wheelbarrows made from felled trees in which were littered dead bodies old, young, female, male, and naked. Their clothes were made from dead animal hides. The majority of the folks wore hides from dead rabbits, while the men and women of means wore hides from lions, leopards, wolves, sheep, horses, and other exotic animals. An industry existed for clothes made from animal hides, and Muniru and Albert own the two shops at opposite ends of the market where people purchase their clothing.

Adeolu ran quickly across the rows of mud houses on the outskirts of the city until he got to the rocky plains where houses were built with wood on trees and land in neat rows of shacks surrounding the marketplace. In the center is one of the king's many palaces where he holds and carries out judgments. The highly placed in the societies build their houses on land with an extension on trees and nearby topography.

Adeolu owned such a place west of the city's many mud and treehouse shacks. He sprinted across the rows of shacks through the middle

of the market, which was scantily populated as a result of the Igbonna disease that had plagued the town. His house was close to the freshwater spring where all the city dwellers came to get their daily water needs. His wife owned the tie and dye factory where the elites came to make colorful clothes from cotton materials for their celebrations and festival parties.

This part of town was filled with fishermen and merchants who came from other lands through the seas and made their landings with smaller boats. The eastern side of town was less populated; water was brought to them through an aqueduct that Adeolu helped design and build. It was where the real elites lived and was less populated. It was where the king's second palace was situated.

He ran quickly inside, with Fero in close pursuit. He saw his wife, Enitan, sitting on the floor wailing and in her hands were their twin boys' lifeless bodies. He fell down beside her, held the boys in his arms and shouted at the top of his voice, "Why?" The pain and misery reverberated in his words as they penetrated the stillness of the moonless night.

The noise attracted many of their neighbors, who consoled the family. Adeolu was a very handsome young man, nearly twenty-eight years old, standing six feet tall, with a square and even jaw. He was one of the few folks in town who was cleanly shaven. He found a mixture from squeezing the juice out of ginger and mixing it with ground pawpaw, one of the many ideas he planned to commercialize.

He looked up with tears in his eyes, standing his full six feet and dwarfing everyone in the room. He turned to Enitan and asked, “What happened? They were healthy when I left two nights ago.”

She replied with more wailing, “I don’t know! The gods gave them to me and now they have taken them with the plague they have visited upon us.”

Adeolu, clearly angry and agitated, shouted, “You must have fed them, clothed them, taken them somewhere!?! That was the question I asked. Woman, you must answer me. What did you do?”

He was sobbing and falling into her arms. Enitan stood up, leaving Adeolu lying on the floor and said, “We got them new clothes from Muniru. Fero had told us he was giving some incredible discounts; it was too good to let go.”

Adeolu continued to lay on the ground, sobbing, when Muniru and Albert came around and entered the compound where the people created a pathway for them. They took the children’s dead bodies outside, took off their clothes, dumped the bodies in the wheelbarrow, and were neatly folding the clothes and putting them into a hidden compartment on the side of the wheelbarrow when Adeolu appeared and said, “Where are you taking the bodies of my kids? Give them back to me. I will bury them myself.”

Muniru replied, “Were you not present when the king declared that the bodies and clothing of those that succumb to this plague be incinerated?”

“It is dangerous to keep such bodies in cemeteries and to keep the old clothes; one might even contract the disease if the clothes are kept around in the house,” Albert added.

An alarm went off in Adeolu’s head; this clothing angle was an angle he had not thought about previously, *What if more people are dying because they wore dead people’s clothes? What if there is a conspiracy between these two merchants and religious zealots to not burn these clothes and instead resell them back to the citizens of Idumagbo?* With those thoughts he kept quiet, looked at Muniru and then at Albert, and then let out another throbbing wail, thereby obfuscating the details his thoughts might have put on his facial expression.

Muniru, a diminutive, fifty-five-year-old Islamic cleric, had very long tribal marks on both sides of his face. His folks also had similar marks. He was afraid at first when he heard Adeolu’s remarks but relaxed when he saw Adeolu burst into another rant of wailing.

Albert, a bearded, twenty-nine-year-old Christian, was six feet tall, and an orphan was raised by Portuguese missionaries who had died of the disease.

“He said “my parents died of this disease too”.

Adeolu nodded and continued wailing.

He stood up, then went outside to meet Muniru who gave him a grim look.

He said “he is suspicious”

Muniru responded with a sneer as they wheeled their carts outside of the western part of the city onto tracks in front of the rows of shacks, where other people came in and dumped their dead into the wheel cart.

After they exited the city walls, Muniru and Albert laughed uproariously and were discussing what their share was going to be. Adeolu followed them soon afterwards surreptitiously and caught up with them a few hours later. He watched them from afar, pitied them when he saw what they were going through, carting all the bodies, and wheeling them along. None of the elites would volunteer any of their horses to pull the carts for them.

They got to the woodlands outside of the city walls, where they had been dumping and burning the bodies. They dumped all the bodies into the pit. Then they went and looked for tree branches, shrubs, and dry grasses to add as fuel to the ensuing fire. Muniru brought two flint stones out from his sack and simply rubbed them against one another. Promptly, the fire lit up.

Adeolu watched silently as the two continued performing their tasks in silence, never speaking a word to each other. It was as if they knew that someone might be eavesdropping.

Then suddenly, Muniru broke the silence. “You took more dead bodies than I did, which means you have more clothes than me.”

“No, I did not! We took exactly the same number of bodies. I kept count in my head, and we alternated the places where we picked up the bodies.”

A disgruntled and grumpy Muniru said, “You will have to count the pieces of clothing. I counted mine; there were fourteen. And I am sure you must have, like, twenty pieces with you.”

A clearly unsatisfied Albert pulled out all the pieces of clothing from the hidden compartment in the cart and counted fifteen pieces of cloth items before saying, “It is fifteen. Should we throw one into the fire to make it even?”

“Ah, please stop! No, don’t do that. I will take this fifteenth piece while you will take the next clothing item where our bounty is an uneven split.”

Adeolu then stepped out of the shadows and said, “So this is how the dead people’s clothes get recycled back into the economy.”

Muniru and Albert were taken aback. They ran for the nearest trees to their sacks, drawing swords.

Adeolu calmly said, “Drop your swords, because if I should take out mine, I will have to kill or incapacitate both of you. You know I am a skilled swordsman and can defeat you with my eyes closed.”

Muniru spoke first. “We do not get paid for doing these jobs; the king just assigned this dirty job to us by fiat. No one acknowledges or appreciates us.”

“Is that why you are recycling the disease-ridden clothes back into the populace so that you can enrich yourself?” Adeolu said angrily.

“No, I cleanse my own by sprinkling holy water on it, a mixture that my parents left for me. It has always worked magically for me. No disease can exist after I sprinkle it with my holy water,” said Albert.

“And I say the Shafa’ah multiple times on the clothes, interceding for the new owners of the clothes and inviting the Malaikahs to preserve the new owners of the clothing from contracting this same disease.”

“Indeed; and that is why the number of deaths seems to have multiplied lately—and you have suddenly come into a lot of money?” Adeolu asked.

Muniru, speaking in his low, squeaking voice said, “You cannot link the deaths to these recycled clothes.”

“I don’t have to. All I need to show is that you profited from the deaths of their sons, fathers, daughters, and mothers,” Adeolu replied.

“And then what?” Albert said in a roaring voice to an unperturbed Adeolu. “You will be burned alive!”

“The punishment given to those who practice ritual killings,” Muniru said, looking at his partner in crime. “We did not kill anyone; we even helped to clean up the deaths!”

“You profited from their misery and you disobeyed the king. The people want to see a spectacle that will purge them of their miseries; don’t be that burning spectacle,” Adeolu said.

Adeolu brought out a bag and asked that they dump all the clothing items into it. He watched as they both obliged and dumped all the clothing into Adeolu’s bag. Adeolu then said, “I will go and test these items, if they are

free of disease, I will give them back to you and you can do as you wish. If they are not, and I can prove that they led to other deaths, I will have to let the king and the people know.” He then calmly asked them to leave.

After they left, Adeolu hurled the sack onto his shoulder and took a different path back to his caves, a section of pristine caves uninhabited, hard to get to, where he did all his work.

At the first sound of the crow, just as the dawn began to break and the first vestiges of sunlight started to appear on the horizon, Adeolu crept out of the cave where he had been hibernating for the last few days. The concoction he had made and provided to the new set of rats had not worked as he envisaged, and all the rats had died off one by one. He would have to go and lay new traps for his new set of rats as another idea of the kind of leaves, herbs, and tree bark he could mix together to generate the right medicine to treat the Igbonna disease that had gripped the towns and surrounding cities in recent months.

It had been over four moons now that they had been searching for a cure to the Igbonna. He looked across at the bamboo shelves containing almost a thousand gourdlets of various concoctions he had mixed over time to try to rid the cities of the epidemic currently ravaging them. He looked at almost a hundred amulets he had gotten made with the help of Wura, the prominent and revered witch in the town. The amulets contained ground leaves, ground bones of exotic animals, feathers of different birds, and some metaphysical powers that were invoked by speaking esoteric commands, the language of the gods in which only Wura and a few of her witches understood.

These amulets could ward off any bad spirit causing illnesses and other people's witchcraft.

At the thought of Wura, his mind drifted for a while as he reminisced on their intense and wild lovemaking some few weeks ago before he quickly snapped himself out of it and urged his spirit to concentrate by whispering a few spiritual commands, "Behold, it has been said that the tornado that blows against the palm tree can only succeed in making it bend, but it will not break nor move it; I command my heart not to waiver henceforth," before bursting into such uncontrollable laughter that he became teary-eyed.

After the fits of laughter subsided, his thoughts went back to the previous week when the king of Idumagbo, King Abiodun, had sent for all the leading herbalists, medicine men, babalawos, mediums, witches, and wizards in the land and outer lands to come and diagnose, analyze, and tell him what is going on in Idumagbo. Most of the lands around the coast of West Africa were inhabited by nomadic hunter-gatherers who moved around in bands of fifty to a hundred men, women, and children. In these same lands lie the city of Idumagbo, a hundred miles from the coast of present-day Lagos, inhabited by ten thousand people of all races; Europeans, Africans, Mongols, and Arabians, and several African hunter-gathering tribes engaging in fair trade and practicing religious tolerance.