

## **DIARY ONE**

### **MEME JUMAI**

<u>Occupation:</u>	Farmer
<u>Residence:</u>	Ikerre-Oti, Delta State, Nigeria
<u>Date of Birth:</u>	June 5, 1950
<u>Date of Death:</u>	June 15, 2000
<u>Cause of Death:</u>	<i>Awaiting Inquest.</i>



**1st June 2000**

WHEN I WOKE THIS MORNING I was sweating like a slave on the farm. Yet it wasn't the sweat of hard work that wet my bed-sheet so. It was the sweat of fear. I was feeling as if a witch had poured fear inside me the way Ma'Abel used to pump our sleeping sons with pap, more than twenty years ago. If you see how my chest was doing! That my heart did not cut was a miracle.

As I pushed my door open into the compound and hung my bed-sheet where it became my curtain, I tried to remember the exact and particular reason why I was so afraid. I couldn't; and I'm not surprised. The problems of my life are not the sort that one narrates to a native doctor and he laughs before he starts his treatment. My problems are the sort that the boldest witchdoctor will hear halfway and flee. Is that not how I went to meet Catechist just before Easter and he said he won't waste his time and mine by praying, that my problems had surpassed the kind that prayer and fasting solve. It's just that adversity isn't something people boast about; otherwise, in this Ikerre-Oti, no one can stand beside me.

It wasn't quite dawn, but, as Ikerre people say, only a ne'er-dowell needs sunlight to gather his farm gear. I got dressed. Nobody can call my house a mud-hut any more, ever since I plastered it all over with cement. (Except those people who have jealousy and witchcraft running in their veins and they think it is blood.

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That type of people can never forget what is under the plaster.) On the harvest poles staked to the wall opposite my clay bed are the remnants of the 1999 harvest... *only three yam tubers...* As soon as those three tubers filled my eyes, the silence also filled my ears. Ma'Abel was *not* cursing her stubborn stove from her kitchen outside. Abel and Calamatus were not quarrelling over who forgot to tether the goat the night before. I was alone in my compound with *only three tubers of yam*.

That was when I remembered the exact and particular reason why I was so afraid, and my chest kept quiet. Because Ikerre people also say that the day a man recognises the disease that will kill him is the day doctors stop eating his money. I remembered the name of the fear that filled me like the urine of a witch; and when a disease has a name, at least it has a salutation.

His name was Starvation.

It was two weeks until harvest and tradition decrees that not a root may be disturbed in the fields before the day of the new yam festival. The situation was serious.

I untied my pregnant goat. Another week and the lazy thing should bear. I watched her climb to her feet and drag herself out of the compound to graze, scratching herself lazily on the broken gatepost. Just as I feared, young idiots with pails as empty as their brains were already hanging around the gate in front of my compound. They're waiting for me to come out to start their giggling and idiotic singing. They've left the water they were sent to fetch at the stream, and are looking for gossip. *Nonsense and tenpence!* I turned away to the kitchen in the backyard. I cooked a pottage with a little yam and a lot of the vegetables that grew in the hedge between my compound and Ma'Caro's. I put away my farming gear. I didn't go to farm today.

In the evening I watched the black-and-white TV I inherited from my father. It is almost my age-mate and to keep the pictures from drifting up and down like the thoughts of a mad man, I have to tap it every now and again. That was how I spent the night of my first day away from the farm this year: slapping a thirty-year old television in a mud-hut masquerading

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as a sandcrete house, watching programmes from the other side of the universe.

I should hate Meme Jumai, if I were not Meme Jumai.

**2nd June 2000**

ANOTHER SHAMEFUL DAY AWAY FROM my farm. The voice of Nwozuai the gossip woke me up from sleep. He was wheedling *akara* — shameless forty-year-old ne'er-do-well who hasn't done a spot of work in years — from Ma'Caro next door. I stared at my yams for ages. Fourteen days before the village harvest and only two tubers and thirteen inches of yam left at home! Only last week, my harvest wall had two poles strung with yams. Yet, a calamity had occurred, threatening me with a ne'er-do-well's fate. It wasn't burglary and it wasn't death. It was divorce.

Ma'Abel, my wife for twenty-five years, had left me for a vulcaniser at Warri, leaving with most of my yams. She took, she said, ten yams for every son she gave me. Me, I quarrelled with her arithmetic. Three of the sons for whom she claimed compensation died before they started farming. The other two, Abel and Calamatus, often gave me cause to wish them dead as well.

Yet, it wasn't good arithmetic that won Ma'Abel her arguments with me. It was her complete shamelessness. Come and see the crowd her screams pulled on that May 31st! The whole villagers in Ikerre-Oti gathered in that my compound. Her fellow women circled me like vultures. Many men were there as well, but where the women supported Ma'Abel by heaping insults on my head, the men stayed silent, like a lunatic's embarrassed relations.

As the crowd thickened, she had grown more excited, dragging

around my loincloth, with me inside, crying that when she married me all she signed for was to be Mrs. Jumai, but instead I had gone and made her Mrs. Suffer-Head.

Yes I'm poor; but I hate disgrace. I had to yield my yams. That very evening, as I sat at the village meeting, pretending that Ma'Abel's desertion didn't bother me at all, Abel took my transistor and electric fan and followed his mother. Calamatus had left weeks earlier on another of his get-rich scams. *Idiots!*

Had that witch left me fifteen years ago, by the next weekend, I swear, I'd have married again. I swear. But, there are certain things that shouldn't happen to a 49-year-old man in whose nostrils the hairs have started to whiten. Especially with today's cost of dowry.

I chewed chewing-stick awhile, wondering whether Meme Jumai had died years ago and forgot his body in Ikerre by mistake. Then I crept out into the compound to untie the goat. Nwozuai had succeeded. He pretended not to see me as he swallowed his bean cakes, moving his neck like a boa constrictor doing in a rabbit. I squatted in Ma'Abel's kitchen and warmed the leftover pottage in the pot. I ate some of it and returned to my bed, missing my transistor radio badly and studying my remaining yams the way witchdoctors study the position of kola nuts on their divining mats. *Kai!* How could I manage the yams to make them last the two weeks until harvest? The young day matured and aged in front of my eyes. I lay on my clay bed. I sat up, I lay down, and I sat up. That was how I spent this shameful day; without my radio I couldn't shut out the mocking songs of the giggling village girls who changed their route to the stream to pass under my window. *Witches.* In the evening I ate the last of the pottage and shut in the goat.

I didn't leave the gate of my house today either.

With which face will I look at the villagers on the day after *the day after* the day my family left me for a *vulcaniser*? Tomorrow should be better. By tomorrow Chemist's son would have returned from Dubai. And even if he hasn't, a village as useless as Ikerre-Oti should have found fresher gossip for itself. In the evening, I tried to find something worth watching on television. As all the dials were broken, I used my pliers to hunt for a

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station, but it seemed that all of them had agreed to be idiots today. I slept early.