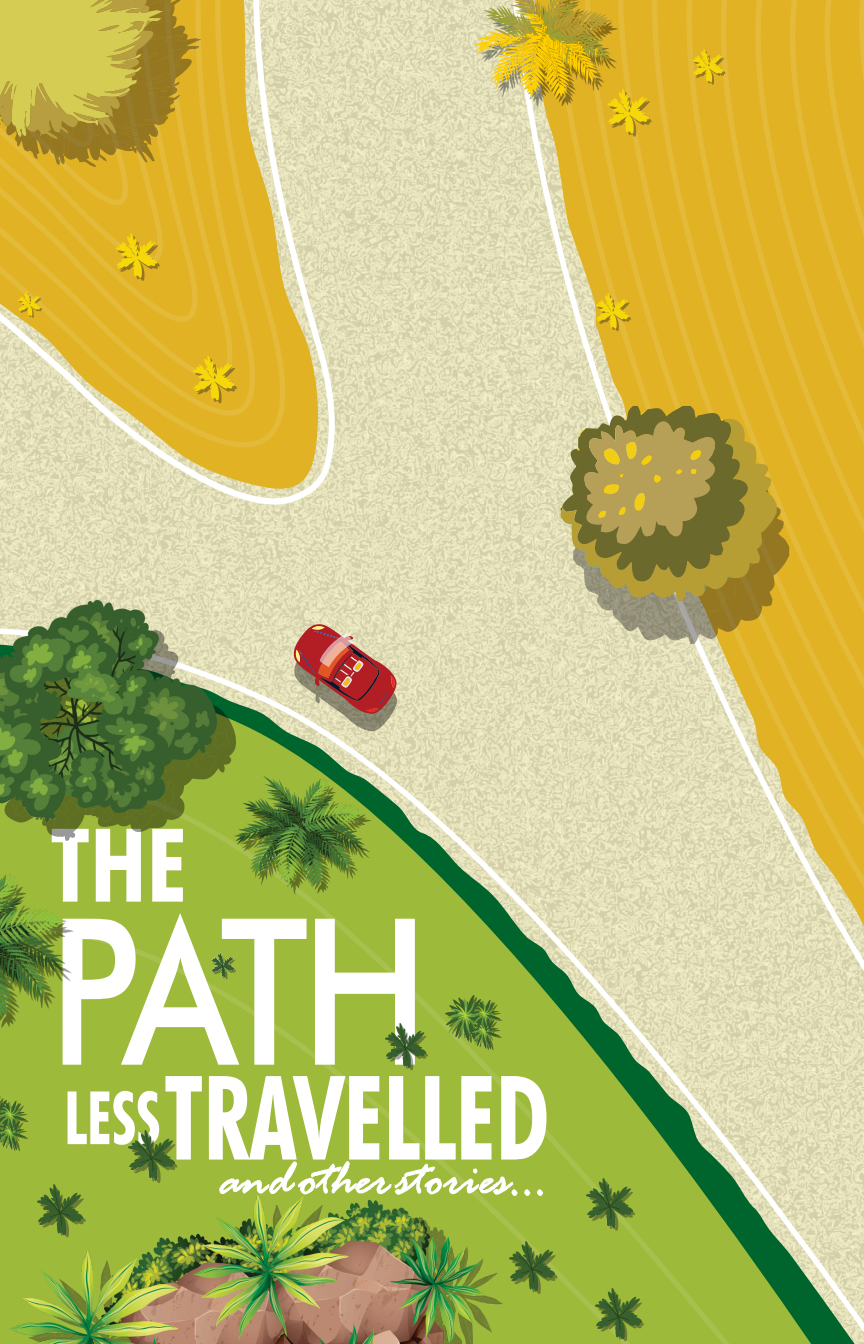
THE
PATH
LESS TRAVELLED
and other stories...

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SEDA
words that make us!

ACKNOWLDEGEMENT

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For every African child who dares to dream;

You can!

PREFACE

The **Storytelling for Education and Development in Africa (SEDA)** Initiative aims to revive the culture of storytelling and reading amongst young Africans. Its unofficial pilot collaborated with TEEC Africa to bring together over 170 volunteers, school prefects, teachers from different secondary schools in Abuja, Nigeria for a leadership event, while its official pilot hopes to present young people with narratives written by fellow young people to reflect the kinds of stories that need to be told. This book you hold is the product of SEDA's commitment to empowering young Africans to reclaim their narratives, to unapologetically reflect their distinct identities and to boldly represent their cultures.

It is written for the young (at heart) African, you do not need permission to soar. Please achieve all you set out to achieve and more!

Dream Big, Achieve Bigger!

And in all you do, never forget the place that gave you life, the place you first called home.

As you read through, dream of, and join us to work towards a world were fairness and justice rules, an Africa where we stand with our peers on our own terms and confident in our uniqueness.

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SEDA

words that make us!

LEGENDS NEVER LIE

AROH CHIZITELU, 16

I always thought the stories told under the moonlight while the firewood burned slowly to ashes were all made up to develop our imagination and scare us enough to keep us inside at night. Who could have ever thought it could all be true? As a child, I listened wide-eyed while my mother told my brother Ntiike and me about the village spirits, *mami wata*, masquerades, and other unnerving aspects of life in our Igbo village.

"Chakpi."

"Woo."

"Chakpi."

"Woo."

"O nwere akuko m ga a koro unu."

"Koro anyi ka obi di anyi uto."

"O nwere otu mgbe…"

It went like this every night, her voice weaving tales that

seemed to dance *atilogwu* with the flickering flames. She spoke of *Aquamara*, the sacred river spirit who lured her prey by pretending to drown in the middle of the river. She warned us about *Nwaanyi Mmuo*, the spirit woman who haunted the *udara* tree at the edge of our village. Her stories were meant to teach us, to protect us, but as children, we only half-believed them.

They were thrilling, yes, but they felt distant, like invisible barriers kept them at bay. Our days were filled with games and laughter. Ntiike and I ran barefoot through the dusty paths of our village, chasing each other or playing *ikpo oga*. Our voices, mixed with those of other children, always floated through the air together with the rhythmic pounding of the mortar and pestle as women prepared meals. We lived in a world where danger felt like a faraway thing, something that only existed in Mama's stories.

But Mama's warnings were constant. “Never go near that *udara* tree once it gets dark,” she would say, her voice

firm but tinged with fear. I obeyed because the fear instilled in me by her words clung to me like a shadow. But Ntiike was different. His name meant "one who does not listen," and he lived up to it every single day. He resented mama's fearfulness and craved adventure.

"Ahh Obioma, *i na atu ezigbote ujo*," he would tease me whenever I tried to stop him from doing something reckless. "You're too scared of everything!" Then he'd laugh, a carefree sound that both annoyed and endeared him to me.

Mama often caught him lingering near the *udara* tree at sunset. She would drag him back by his ear, her face pale with worry. "Do you want to leave me like your father did?" she'd cry, tears streaming down her face. But Ntiike only shrugged her off with a grin. To him, Mama was overly dramatic; her tears were just part of her nature.

Our father, Okonkwo, had been dead for years. But no one in the village would let us forget him. He was a drunkard, a man who spent more time under palm trees than under a

roof. He had fallen from one too many trees while trying to tap wine and had left us when I was barely old enough to remember his face. The villagers mocked him endlessly for his weakness, but to Ntiike and me, his absence was a wound we carried silently.

Without him, Mama bore the weight of everything, raising us, feeding us, protecting us from dangers both real and imagined. She was strong in ways I couldn't yet understand but also fragile in ways that scared me. The day everything changed began like any other.

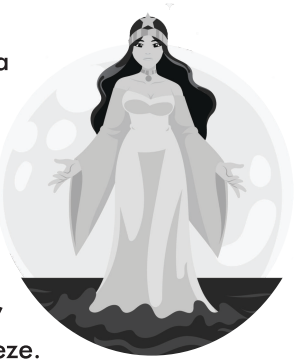
Mama had gone to buy *ugu* leaves from the market while I stayed home nursing a terrible cough, *Ukwara Nta*, tuberculosis as they called it in school. My body felt heavy with fever as I lay on a mat in our *obi,* watching Ntiike through half-closed eyes.

He was sitting under the *udara* tree again.

The sun had begun its descent towards the horizon,

painting the sky with hues of orange, blue, pink, and purple. Shadows stretched long across the ground as darkness crept closer. I tried to call out to him, to drag him back into the safety of our compound, but my voice caught in my throat.

And then… I saw it.



At first, it was just a shimmer, a distortion in the air near the tree's base. But soon it took shape: a figure cloaked in white with long flowing hair that seemed to move like fresh water, even though there was no breeze. *Nwaanyi Mmuo* - the evil spirit from Mama's stories - stood before my brother.

Her presence was suffocating. The air grew heavy around me; even breathing felt like a struggle. My fevered mind screamed at me to look away or run for help, but I couldn't move or speak. All I could do was lie rigidly and watch as Ntiike began talking to her, his voice

calm as if he were speaking to an old friend.

She smiled at him, a smile that sent chills running down my spine, and reached out a hand toward him. He hesitated for only a moment before taking it. Then, he vanished.

One moment he was there beneath the tree; the next he was gone, as though swallowed by its shadowy branches. When Mama returned and found my cold body sobbing uncontrollably on the floor, she didn't need an explanation. She knew what had happened before I could even form words.

We searched for days, calling his name until our voices gave out, but there was no trace of him anywhere in or around the village. The elders shook their heads solemnly when we told them what I'd seen.

"The *udara* tree is sacred," they said bluntly. "It is not meant for humans after dark. Next time, train your son not to be useless like his father."

Mama cried bitterly every night for weeks after that, her sobs rippling through our empty home like a haunting

reminder of our losses. For me... the guilt was unbearable. If only I'd tried harder to shout, or if I had done something, anything, to stop him from speaking to her.

But it was too late now. Weeks turned into months, and life without Ntiike became our dreaded reality. We hardly bathed or ate, and the games and laughter from our compound abruptly stopped. Even the other children avoided playing near our compound, as though his disappearance had cursed us in some way.

The *udara* tree became more of a legend, a place whispered about but never approached. Some villagers claimed they saw lights flickering near its base at night; others swore they heard laughter echoing through its branches, the laughter of a boy who had once defied warnings and paid the ultimate price for his curiosity. As for me, I grew up quickly after that day. The carefree child who played *ncho* and teased her brother was gone,

replaced by someone older, someone who now understood that legends are not just stories told around flickering flames.

<<< THE END >>>

MUSEUM TALES

UGWU CHIMDIUTO, 14

Mr. Afam's eyes beamed with pleasure as he looked at his students. He knew his students were eager to uncover the mysteries that lay inside the National Museum of Unity, Enugu. Often, he came to class as a history teacher reeling out his experiences he had after visiting the museum on many occasions.

"The National Museum is a treasure trove of our cultural heritage. We're already planning a visit," said Mr. Afam.

As he narrated his experiences, he recalled what he had first seen the day he visited: a spectacle of masks that seemed to appear alive that was handsomely carved by the sculptor. The wooden faces had different shades and colours. He recalled seeing Eze mask which according the museum docents,

were symbols of strength and leadership for the Igbos. Next to it was the Agbogho mask, with her breasts noticeably pointed out. Mr. Afam heard the docent say, "This mask represents beauty and femininity to us, Igbos." He recalled they drifted yet to another gallery where they were surrounded by iconic symbols of Igbo cultural heritage. He saw Ikenga, a wooden idol where it stood uprightly, proudly. When the docent said to Mr. Afam: "Its horns and staff represent strength and masculinity," he made towards it and felt it gently. Many more things he had seen, including *Ijele*, the masquerade.

Each time he came to teach his students, he was never lacking those experiences, those curious tales of museum. His students enjoyed stories of those museum tales. And they longed to be there too. The students' faces reflected their eagerness, with eyebrows furrowed in surprise, and in excitement. They made up their minds that the movement to the National Museum would make

the term better than the rest spent. In the midst of Mr. Afam's museum tales, his students chatted between themselves, speculating about the whole thing. The moment the teacher had said,

"The day we'll go there, young minds like you people will have thrilling adventures.

A student named Uche asked him, "What's the name of the Museum sir?"

"I said National Museum of Unity, Enugu; I mentioned it in one of our previous classes."

Mr. Afam beamed his face once more, seeing his students' enthusiasm soaring higher. He knew that such news about visiting the museum was to the students, like a spark that would ignite a lasting passion for learning in them. He had said that what characterizes the twenty-first century learning was that the students have to see, touch and do. So he was serious about taking his students to the museum for them to see those things he always talked about.

"What ancient mysteries are we expected to see when we

get there?" asked a student.

"I've said it before now. The place has four sections and you shall be taken from a section to another. But be rest assured to see bronze artifacts from Igbo Ukwu, terracotta figures, Igbo masks, Ikenga, wooden sculptures, music instruments, ceramic, pottery, etc.," answered Mr. Afam.

"Are we expected to see real-life dinosaurs?" dropped another student who seated himself at the back of the class, raising his hand and question in a chorus manner.

"An Igbo proverb says that a palm-wine tapper doesn't say everything he had seen while he was on the palm tree. When we get there, you'll be shown all that...," said the teacher to the student who had answered, thereby leaving behind the reason for them to hunger for more.

When the teacher had gone out of the class, the whole class got filled with chattering sounds, laughter,

enthusiastic discussions. Otito, one of the students, stood gesticulating with his hands as he demonstrated how he would feel about the Ikenga at the museum, or perhaps, how he would struggle first on the bus on D-Day. The noise level in the class continued to rise so that it became difficult for them to hear what they were saying. The sounds of the chairs and lockers were heard scraping against the tiles. A few of them clustered by the window, calling loudly on their friends outside. It was during break.

In the field, other students were playing. One of the students, Uche, sat in a corner of the field. He was excited to learn he would be going on the trip and wondered what he would see there. He wondered for a while before standing up to join others as they played.

Although it was in the rainy season, the sun was already at the centre, casting brightly on the playground as if it were the centre of his business. The sun was pouring down his cozy glow on those students. The air

was warm already, but it seemed that the students never cared. Everywhere was filled with the sound of laughter in their bid to stretch their muscles. They clustered each according to their interest in the various games in provision. Some played volleyball, some were after handball, others after badminton, but most boys found themselves inside the football pitch, balling and howling loudly, especially when a straight hit went successfully into the post, leaving the goal-keeper in a self-doubt.

After the break time was over, they filed into their classroom like a herd of cattle returning to their camp after pasturing. But they were calm now. Mr. Afam had told them that the school offered to give a school bus for the journey in three days' time. They had begun to plan for the tour. Jotters, pens, pencils, sketchbooks, school camera and audio recorder were set ready waiting. They knew they were going to capture visual details, ask questions, draw or sketch artifacts there before and after the tour.

As the day came, most of the students: Gerald, Ifechukwu, Uche, Obinna, Collins, Offorma, etc. stuffed

their backpacks with snacks and their bottles of water. They were yet to file out to where the school bus was packed, but Obinna and Collins were already in a heated argument while other watched silently.

"Mr. Afam had said that I'll stay with him in the front car," Obinna said. Others laughed, including Offonma.

"You tortoise, when did he say so? You always want to play smart. He hasn't told you anything, " Collins argued.

Now, Mr. Afam's voice echoed from afar, but approaching at the same time. Shortly, he appeared holding to his left hand a permission slip from the school Vice Principal. Then to his right hand he clasped students' roster. With him were two teachers: Miss Jane and Mr. Paul Ideani, who held his smartphone, school camera and worksheets. The sheets the teachers handed to each student saying,

"Record your experiences as we get there."

Very close to the bus was the bus driver standing. On seeing the students, he helped open the door, and it creaked open after he gave it three successive hits. In the morning, on the 12th of June, 2025, layers of clouds sealed the sky already as if it was about to rain. The air became cool. The students were in their knitted jackets, cardigan to ward off the cool, gentle morning breeze that carried with it visible morning dews. They filed into the bus one after the other as Mr Afam called their names. After all the arguments, none of the boys sat in the front because other teachers were there. Uche avoided the whole noise and went to the last seat to rest his head for the journey ahead.

"I hope it won't rain," said Miss Jane.

"I hope so too," said Mr. Afam. He couldn't explain what had come over the heaven that morning, that moment they were to visit the museum. He had noticed that the clouds held moisture, creating, therefore, a sense of calmness. Perhaps, it was indeed a moment of

contemplation for both the teachers and the students.

Other students who weren't for the journey watched the Grade 9 students as they waited to board the bus. A line was already formed by the students, a string of lines that stretched from the security post to where the bus had come to a gentle stop. The students climbed the bus one by one, and settled on the seats. A cool breeze wafted into the bus through the window.

Shortly, Mr. Afam called the last name on the list, and the driver shut the door before the engine came alive. As the driver pulled out of the place he had parked, noises from the students came again like the ones of a flock of geese. The bus was tumbling down the distance path, leading the wheel here and there, swerving left and right to bypass potholes until they set onto the road that would lead them towards 82 Division. The students' eyes were busy on the views passing as they could see through the bus windows. The views outside the windows changed from loads of hawkers to houses, and to buyers and sellers.

There was traffic at a point. The students, through the

windows, could see how keke, mini-buses, trailers, cars, and dispatch riders knotted the road. It was like a stop-and-go motion. The students and their teachers observed that their bus would dart a bit forward, and then to a sharp halt, especially when the driver slammed the brake.

"Take it easy,' cried Mr. Paul to the driver who kept mute.

"The traffic is as a result of the trailer that broke down in front of us. It's been there for a week now. I see it each time I come to school," said Miss Jane.

"Road users now ply one lane," said Mr. Afam.

"Exactly," contributed Mr. Paul.

The whole delay seemed to be nothing to the students as their chatters wore on. A wave of anger threatened to consume the motorists, as they were held down for more than an hour in such a stop-and-go manner. Then it turned to a slow steady chase. All set creeping along gently until they accelerated to the relief of everyone

"We're close by," dropped Offonma. He knew the road.

Is that true?" a few students asked their teachers for confirmation.

"It's true," replied Mr. Paul.

In those students was a fresh sense of excitement mixed with anticipation. Buzz of energy came over them as palm-oil does on hot yams. At the gate, the signpost read: National Museum of Unity, Enugu. Into the compound, they saw a lengthy driveway stretching very far beyond the gate where they passed. The long path, as the students observed through the windows, was hedged by flowers. Besides, there were standing sculptures. Of course what they saw was just a tantalizing glimpse of what was lying ahead uncovered, which built anticipation.

The driver halted the bus in an open place. Mr. Afam said to the students,

"I'll be right back." He climbed down the bus with the two other teachers, and they walked straight to two men who sat in front of the museum, discussing. Shortly, the teachers were seen with a book provided by the museum

staff, and they entered information about them: the name of their school, the number of students, the number of teachers, and the purpose for coming.

The students were brought in front of the museum now. And standing before them was a staff member of the museum. He was a tall dark man whose tummy protruded. The way he spoke presented him as a strong and confident fellow.

"Good morning, everyone," he greeted.

"Good morning, Sir," reciprocated the students. They were quiet by then.

"Good!" Returned the museum staff, "welcome to the National Museum of Unity, Enugu State. My name is Mr. Ben Okoro. The staff here are super excited to have young minds like you. And I'll serve as your guide today as we show you our exhibits and rich collections with you. Before we get started, I want to explain to you all about our rules here. First, make sure you walk in a group and obey the directions to our exhibits. Secondly, please, this is more important: do not touch the artifacts, keep down

your voice for this is not Ogbete Market. The museum staff are here and ready to answer your questions. Once again, we're happy to have you, and we're in full expectation to hear your thoughts of this place. Also, keep your bags here so that we do not eat inside the museum."

The students entered the museum and were surprised by its grandeur, which sparked more interest in them. A sense of curiosity came upon them the more. Collins lost control of himself which was noticed when he shouted,

"Hei, see *Ijele* masquerade."

"Zip up," Mr. Afam hauled at him, meaning that he should close his lips. "Observe with your eyes, ask questions when you want, and work with your jotter."

Many of them gasped in amazement, which was showing as their eyes widened in wonders, and were eager to see everything. Now they had passed the reception desk. Mr.

Ben's voice came again,

"Here we have four sections: the one for Nigerian artifacts, the one for agricultural tools, the one for masquerades and finally, the one that displays the history of the development of Enugu, the Coal City." Behind him was a large map of Nigeria which bore the stretches of various regions.

First, Mr. Ben led them to the gallery that displayed Nigerian artifacts. Here they saw Igbo Ukwu excavations, stone beads, staff ornaments, pendants, crowns, ritual vessels, etc.

"Are these figurines made by Africans? They look so beautiful!" asked one of the students, Mr. Ben.

"Yes, of course," answered Mr. Ben. "These masks and many more here show the skill and craftsmanship of our forefathers. You might not see the likes anywhere else in the world." Here they saw pottery and beautifully

made ceramics bearing designs and patterns around them. He made woven textiles and woven mats, garments, musical instruments like flutes, different cooking utensils they hadn't seen. He pointed, following his explanations, to artefact showing Igbo communities and Igbo legends and their compounds, shrines, altars, spiritual objects that carried spiritual meanings. Ikenga was there! At the sight of the Ikenga, the students marvelled at the wood carved: a seated-male-carve wood with horns. Mr. Ben explained,

"It's a symbol of our achievement, strength and our success in the past."

The students were jotting things down; each was with a pen and jotter. Their teachers held an audio recorder for their conversations with Mr. Ben.

They were moved to another gallery the place where agricultural tools were placed. They saw hoes, axes, a local basket, a big, long hollow mortar for pounding and processing of palm-oil, etc. Each section, students took some pictures for evidence. On the walls were paintings and pictures of Kings and Queens, ancient kingdoms like

Nri Kingdom and Benin Kingdom.

"Who are these?" Uche asked Mr. Ben. He had seen very bold men in large portraits shown on the wall.

"They are Nigerian freedom fighters who struggled for our independence. Their names are: Nnamdi Azikiwe and Obafemi Awolowo, and many more. See them here," Mr. Ben kept showing and explaining. The students kept jotting and the exhibition wore on. He equally showed them what depicted how the British ruled Nigeria; Nigeria's journey to self-rule.

"Let's move to the third section where we shall see masquerades and masks," said Mr. Ben. They followed him. "This one is *Ijele*. How many of you have seen it before?" Very few of them put up their hands. "Ok," he continued, "it's for entertainment during the new yam festival, and for some ceremonies. But it has many functions apart from the fact that it reflects our beingness, it

shows political reaffirmation before our kings and Chiefs, etc. But look at this one," he pointed at another masquerade. "This serves a judicial role of settling conflicts amongst us even before the whites brought us lawyers. You do not pay money to settle cases as the lawyers and judges do in Nigeria. They do their work freely."

Uche looked at all the masks they could see then asked, "Should these masks be returned to our villages?"

Mr Ben hesitated for a moment before brightly replying, "Well, they would be as soon as they villages are well prepared to receive them!"

"Why?" Uche asked again.

Mr Ben looked at Uche carefully, "Why, what?"

"Why do the villages have to be ready for them first?"

Now there was silence everywhere as all the students including the teachers stared at Mr Ben. Mr Ben thought again before answering, "Because they cannot just send off all these materials to the villagers to manhandle

them. These are years of history. If the villages where they came from are not prepared to preserve them, they cannot be sent back as losing them would mean losing our history."

It made sense and had everybody nodding until Uche asked again, "But is it our history or their history?"

Mr Afam interrupted. "That is enough, Uche. Allow others to ask their questions, too."

Mr Ben looked relieved, but when they looked around, nobody had any question. They all moved on and had other discussions from here to there.

Finally, they came to the last section: history of Enugu Museum, which Mr. Ben explained briefly about the coal, the first secondary school in the city, the first hotel in the city, etc. At the end, they filed out of the museum fully loaded with knowledge like a barrel gun loaded with gun powders waiting to explode. But before they signed off the museum, another museum staff addressed them:

"You children of today knew little, very little. You never knew that all these are existing because of the time we're

into. Well, I like it when children like you come here to see how far our forefathers went too far in creating these artefacts that define us. They were creative as God gifted them. Some of the things you see here can't be seen in any other places in the world. We're looking up to you for what you've to invent for future use. Let me not talk too much because you look tired already. Read your books, knowledge is power."

They left and found where the parked school bus was. The driver had gone to sleep, but was woken up. They filed into the bus and the driver drove off. By that hour, no traffic was on the way. It was around midday, the sun was up his game. The pregnant clouds couldn't be seen again, they gained their way to the sun. Shortly, the school gate was open, and they drove in, climbing down and moving straight to their classroom. They enjoyed it, but longed to go again and again!

Uche looked at direction of the museum, vowing to one day research about any artefacts from his village and

what history it told.

<<< THE END >>>

THE PATH LESS TRAVELLED

TOCHUKWU PRAISE, 16

Udendu developed at his own pace and began crawling after seven months. His tiny fingers would often grasp the glass table at the centre, and from there to the ageing couches that were gradually losing their colours as a result of passage of time. His parents noticed that Udendu could move his arms and legs, but was not that strong enough to coordinate his movement to step forward unsupported. So, his mother, Sophia who was always with him aided him with her own tender hands, cradling her crawling child, giving motherly support to those wobbly legs as they set for a steady fit.

She enjoyed the slow motion, the baby's eyes shone with Deep excitement. She loved to say,

"Ude, you can walk better.

Come. Come. Come." She'd say, stepping backwards, expecting the little toddler tottering towards her, energetically. It gave her joy!

"Ba-ba-ba! Ya-ya-ya!" Udendu would gibber his unintelligible words, stepping forward as the mother bade him, flapping his arms. Their playful moment was commending.

Udendu's father, Matthew Obi was a church teacher, a preacher and also a banker. He shepherded The Full Gospel Church in Rema Street, behind their house. His church stood close to a busy bustling bar that always blared traditional songs of Mike Ejeagha, *Ka Esi Le Onye Isi Oche*, and those of Osadebe amid the loud laughter of bar attendants. These were the laughter of customers who had become regulars since the local bar also provided them with local delicacies like oha soup, nkwobi, abacha, ukwa, and palm-wine. Even as worshippers converged in worship, they were often greeted by the unpleasant scent of wafting cigarette smoke coming from the bar attendants who never seemed to be converted to Christ. Every Sunday

morning, the blaring music from the bar and the loud music from the church were jarring almost like cymbals in clash that left a bitter taste. The residents around always had annoyed faces as the noise took away their peace and sanity.

Matthew Obi enjoyed the energy in Udendu, his only son. Many years after he had married Sophia, they had lived without a child. An Igbo proverb says; the long-awaited child is the beloved child of the parent. When Udendu was born, Matthew Obi bustled harder in his church teachings, shared testimonies and encouraged the congregation because "Hope deferred is not denied."

But the laugh in his family did not last long and Matthew Obi and his wife soon faced bleak times. The cloud became pregnant as sunshine went behind the clouds giving the earth a darker shadow. Their joy was about to be deflated.

One afternoon, Udendu was alone in the parlour, while his mother was baking in the kitchen. He had crawled unto the arm of a sofa in the parlour, and aiming to hold a bracket of a bookshelf standing beside the sofa, fell

with his shoulder on the floor. He yelled out in pain! His mother rushed into the parlour and saw him in tears. She hugged him to herself, massaging the shoulder as well as she could before rocking him to sleep.

She hoped his sleep would take some of the pain away but when Udendu woke up later in the evening, his arm had swollen up like an anthill. He came awake crying from the pain. The swelling continued without stopping. Matthew Obi was back home by then and together they rushed Udendu to the hospital for treatments where several x-rays were conducted and their results came back showing that nothing was wrong with the shoulder joints.

Refusing to accept the result as their son groaned in pain, Matthew Obi and his wife moved to a different hospital, and then to another, and then to another, each hospital bigger, and better equipped than the last. But the x-rays all came back the same. Apart from a few bruises and the sprain, nothing was wrong with Udendu's arm. And yet,

the boy groaned.

His father was thrown into worry! It was hard watching his only son crying and his right arm swelling. Matthew Obi looked dull as if what sparked his life earlier had been doused. He prayed fervently until his words became like incoherent mixture of empty murmurs. Sophia wept in tears, and would not be consoled. Her only son, her joy! The parents spent their time praying for Udendu so that prayers now seemed more of a duty assigned to them, instead of a heartfelt manifestation of devotion. Despite taking all the prescriptions given to him by several doctors, Udendu's pain persisted and even grew severe. His parents changed his doctor as they moved from one hospital to another. Still, there was no life coming into their little son.

It is said that a man does not advise a fellow on how to climb a mountain when he is still in the valley. Each time Matthew Obi mounted the pulpit to preach, he was always hesitant to speak of healing miracle. His words at times, were jumble of clashing feelings as to whether to preach to his church members about the healing miracle,

about the healing power in the blood shed on the Tree of Life, when his sick son has not received the healing miracle from a father who was an arrow of Christ. However, he cast away the malevolent spirit that whispered doubt in him to dampen his faith in Christ over his son. That day, in the church, Matthew Obi preached about Jairus daughter, urging the brethren to open Matthew 9: 18-26.

"Praise the Lord!" said sister Jane, when she had opened the book of life.

"Alleluia," answered the brethren.

Sister Jane rumbled through the story of the synagogue leader and his encounter with the carpenter's son: how he begged Jesus to heal his daughter who was 12-year-old. And Jesus restored the broken body from her dying state. The topic that day was on Healing Miracle. Matthew Obi took the sermon that day. He stood there, a beacon of hope and faith scanning the church with his

eyes like depths of discerning wisdom. He preached, gesturing with his hands, referencing Jesus' healing powers: His encounter with the leper, the centurion's servant, the paralyzed man, the woman with the issue of blood, the blind, the withered hand and many more miracles. At the end, he made prayers for his son, brethren and the service ended.

Matthew had travelled to the village for the wedding ceremony of his elder brother's daughter. He missed seeing his brother, *Dee* Ibe, and had reluctantly agreed to grace the occasion. *Dee* Ibe, as Matthew grew up calling him, was not only older than him with 10 years, he had married quite early and his first daughter was now grown. He had insisted on a traditional marriage and had invited Matthew to celebrate with them. On the evening of his arrival, smokes could be seen drifting hazily from several three-stone hearths in the village where mothers prepared dinner for their households. Plans for the wedding were underway too.

The branches of palm trees in the verandah etched against the other, mango and orange trees rustled gently

in the evening breeze almost releasing melodic sounds in the air. After settling down and exchanging pleasantries with members of the household, Matthew took a chair to the verandah and sat down as he tried so hard to hide his pain.

An elderly man walked to the compound looking for *Dee* Ibe. Matthew directed him to the entrance of the house and heard him mutter "Peace be unto this house," before walking inside. Matthew shook his head and wondered why he had come to the village despite everything happening with his son. It did not help also that he and his brother believed different things and would almost end in one big disagreement before the ceremony was over. *Dee* Ibe was never a convert and never dreamt of becoming one day, like his brother He still lived life according to the traditional ways. He also said, "We'll not pour sands on the old paths that give us true identity." He liked to pray to the sun with kola-nut, alligator pepper and dry gin, calling the sun, Eye of *Okike*. He had been Matthew's closest sibling but ever since Matthew converted, they parted ways in the things of faith though

remaining connected in brotherhood.

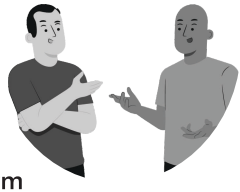
The marriage was a success. Matthew Obi saw the traditional marriage displayed: how the bride received *iko* of palm-wine from her father, *Dee* Ibe, to show him and the kindred her husband. In her cultural attire, she took a traditional dance as the music came, searching for her husband. When she had found him, she knelt, sipped from the *iko* of palm-wine, gave the rest to her husband who finished the dreg and put money inside the *iko*. Both danced to *Dee* Ibe for marital blessing of a father, who legitimized the marriage. Matthew Obi watched that tradition displayed without concern for white wedding, which, to him, was not a complete marriage. He knew his parents had married exactly that way in many dead years. He was a product of unholy marriage, he thought.

After the traditional marriage was done in three days, the two brothers sat in discussion. Of course, *Dee* Ibe had been told of Udendu's present state, and waited for his brother to drive home for a talk. At home, they sat to talk with some up wine set before them

"What fell on Udendu? You told me over the

phone," *Dee* Ibe struck a conversation.

"It baffles human understanding but not God's," Matthew Obi declared. "I was in a meeting when I got a call from my wife saying Udendu fell and his shoulder bone shifted. Since then, the whole arm keeps swelling but nobody knows what is going on. X-rays are not showing anything. Devil is a Liar!" He explained to *Dee* Ibe how they had prayed, and the movements from one hospital to another, but to no avail. *Dee* Ibe gnashed!



"What steps have you taken? Have you seen a *dibia* to try his local ways?" *Dee* Ibe asked many questions at once.

"You already know I do not believe *dibia*s. It's against my belief," Matthew Obi said.

"No! I meant *dibia osi* - the bone setter. We call them *dibia osi*. They set dislocated bones through their

knowledge of herbs," *Dee* Ibe insisted.

"I do not just have faith in traditional medicine. I'd rather continue to see the doctors for proper medical examination, and pray to God for healing miracle until my prayers are answered," Matthew Obi said.

Dee Ibe gnashed again. "If you've prayed and seen the doctors and Udendu isn't better, let's try *dibia osi*," *Dee* Ibe said straight away. "When sickness defies medication, it'd be a spiritual thing. Let's see *dibia osi*, the bone setter in a nearby village for questions," Ibe continued. He knew that Obi saw him as a heathen, but he was used to the other man's definition of things.

"*Dee* Ibe," Matthew Obi called, dropping a smile by the corner of his mouth, "you seek a word from my mouth. Okay? And you won't find it. You knew it's against my belief to seek the path of darkness. God will do it at the right time."

"You've prayed and taken him to the hospital," *Dee* Ibe continued, "But no changes. Why not watch masquerade from the other side? A man doesn't watch a

masquerade from one side, he moves rounds for a total view."

They were drinking. *Dee* Ibe took his up wine and Matthew Obi took a bottle of soft drink. As he sipped his drink, he tilted his head backwards, the cool drink sweetened his soft palate, leaving aftertaste of satisfaction.

"Gone are the days I sought the heathenish ways for solving a problem. Christ died for us to have life and have it in abundance. Udendu shall live."

" *Dibia osi* only heals illnesses with herbs; does that make him a heathen? Did God not create the herbs? Did your Christ die to reduce the potency of herbs? It is not fetish. Try this path; It is less travelled in this modern time, but highly effective." *Dee* Ibe said staring at Matthew Obi.

However, Matthew Obi dismissed the idea. *Dee* Ibe was going too far into *omelani*, he thought. After that discussion, the next day, he returned to town where he based.

Two days after his return was a day set aside for a house fellowship in his house. They clapped, sang, prayed. Sophia led the worship song. They ended up heaping prayers on Udendu, whose eyes lost in thought, sitting unsteadily, faltering as well. Just like one puppet on strings; his brief laughter looked tinged with a trace of babbling cry: "Ma-ma-ma-ma," trying to wave a tiny left fist, but could not. His eyes were lost in shining delight. He could do nothing of his own while Sophia, his mother, spent almost every minute of the day tending to her child of one year and two months.

When Matthew Obi's church members had left, he sat on his bed looking at the world. His son's state ached his heart. He remembered then the Igbo proverb which said, "*Dibia* does not cure himself of an ailment". The brethren in fellowship with him got well through his potent prayers, but his own son was left in a sorry state. Personally, he had prayed for his son. Collectively, prayers had been said on many prayer grounds. The more Udendu was taken to prayer grounds, the worse he arm pained. Sophia was also too engraved with her son

so that it affected all areas of her life.

One day, Matthew Obi sat steadily, wracking his brain. He thought about what *Dee* Ibe told him in the village. But isn't it a sign of backsliding to go the way of the native doctor, the healer, when miracle is real? Does it not mean falling out of faith? Does a man lick from the saliva he passed unto the ground? He thought deeply about those things, and about himself, the teacher of faith. Looking at his son, Matthew Obi was met with steady reminder of vain attempts. His toolbox was totally empty except that he clang to his faith which, at times, faltered in his heart.

It was a cool morning with cool breeze. Matthew Obi woke up very strong and determined to hide his horns in a strange land. He had met a fellow in the city who advised the same thing *Dee* Ibe had said; the need to see bone setters, *dibia osi*. Together with the fellow and his son, Matthew obi left the city for the village to visit *dibia osi*. Matthew Obi did not inform his wife about this visit to *dibia osi*, as he did not want to be discouraged. He hoped this would be the final destination to this challenge that

has plagued his family for quite some time now. He told her instead that he was taking Ude to see a “doctor” that was recommended by *Dee* Ibe and some of his friends who could cure all sorts of ailments.

With the aid of the fellow, Matthew Obi was able to locate *dibia osi's* home where he administered treatments to his patients. Luckily for Matthew Obi they were able to meet *dibia osi* almost immediately after they arrived and he agreed to listen to them.

"You said your son fell? " The *dibia* questioned”

"Yes," Matthew Obi intoned, hiding his identity and belief.

Where he sat with the fellow that brought him, they had heard a man sitting by them saying to his friend, "I have spent good money in the hospitals over this dislocation and nothing has happened. I am at the point where I am ready to try anything.”

"Has it been long it happened?" asked the *dibia*. Matthew Obi looked at him., "Yes; It has."

Like how long?" *Dibia osi* asked.

"A few months now."

"What has delayed you from bringing this son here?" the healer questioned. He stared at Udendu pitifully. The little boy was already exhausted, his eyes had turned red.

"We took him from hospitals to hospitals but he's not getting life. Then we chose to try here," Matthew Obi said.

The *dibia* told them that they would stay in his house for three days to receive treatment. Matthew Obi had no choice than to believe. It was already evening. The healer went to the bush and gathered the herbs and roots. On his return, he washed them and proceeded to utter some words over them. Matthew Obi was very

uncomfortable. The *dibia* noticed his discomfort.

"What is wrong?"

Afraid to say anything, Matthew Obi kept quiet. The *dibia* repeated what he said, "*Ka Okike gwo nwata*. You do know that is a prayer, right? You thought you can deceive me but I know you are a man of faith. And what I just said is a prayer. We just pray differently." Matthew Obi widened his eyes in surprise but the *Dibia* ignored him and continued treating Udendu.

Next, he squeezed juice out of herbs and they forced the bitter herbal tea down Udendu's throat. After that, he ground some herbs and roots while his client watched. After grinding, the healer massaged the painful arm gently with what he had ground. He got two straight sticks, held Udendu shoulder with them, and tied them. That, done, he laid the child to sleep. The child slept for hours and woke up the next morning, smiling.

"Ude," Matthew Obi called, "How are you?" He wasn't certain that Udendu answered him. But he was certain that Udendu smiled. The swollen part went down

overnight to his father's surprise. The healer knew it would. He had appeared to Udendu that morning and gave him the same herbal tea and disappeared to attend to others. The fellow that brought Matthew Obi left the previous day.

Now, the three days were gone. Udendu's swollen arm returned to its shape, but inner pain was still noticed. *Dibia osi* said to Matthew Obi,

"The herbal tea I won't give to you again. But take this," he handed over to him what he had ground. "In the next two days, wash the hands and massage it again with this… The dislocated bone is back again to its place. In six days, his pains you shall see no more. After those six days, bring to me whatever you wish as payment for healing your son. I do not charge money as your medical doctors do."

Pastor Matthew Obi returned back home with his son, thinking about life. His wife was amazed at the sight of her son smiling and noticed how the swelling had gone down and Udendu looked at peace. She was overjoyed and felt the burden lift from her soul. She also marvelled

at how her son was cured within three days which prompted her to start asking questions on how it happened. Who was the doctor that had succeeded where others failed?

Matthew Obi brushed off the rest of her questions by saying "I took the path less travelled". He also told her to forget about the past now and that their son has been cured they should celebrate and thank God for his intervention.

Matthew Obi did as the healer had said two days after he returned. On the third day of their return Udendu could join the children in the compound, playing and laughing happily as before.

But Matthew Obi marvelled at the power of these mixed herbs, especially when he looked at his son in full energy again. From then on, he made the decision to stop ignoring the power in natural leaves. He had seen life from this local concoction and he mumbled to himself,

"God's power is not only on the pulpit."

<<< THE END >>>

HOME CALLING

DIDIGWU FAITH, 15

Ikenna's eyes glowed with an excitement like a star from a clear heaven when his mother called him.

"Ike, you will spend this coming holiday in the village. It will not be spent in Lagos nor in Port Harcourt. Your father said some things."

"What did father say?" Ike questioned in expectation. His eyes shone like a spark sheet of lightning seen from cloud to cloud. In his mind's eye, he saw his grandmother's thatched roof, an outbuilding post with a single central pillar build for sheltering her five old goats. He pictured himself walking their compound in the village barefoot. His thought was also filled with the texture of grandma's grey hair, and her hairline receding, giving her forehead a bright look. As Ike envisioned his village, a strong sense of connection was there,

grandma's stories about their family, their local dishes and her parenting style.

Ike recalled a funny moment, an incident that took place the last time he visited the village three years ago. It was a day he was with his grandma and his cousins in the village. He had walked to the back of their house, and was caught urinating on *utazi* leaves. He didn't know the leaves were edible, because the *utazi* were unfamiliar to him. He had never seen the leaves in the township. His grandma caught him in his ignorant act and picking a broom, ran after him cursing, she threw the broom at him saying, "*Efulefu*, you alien! Did you fall from sky so that you do not know what *akwukwo utazi* mean?" Ike recalled that the broom hit his shoulder and fell; and was picked by Grandma who spat saliva on it for a reason he knew not.

"Yes," continued Ike's mother, "*Nna gi*, your father, said so. He says he is tired of your stories of township things you tell him each time you return from Lagos or Port Harcourt. He said that you have to travel to the village to know our pieces of land and their

boundaries; know our culture; know your cousins, and know your nieces and nephews."

The news fell like a key that opened a treasure that had been locked inside him. For three years now, he had not been to the village as a result of insecurity in the land. His father most feared kidnappers along Enugu Road that stretched down to Opi and then to Nsukka town.

"I love to be in the village. But I always feel rejected by my mates in the village and I always do something wrong. Last time, I laughed at the masquerade because it was just a man who put on a swishi-swishi dress."

"What is a swishi-swishi dress?" His mother looked confused.

"That was the sound the dress made! I laughed at the sound because it was funny. But when I went to join the other boys, they did not like me because they felt that my behaviour doesn't conform to their traditional ways of doing things. I felt lonely in their midst," Ike said, regrettably, and looking at what his mother would say.

"Ikenna, would you like a person who laughs at the things you hold sacred?" His mother asked, frowning.

"No" He replied in realisation.

"That's why your father said you have to get used to your root. A man doesn't appear a stranger in his land. Your father said you should go to the village to learn your traditions, and dialect; not just city life, central Igbo and the British English. To learn your root and history is the beginning of wisdom. Do you know the meaning of the word: *ogodo*, in our dialect?" his mother challenged.

"No," Ike answered. "I've never heard that word," he accepted his ignorance.

"*Ịfụgo*! It's part of your history, your language. *Ogodo* in Aku dialect has a central Igbo equivalent as, *ákwà*, which means: bed, in English expression. You get to know this and more when you visit your home country. Your father said he has realized his mistake for not allowing your elder sisters to visit the village. And they do not know their left nor their right now except books. Your

father and I realized the need for native intelligence. You're moving down to the village after your exams" mother concluded.

Ike was a third child in his family. He had two elder sisters. His father, Ogbonna Mba was a business man dealing in phone accessories in Ogbete Market. His mother was part of the family business too. Both parents were graduates, but found themselves in the market. And they were doing well. Their house stood in the heart of 16 Ugwueme Crescent in Independence Layout, Enugu. It was such a beautiful layout with rows of bungalows stretched here and there. Even the sidewalks were clearly drawn. Most of the houses there took same beautiful colours, the same designs that seem to welcome visitors. It was a quiet estate far from busy roads, where thousands of unified bursts of horns filled the air.

Ike liked how their rented apartment was bathed in silence. Three-seater sofa made of brown leather took

the left space in their parlour. A coffee table was there; on it was Ike's coffee mug given to him after his school concluded her Interhouse Sports competition. He was a runner and footballer.

Prior to this conversation with his mother, his father had noticed Ikenna's challenges, his inability to speak Igbo language fluently, his poor attitude towards some native delicacies and traditions, and his persistent cry to have an English name as a baptismal name. His father had declared,

"You shall not take an English name in this family. No one dares! Take Ikenna as a first name, and Kelechukwu as a second name."

Their church priest had no issues with Ogbonna Mba's decision over naming his children two Igbo names. But Ike wasn't at peace over that. He needed an English name. His mates in classroom have theirs: Enoch, Caleb, Blue, Pentecost, Revival, Deliverance, Holy Ghost, etc. He felt inferior before them all. They had laughed at him for being too native. Ike said to his father:

“I feel too local in my class in school. All my mates have English names except me. They mock me, and I feel inferior. Can I take Jona or Cross as a name?”

“You're funny! Why not take the name *aturu*? Funny generation! I didn't send you to school to be crazy, or to lose your brain. I sent you to study, and the part of what you learn is to realize that you aren't inferior to anybody, to any race. English names are borrowed gowns. Do not be a victim of an unknown forces within yourself.”

“Ok, Sir,” Ike answered.

“Cast away inferiority. Your name is your history, and do not throw it away to promote another's who doesn't take your own name and is not planning to. Does that make sense?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Well, I shall hire you an Igbo teacher to come to the house and teach you. It's good you speak Igbo, fluently. I do not want broken English nor English in this house. Speak our dialect. When you go to school, speak English.”

After his discussion with his mother, he had decided to take on Igbo as a subject in school. As a page-turner, Ike was often seen seated hunched over his reading table in his personal study. His eyes glued to his book. Igbo as a subject, was beyond his grasp, even though the language is his mother tongue that flowed from his parents' lips. From Ike's childhood, his mother was found speaking broken English to him, and not his native tongue. However, with a personal Igbo teacher and taking Igbo as a subject in school, Ike started to feel more confident about speaking Igbo.

He counted down each tick of their clock as he waited for the forthcoming holiday. Two exam papers were left for him to finish his exams, and take a rest. He was left with two subjects to finish exam: Creative Writing and Igbo. As he revised, Ike fluttered open Igbo textbooks, and allowed his eyes walk through the lines. Each Igbo word was like a snag to overcome. At times, his eyes would clog on a word steadily, his mind racing to decode what the word could mean. He enjoyed his Igbo teacher, the way he taught them in class; how he unravelled Igbo

history of King Jaja of Opobo and Nnamdi Azikiwe. Such stories fanned Ike's curiosity!

And what about Igbo Festivals? Ike learnt about New Yam Festivals, the *Ofala* Festivals, and the Igbo traditional musical instruments like: *ekwe*, *igba*, *ichaka*, *udu*, *ogene*, *opi*, *oja*, etc. and Igbo cultural dances like: *egwu amala*, *atilogwu*, *ijele* dance, *ekpe*, *nkwa*, *egedege*, etc. Ike learnt the origin and the migration of the Igbos and what led them to their current locations. He enjoyed the manner his teacher illuminated these histories through storytelling. But to Ike, reading the Igbo words was daunting. He read such words like one struggling to crack a secret code, stumbling over pronunciation as well.

Exams came and went smoothly. After the Igbo exam, Ike came out of the exam hall feeling very confident. With his exams dusted, holiday was on. Father had returned from a business trip he went for in Lagos, Nigeria. The two would travel to the village the next week to spend four

days. His mother would stay behind. Their car was in order, much ready with its tires ready to devour the distance. Ike arranged his bags. He first packed his robber flute, then his clothes, shoes, caps and two novels: *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe, and *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* by Amos Tutuola. He wasn't sure to read them, but he liked to be with them.

On the day of travel, Ike clothed himself and put his bag and his father's in the car boot. His father entered the car, plugged in the key inside the ignition and the engine revved on.

"Darling, I'm just troubled about the ongoing kidnapping along that road going down to Opi Nsukka. People were kidnapped yesterday and last week too. But they won't see you people. Amen," Ike's mother complained and prayed.

"We can't because of killing stop war," Ike's father uttered a proverb, "We must travel, our home is calling us to visit.

Ike needs to be in the village often before he gradually turned into *efulefu*, a township nonsense. We shall go. You've prayed to *Okike* to lead us."

Ike's mother opened the gate and bade them well. The two travellers pulled towards Ugwueme Street, and burst into the road leading down to Agric Bank. In a few minutes, they got to Abakpa and took the road that led to Nsukka. Their car then poured into life, slicing through the calm morning air. They passed T-Junction. Ike could hear the car's engine snarling. He caught his father through the corner of his eyes, whistling a song he couldn't think of. The silence was there between them until they had passed more than twelve check-points and got to where the road twisted like a spring, something like a coil, curving and bending. Ike's father broke the long silence,

"Here is the exact place the bandits are kidnapping people everywhere now and then. It seems the government isn't interested in ending the business." Ike knew that his father was talking to him, but he knew not what to contribute so he remained silent.

Shortly, Ike saw a sign post reading: Welcome to Opi Nsukka. They picked some pieces of bread and then other things for grandma. They took Lejja Road and found themselves in their home town, Aku in Igbo Etiti. In their compound, his father parked. Children rounded in dirty bodies, shouting, "*Nno nu*. Deje. Welcome." Grandma"s face lit up like an electric bulb. She smiled and shouted before her grandson.

"Ikenna ya, the strength of his father," she praised, "you've grown like *Awonder*." *Awonder* was a very tall masquerade from *Obie Aku*, which was as tall as Tower of Babel.

Ike was enveloped in her wrapper as she hugged him. His father took their bags inside. The little girl named, Mma, who stayed with grandma in the village was there, greeting. They all sat in the parlour, where grandma carried a narrative of laughter. The air was alive with their glowing words and laughter. Ike hadn't seen his grandma for three years now, but these three years now melted away at once. There was such a radiance of connection.

Later that night, they sat after dinner, grandma, Ike, Ogbonna and Mma exchanging talks and questions. “My wife is well,” said Ogbonna to grandma who requested. The old woman spoke about how the village was no longer a safe place as it was before: hunger; killing in inside bushes; countless deaths; unexplained diseases; stealing; minor quarrels among clans; among others. Ogbonna mourned the insecurities that modernity had brought. At the end, they slept.

The next morning, Ike's father took him to the places where their land inheritance sat and showed him. “Be very observant over this,” his father warned, as they made rounds. After that, they returned. His father took him to see his relatives and cousins whom he had not known at all. In the evening, Ike joined his grandma in the kitchen preparing local meals. Ike sat and was cutting onugbu with a sharp knife. The knife cut him, and blood gushed. Grand squeezed bitter leaves” juice into the wound. Ike left a piercing shriek that tore the night,

“Yayayaya, yayayaya, uuuuuuu!”

“Ndo. Ozugo. Sorry. It's okay,” grandma said.

“Let”s buy drugs for it,” Ike said.

“Is there any drug better than this bitter leaf juice, Eh? You people won't leave chalks alone,” his grandma said, referring to paracetamol and other English drugs as chalks. After the first aid, Ike didn't continue. But Mma took over and finished the cutting at once, faster than Ike did. All participated and *ofe-onugbu* was done. It was consumed with cassava that night, which Ogbonna enjoyed. Ike tasted the soup and his face contorted in disgust, the soup was bitter. Mma’s eyes widened in mockery at him.

“You funny man!” Ike's father said. “You think this is the processed death you and your mother eat every time in Enugu! This is life,” Ike's father referred noodles, cereals and the likes as processed death, and referred to *ofe onugbu* as life. Ike managed to swallow a few balls and signed off.

The next day was for masquerade display in their

community, the arrival of *Odo*, the ancestral spirits that visited the living. That evening, Ike followed Mma and other children. At *Elu-Orue* where most of the *Odos* came for a display, Ike watched. His eyes sparked with wonders. At times he wanted to break loose from Mma's grasp into following a group of young children singing and dancing their traditional songs in jubilation. But Mma would always pull him back like a herder and cattle, saying, "Come back, you'll get lost. Hold my hand." There were millions of people in their traditional attires; women displaying their dance steps; children scattered in many places to catch views. Cultural songs renting the air here and there. Those *Odo* masquerades appeared, dancing and hugging themselves vigorously.

At the end, they returned home. Ike looked exhausted, coated in dust like *Mma*. That happened on *Afor* Market Day, a remarkable day in the town every two years. People returned to the village to see such a cultural

display, and visited their loved one was part of the benefits.

At home that evening, Ike shared his experiences with his grandma and his father. After, he lay on the bed like a log.
"Ogbonna," grandma called, "Always bring these children home. Ike behaves like a strange fowl in his own land, it's not good o!"

"I will," said Ike's father, "We've realized our mistake."

Ike wished never to leave again but his father made it known to him that his Igbo teacher would be resuming the lessons upon their return because he wanted Ike to learn faster, before school resumes. The day they returned was, indeed, sad to Ike. He never liked it. But his father made a promise for another home calling. Ike agreed. Grandma prayed for more than one hour as they set to go. Finally, they bade grandma and Mma bye and zoomed off through the same roads as they came. They left in the morning and arrived Enugu town at noon, totally exhausted. His mother wasn't in, but shortly, she returned and was very happy for the safe journey.

"*Nno nu*, welcome!" mother greeted.

"My wound," Ike showed his mother his finger. "I was cut with a knife when preparing onugbu." He explained the sharp pains and how grandma poured juice from bitter leaf on it.

"*Aku* man, you smell village o!" his mother teased. "The wound will heal."

"It is gone. The pains stopped that same day. I saw *Odo*, and my friend said that they are spirits of the dead. Is it true?"

"Ask your father."

"I learnt our language from grandma while we were cooking. They are: *darh* - well done. *Kpangedeh* - is it compulsory? *Nfhewa* - shortcut. *Oheyi* - soup. *Nwehyi* - clothes. *Osheyemeh* - it has destroyed it, and others."

He continued to narrate to his mother his experiences in the village and found himself saying, "I'd love to go again." His parents nodded satisfactorily certain her

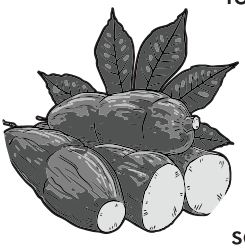
would not be mocking his culture again.

<<< THE END >>>

WHEN THE RAINS CAME

OBI ZIMIKEKACHIM, 14

The village of Umueneke nestled in the eastern part of Nigeria, where rolling hills and fertile lands stretched as far as the eye could see. It was late July, a time when the air pulsed with anticipation for the New Yam Festival, a sacred tradition held every year between late July and early August marking the end of the farming season. It was not merely a celebration of the new harvest but a time to honor *Ani*, the earth goddess, and *Chukwu*, the supreme deity, for blessing their land, especially the yam fields. The days leading up to the festival were usually a flurry of activity. Women gathered at the village stream in the morning, their laughter mingling with the splash of water as they washed yam tubers, scrubbing away the soil with smooth



stones. The king yams, *eze ji*, were carefully selected by the men, and set aside for the ritual offering at the village square.

However, this year was different, the rains had been sparse after two months of planting the yam setts, and many feared the harvest would not be enough to sustain them, let alone the celebration.

Igwe Nzekwe, the village king, was known for his wisdom and deep connection of tradition. He had spent many nights consulting the *dibia*, the village priest. In the early hours of the day, he sat in his *obi* listening to the elders debate the crisis. "We have never begun a New Yam Festival with an empty barn," one elder lamented. "Without enough yams, how do we give thanks?" another question. The village *dibia* had assured them that *Chukwu* would provide, but as the days passed and the soil remained cracked, doubt spread like harmattan dust.

As days and weeks of no rainfall continued, the villagers despite the uneasiness were hopeful that it would rain for a bountiful harvest. The women, refusing to let the

uncertainty dull their spirits, often gathered at the little village stream at dawn. And though the stream was gradually drying up, their laughter rippled through the air as they washed produce, mostly vegetables, from their nursery beds. The men, though concerned, took to mending the village square, thatching the roof of the *obi*, and clearing the dancing arena where the masquerades would perform. The rhythmic sound of machetes slicing through overgrown grass echoed as they worked.

Ugonna, a wiry boy of sixteen, did not believe the rains would come just because the *dibia* or the king and the rest of the village believed. In school, he studied about climate and the environment and he believed the drought was for a reason. He just did not know the reason, and even his teachers did not know too. However, he joined his father and uncles in repairing the *ikoro* drum, a massive wooden slit drum that would signal the start of the festival. He was eager to prove himself, but he too could not ignore the whispers of

the farmers. “The land has grown tired,” one said. “Without rain, there will be no feast.” He wanted to tell them about the changing climate but he kept quiet because he did not understand enough to say anything.

Meanwhile, the mothers and daughters dyed fabrics with indigo, tying intricate patterns into george wrappers. Nnenna, Ugonna's mother, wove a red *isi agu* cap for her husband, a symbol of pride and honor. Young girls practiced the *ada mma* dance, their bare feet tapping the dusty ground as they twirled, their anklets jingling in time with the *ogene* bells.

In April, a month later, Igwe Nzekwe called another gathering at the village square. "Our forefathers did not falter in times of trial, and neither shall we," he declared. "Tomorrow, we will honor *Ani* and *Chukwu*, and we shall do so with joy in our hearts. The spirits test us, but they have not abandoned us." The villagers nodded solemnly, hope flickering in their eyes.

The village *dibia* led a quiet procession to *Ani*'s shrine, where a white cockerel was sacrificed as a symbol of purity. The elders, their voices laden with urgency,

prayed not only for peace and health but for rain, rain to nourish the earth, rain to restore their faith. A bonfire was lit in the village square, its flames leaping high as if carrying their hopes to the heavens.

Then, something miraculous happened. As dawn broke after the village *dibia* led the solemn procession, dark clouds gathered over Umueneke. A strong wind swept through the village, bending the tall palm trees. Then, the first drops fell, cool, fat droplets that turned into a downpour. The people erupted in joyous shouts, running into the rain, their faces turned upward in gratitude. The parched soil drank deeply, and in that moment, they knew, *Chukwu* had heard them.

The day of the festival came without further delays. Early in the morning, the *ikoro* drum sounded, shaking the morning air awake. The festival began. Families, now relieved, gathered at the village square, dressed in their finest attire. The *dibia*, in a solemn ritual, took the largest yam, the king yam, and sliced it into thick rounds.

Roasted over an open flame until golden brown, the pieces were dipped into palm oil spiced with *uziza* leaves. The first bite was taken as a gesture that the people could feast.

Women pounded yams in giant wooden mortars, their pestles thudding in a steady rhythm. The smooth, elastic pounded yam was served with steaming pots of *ofe nsala* and *ofe onugbu*, rich with dried fish, goat meat, and *okporoko*. Children licked their fingers clean, their faces gleaming with palm oil.

Then came the masquerades. *Ekpe* emerged first, a figure of wisdom and tradition, moving with slow, deliberate grace. Its black and white patterns symbolized balance, reminding the people of the need for peace in the coming year. *Omebe* followed, a whirlwind of energy, leaping and twirling, its mask a fierce reminder of the untamed spirits of the land. Finally, *Police Eliza* stormed in, a comical masquerade dressed like a colonial-era policeman, blowing a whistle and swinging a carved

baton, bringing laughter to young and old alike.

As the sun set, young maidens performed the *ada mma* dance, their anklets jingling with each delicate step, their colourful wrappers flaring with each twirl. By the time the bonfire roared again, Ugonna found himself staring into the flames, the echoes of the *ikoro* drum rumbling in his chest. He understood now, the New Yam Festival was not just about crops or masquerades. It was a living thread, connecting the past to the future, the ancestors to the unborn, and the land to the people.

As the sky darkened, Ugonna realized why his mother spoke of respect, not just for the spirits, but for the land, the traditions, and the unyielding heartbeat of Umueneke village. He knew what he'd learned about at school made sense but this experience taught him not to elevate one experience over the other. Education explained things, but so did tradition. Moreso, tradition had been around for longer and was also based on facts.

That night, under a sky dripping with *Chukwu*'s blessing, Ugonna knew the village would endure, just as it always had. And with the lesson he had just learned, he knew

that he would endure too.

<<< THE END >>>

GLOSSARY

LEGENDS NEVER LIE

Mami wata — water spirit depicted as a beautiful woman

Chakpi — chant

Woo — chant

O nwere akuko m ga a koro unu — I have a story to tell you people

Koro anyi ka obi di anyi uto — tell us to gladden our hearts

O nwere otu mgbe — there was a time

Aquamara — sacred river spirit

Nwaanyi Mmuo — the spirit woman

Udara — African star apple

Ikpo oga — a kind of children's play

Ahh — exclamation

I na atu ezigbote ujo — you fear a lot

Ugu — pumpkin

Ukwara nta — tuberculosis

Obi — heart of family compound

Nwaanyi Mmuo — the spirit woman

Ncho — Igbo puzzle

MUSEUM TALES

Eze — King

Agbogho — young woman

Ikenga — a carved wooden figure signifying male strength, success and achievement

Ijele — a respected Igbo masquerade embodying spiritual wisdom and power

THE PATH LESS TRAVELLED

Dee – Uncle

Dibia osi – Bone Healer

Oha soup – Ora leave soup

Nkwobi – Spicy cow foot

Abacha – African salad

Ukwa – African breadfruit

Iko – Cup

Omelani – Tradition

HOME CALLING

Akwukwo – leaf

Nna gi – your father

Ogodo – bed

Ifugo – have you seen!

Ekwe – wooden gong

Igba – musical drum

Ichaka – rattle

Ogene – metal gong

Opi – flute

Oja – flute

Egwu amala – cultural

Atilogwu – cultural dance

Nkwa – an expect of native dance

Egedege – cultural dance

Aturu – sheep

Okike – the creator

Nno nu – welcome

Deje *(Ike's dialect)* – welcome

Onugbu – bitter leaves

Ofe onugbu – bitter leaf soup

Darh *(Ike's dialect)* – well done

Kpangede *(Ike's dialect)* – compulsory

Nfhewa *(Ike's dialect)* – shortcut

Oheyi *(Ike's dialect)* – soup

Nweyi *(Ike's dialect)* – clothes

Osheyeme *(Ike's dialect)* – it is destroyed

WHEN THE RAINS CAME

Ani – earth

Chukwu – the supreme deity

Dibia – a local priest

Obi – palace

Ikoro – large music drum

Ogene – metal gong

Isi agu – traditional Igbo attire worn by men to signify leadership, power and authority

Uziza – West African black pepper

Ofe nsala – white soup

Ofe onugbe – bitter leaf soup

Okporoko – dried catfish

Police Eliza – a comical masquerade that dressed like a colonial-era policeman

Ada mma – a female type of masquerade for entertainment

Omebe – a male type of masquerade for entertainment

Ekpe – a male type of masquerade for entertainment

ENUGU STATE PROJECT TEAM

Chukwuezugo Okwor is a writer and editor who holds B. A. and M. A. degrees in English and Literary Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, with a specialization in African Literature. As a Facilitator and Team Leader for Storytelling for Education and Development in Africa (SEDA), Enugu State project, he collaborated with other team members and secondary schools within the state to guide students' submissions. He believes in SEDA's mission to encourage African youths to share their identities through storytelling because he believes in the far-reaching power of storytelling to shape minds and societies.

Chinyere Marilyn Michael holds a B.A. from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, and is currently pursuing her postgraduate studies. As a certified educator, she finds engaging young minds fascinating. She teaches English and Literature at a college in Enugu state. She is also a writer, reader and editor. She is proud to be a part of the SEDA project where she facilitates students' literary works. Discovering SEDA presented her with an opportunity for growth for her students and herself. With SEDA's vision to expand students' writing interests, she is honoured to be a part of the community and contribute to its mission.

Nsude Juliet Chioma, is a graduate of Enugu State University of Science and Technology. She is passionate about holistic learning, incorporating indigenous knowledge and cultural narratives. In the SEDA pilot project, she facilitated storytelling sessions, guiding students to gather oral histories and understand their cultural identity. SEDA's focus on preserving indigenous African narratives resonates with her, especially as Igbo language and culture are being sidelined. She believes SEDA offers a platform for students to reconnect with their roots and value their mother tongue. She sees potential in promoting Igbo in everyday communication and empowering future generations.

Mr. Dugwu Lucky J. is a graduate of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. He is a seasoned secondary school teacher with over 12 years of experience. As an educator, he is dedicated to fostering intellectual growth and development in young minds. In the SEDA project, he coordinates student writers, guiding them to produce short stories that adhere to project guidelines. He is drawn to SEDA's mission to recognize and nurture talented students. Through his involvement, he aims to inspire students to strive for academic excellence and personal growth, empowering them to reach their full potential.

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SOCIAL MEDIA
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Some book illustrations were gotten from (designed by) Freepik

Legends Never Lie explores the tension between childhood scepticism and the harsh reality of cultural myths. It is built on strong emotional core, vivid imagery, authentic Igbo cultural elements and speaks of folklores as repositories of warnings and wisdom instead of mere entertainment

Museum Tales celebrates cultural heritage and the importance of experiential learning. It emphasizes how museums preserve culture, inspiring young minds who questions their historical relevance.

The Path Less Travelled emphasizes the clash between faith and tradition, questioning whether healing can come from both prayer and herbal medicine. Its nuanced exploration of Igbo spirituality vs. Christianity critiques dogmatic thinking and advocates for open-mindedness.

Home Calling reconnects with one's roots critiquing urbanization's erosion of cultural identity and arguing for preserving traditions. Its portrayal emphasises the need to reconnect with one's maternal roots.

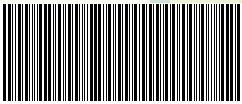
Then the Rains Came talks about faith, tradition, and resilience. Through its beautiful imagery, strong cultural authenticity and effective communal perspective, the story shows how communal rituals sustain people through hardships and climate challenges.

- Miracle Okam Chimeremeze, *Archaeologist & CEO*, Heritage Hub Actors

THE PATH LESS TRAVELLED

and other stories...

5 Stories
5 Teen Authors
Culture
Identity
The stories less told.



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