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AKÍNWÙMÍ ÌSÒLÁ'S "THE LOSS OF
INNOCENCE (Agbóyìnbó Kì í Kù Sílé)", excerpt
from the novel, *Ogún Omodé*, chapter thirteen

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AKÍNWUMÍ ÌSÒLÁ

Translated from the Yorùbá by Pamela J. Olúbùnmi Smith

THE LOSS OF INNOCENCE (*Agbóyìnbó Kì í Kú Sílé*, excerpt from the novel, *Ogún Omodé*, chapter thirteen)

Seasons come and seasons go; life is full of peaks and valleys — certainly nothing simple like the straight barrel of a gun. Change — inevitable change — so much of it everywhere. Far too often we ourselves are so caught up with the mundane — nourishing the body and soul physically, worrying about our future aspirations and our place in the world — so much so that we forget to develop that deeper sense of self and desire. With or without foresight, Iyìelá and I had one true passion, a simple, singular wish in the entire world: to be together, inseparable, to spend the rest of our lives side by side, forever. But, conveniently and unceremoniously choking off that simple childhood impulse of ours were our parents' own differing hopes and plans for our lives.

At the end of that year, we had completed the highest grade level possible at Lábödé primary school. Iyìelá and I had successfully completed grade school. Inevitably, we would have to transfer elsewhere to attend middle school. But where would that be, we wondered? We had both thought, nay assumed, they'd send us to Ibadan. We had figured we would live at Granny's and attend Methodist School, Agodi. As far as we were concerned, that did not only make sense but it was practical, it was logical, it was a sound plan! We anticipated we would rule the streets and take in the sights and sounds of the entire city in the company of *The Twins*. In fact, we had begun figuring out just how we would procure funds to purchase a large soccer ball for the many games we would play at Bower's Field. But, unfortunately, our private, childhood yearnings found no place whatsoever in our colluding parents' grand scheme.

This imposing adult plan was only impediment to living out our dream in the city of Ibadan. The authoritative, parental explanation/argument: it would be too much trouble for Granny to manage two children. Apart from that, they explained, knowing the high cost of food, it was unconscionable to saddle Granny with the responsibility of satisfying the appetite of two growing boys on the paltry income she eked out from peddling the extra yield from her vegetable garden. Most importantly, they stressed, with Iyìelá's mounting attitude problem, it would be impossible for Granny to control him. The parents were adamant that, at the present time, what he needed was discipline and a

structured environment in which he can be guided and made accountable for his behavior. In contrast to me and my even tempered and easy going mien, they said, there is no doubt Granny will be unable to cope with both Iyiælá and me. Consequently, they sent me, alone, to live with Granny in Ibadan.

What a day of mourning it was for me and Iyiælá when they broke the news of our impending separation to us. We both bawled endlessly. At first, we rejected this arbitrary decision. Immediately, I threatened not to go if Iyiælá could not go to live in Ibadan with me. Iyiælá vowed to follow anyway, if I was made to leave without him. At first we were full of threats. Then our daily threats soon turned to entreaties, to no avail. Our parents were mercilessly steadfast in their decision.

Iyiælá would attend one Ìkèrèkú school as a day pupil, they announced firmly. He would attend daily in the morning and return home after school hours in the evening. Still, for our part, we left no stone unturned, eliciting the help of every 'who's who' on our parents' list of relatives and influential friends to entreat on our behalf, but all efforts failed. The more the different strategies and number of entreaties we presented, the more resolute the parents became and remained, it appeared.

To be fair, we were not the only ones affected by such absolutely arbitrary parental decisions. Several of our classmates and friends suffered the same fate that befell me and Iyiælá. One such schoolmate was named Dælápö. Dælápö was one grade behind us, yet an older brother, a schoolteacher around the town of Ifè, wanted Dælápö to move to live with and work for him as a domestic servant. Strangely enough, but perhaps aware that all the other kids in his age group and his playmates were also about to leave, Dælápö couldn't have been more delighted with the prospect of leaving the farmstead. It was also about this time that Àkánmú's older brother, a relative of ours, decided to take Àkánmú along with him. This cousin was School Principal at some elementary school in Òkìtìpupa. Àkánmú's mother met the offer with scepticism, making no bones about her reluctance to let her son make such a move.

"The distance was bothersome, way too far for one," she complained. "Furthermore, why not choose more familiar, close-distance places we know of like Ifè or Ilé«à or even the town of Èkìtì proper? What's the deal with this Èkìtì-pupa, for heaven's sake?" She wondered aloud.

Then some wisecrack tried to set the record straight, explaining to Àkánmú's mother that "there's no such place as Èkìtì-pupa; Òkìtì-pupa

is the real name of the place." To this Àkánmú's mother quipped, "That's all well and good, but I see absolutely no difference between Èkìtì-pupa and Òkìtì-pupa. They sound the same to me. But, never mind all that. I really could care less whether the place is Èkìtì- or Òkìtì-pupa. What is crystal clear to me is that either one of these 'pupa' places sounds far too distant to let my son go." With her mind thus made up, it would take much entreaty to make Àkánmú's mother finally relent and let Àkánmú move to Èkìtì-pupa with the school principal.

Knowledge of our individual fate put us in such depressive states of mind during our final days at Lábödé School. At night, Iyiælá and I would sit and discuss ways of meeting up with and seeing each other. One time, we even schemed on a plan whereby Iyiælá would move to Ibadan, never mind what the parents think. We figured he would suddenly show up; we imagined we would plead with Granny, and Granny would acquiesce and let him stay with her as well. But then, there was a problem our scheming minds hadn't thought of: how would Iyiælá get to Ibadan without transportation fare, not to speak of how he would manage the dangerous roadway that's unsafe for a young boy his age to travel alone, unaccompanied? Despite defeat, we remained determined to continue to explore ways to ensure, minimally, weekly meetings. Perhaps we would work out an alternating schedule with me visiting one week and Iyiælá, the next week. We left no stone unturned in our approach to solving the issue of our impending and inevitable separation.

Our vacation time was fleeting by faster than we could imagine. The first day of the new term was fast approaching, more or less around the corner. The first to prepare to leave the farmstead was Àkánmú and his older brother. Obviously, of the whole lot of us they had the longest distance to travel. They left about a week before everyone else did. What a day that was! Tears from our impending separation started streaming down Àkánmú's cheeks the eve of his departure. Boy, did he cry his eyes out, so much so that his mother almost reversed her decision last minute to let him go!

They left promptly at 8:00 in the morning. With a scheduled overnight stop in Ibadan to shop for supplies, they would head out to Òkìtì-pupa bright and early the next day.

As you can imagine, the entire farmstead, young and old, turned out to wish them godspeed and journey mercies, paving their way with prayer after prayer. Àkánmú's mother locked step with her own older son for her final moment's heart-to-heart while we, Àkánmú's playmates, trailed behind our buddy, his bag balanced atop someone's head. The elders

turned back midway. By the time we reached *Èkèfà* only a handful of the once trailing throng of children remained. We escorted the traveling pair all the way to the *Ìkèrèkú* roadside bus pick-up stop.

When we arrived two buses were lined up, ready to load up with passengers. The first bus was almost full. The other bus, empty, had just taken up its place in the queue. The gang of touts of the second transport reached us first. They quickly grabbed the bags we were carrying and loaded them swiftly into the open trunk of their bus. Likewise, the touts of the first passenger bus had quickly grabbed and stowed Big Brother's carry-on bag in their fairly loaded trunk. Unfortunately, Big Brother had not realized that the touts were members of the rival bus' gang of touts. The confusion almost broke into a fistfight, what with Big Brother trailing the first set of touts in one direction and we, at the heels of the rival touts, going the opposite direction to bus number two. The two drivers jumped into the fray and went at each other, arguing over the rights to our business. A simple solution saved the near brawl. The seat space which bus number one touts had offered *Àkánmú's* brother was cramped, with hardly any leg room. Of course, with the opportunity to occupy the empty passenger's seat beside the driver in bus number two, Big Brother jumped at the second driver's invitation, momentarily snatched away his carry-on bag from the protesting rival tout, and settled in comfortably in the prized seat of the more than half empty bus.

As it turned out, it took a good half hour or more to round up enough passengers. *Àkánmú* had already boarded the bus. Balled up in a corner seat, he cried uncontrollably. The rest of us leaned against the side of the bus where *Àkánmú*, repeating our goodbyes every which way we knew how while our playmate sobbed. At last, now fully loaded, the bus took off. We stood in the same spot and watched until the bus rounded a bend, carrying *Àkánmú* into his future.

The date of my own departure was imminent. I got a whole lot of attention from my older sister, *Àyóká*. Every single day gave us reason to hone our mathematical skills. With the dawn of each remaining day, *Àyóká* would initiate the calculating game we shared. She would begin with 'by this time sixteen days hence...' and I would complete the thought with, '*Td be home in Ibadan.*' On and on we extended the game until we had exhausted the number of days remaining:

"By this time ten days hence..." she'd chant, "You will..."

"*Td be home...*" *Td* chant back, even before she had the chance to say it.

.....

"By this time... tomorrow..." she lamented on the eve of my departure. "Ah, would you please spare me the pain of it!" I pleaded.

The separation anxiety was crippling. As the final day loomed, I found it more and more difficult to bear the thought of leaving. I even suggested that I be allowed to attend *Ìkèrèkú* School along with the others, but Father assured me that Granny would look after me well and won't let anything bad happen to me. Yes, she'll look after me very well, no doubt; of that much I was certain, but that was not the point. As the day finally grew closer, even Mother had begun to be of two minds about my leaving but had to let go of her reticence in consideration of Granny's feelings. Besides, Mother had observed in her parental wisdom, the grandparent generation's knack and the patience for nurturing their grandchildren gave one enough comfort and assurance to let go. Were that not the case, Mother confessed that she could have ill afforded to have me fall under the bad influence of The Twins, should I remain at the farmstead.

What a sad day it was indeed, the day before I left home. Mother had finished packing my bags, so that left me, *Iyìàlá* and *Dàlápö* lots of time to sit outside and talk all night long. We talked and talked long after everyone had turned in for the night. Unlike *Iyìàlá* and me, *Dàlápö* soon succumbed to a drowse and went off to bed, leaving us to continue yet one more of our customary, endless conversations.

We traded different yarns – rumors mainly – we had heard about the *Ìkèrèkú* and *Agodi* schools. For instance, one such rumor was that when the teachers at *Ìkèrèkú* came to blows, they fought each other with hoe-hafts. The principal at the *Agodi* school, they said, was quite stern, a no-nonsense disciplinarian. To tell what a stern man he was, it was rumored that he once subjected a pupil to one-hundred-and-six lashes for stealing. Telling that rumor to *Iyìàlá* most certainly evoked his vintage, defiant response.

"What! If that had been me, I would not have let anyone subject me to such punishment. I would've raised so much hell! What offense could possibly have called for such drastic measures? Was he trying to kill the boy or what? Did you say 'One hundred and six lashes' just for stealing? Are you serious? Is that all the offense?"

"What offense can be worse than stealing?" I demanded with a loud laugh.

"Well, it's not as if we're talking about him murdering someone, is it?" he replied earnestly.

"I'm not sure about that. Murder, by any name, you know, is murder and is punishable by death," I countered.

Somehow, Iyiaelá had managed to find a silver lining in the parents' decision to send him to Ìkèrèkú School. At least, a chap we nicknamed *Chiselled Chest* was also enrolled at the school. A good thing that was, Iyiaelá conceded, because together they would raise hell and show the Ìkèrèkú kids a thing or two. Moreover, he boasted, any teacher that tried to manhandle him would live to regret it. In deference to Iyiaelá's sentiments, I admit that I, too, had heard similar horror stories about the Ìkèrèkú School principal's evil hand at wielding the lash. A number of the pupils had also confirmed the man's notoriously harsh notion and of discipline. For instance, if the principal were going to administer six lashes, as one story had it, the receiving pupil may not attempt to "rub dull" the pain at any time during or immediately after the lashings. Any attempt to massage away the sting of the cane while the punishment was being administered was grounds for starting the count all over from the beginning. In other words, three lashes doubled to six or even tripled to nine, depending on the point at which the buttocks massaging occurred. Also, if the offender hedged in pulling taut his shorts around his buttocks when ordered to do so, the man was known to begin the punishment anew with preliminary "warm-up lashes" on the pupil's small of the back, while chanting, "That's the warm-up, that's just the warm-up." In other words, the blistering 'real' thing was yet to come.

We continued trading one yarn after the other thus through the night, when Mother chanced upon us and sent us immediately off to bed. I should have turned in and been asleep long since, what with traveling early the next morning, she half scolded me. Iyiaelá and I turned in all right, but not even the power of sleep, we swore, could come between us or dull our conversation.

By morning, my mounting sadness was engulfing, complete. Crippled completely by the power of my separation anxiety, my departure, no longer a thing imagined, now stood right before me. And as they say, twenty years hence is but a 'matter of time.' In the grand scheme of things, each and everything necessarily follows its designated pathway. Alas, the hour of my departure had finally arrived! My bags had been packed, ready the night before.

Father summoned me for the inevitable farewell speech, replete with the routine list of parental injunctions: a pep talk of the do's and don'ts of proper behavior such as how to treat Granny with utmost respect; where to roam and not to roam; how to mind traffic by watching

both sides of the road for on-coming traffic before crossing..., you know, the gamut of common-sense, parental advice. He finished with a message for me to deliver to Granny, gave me his blessing and wished me journey mercies before taking up his machete and heading off towards his farm.

I stood, rooted to the spot, just watching as my father went about his day's work at his farm, the very same farm I had conjured up there and then so vividly in my mind's eye. I visualized the furrow that clocked my play-time hours; the papaya trees, laden with ripe fruit, which provided many a succulent snack. I remembered and could still taste the miracle berries with which I loved to flavor up my sometimes tart orange segments. I remembered the stream below the rocks, from whose cool waters we quenched our thirst. I remembered the shack itself, where many times we snacked on roasted yams. These fond memories of my childhood filled me with tears of loss. Pray tell, where, in town, could one find such simple pleasures?

My appetite had waned. I truly ached for what I was about to leave behind. My elder sister, Ayöká, couldn't stop crying. Ours had been a special and unusual sibling bonding, particularly so since her return home after the police rescue from the kidnapper beau who had held her captive. I doubted she would ever consider reconciling with the imbecile.

Just as I prepared to leave, Mother's voice raised head-swelling strains of my praise name:

*Ìlòkó, Son of Àrélù,
Erúrímísá, king's servant of unquestioning loyalty
Tèètú who carries out the king's bidding hie!
Son of Aketálónàdòsì
Àtándá Àró, Son of the sword bearer
Son of the sharp sword bearer who beheaded his in-law.
Erúrímísá said, "Find a worthy candidate for sacrifice to the Ruler."
But nowhere could he find a worthy one to volunteer.
Still swords refused to be sheathed.
When swords were finally sheathed,
Worthy candidates emerged.
"I shall accept prime heads only, money will not suffice.
That which I seek is priceless, money cannot buy."
Onílòkó, the brave, sets the rule of engagement.
Which shall it be: death by beheading or by severing of limbs?
On the right side warriors stand with swords drawn, charging.
To the left, stand warriors with swords drawn but pacifying.*

*And the middlers stand, belligerent and insistent on beheading.
Off with the head! Death dealt!
Long before the break of dawn, your erstwhile progenitors had nipped
in the bud the conspirators' intrigues.
Leaf gatherers of Ìlòkó, be wary lest you defile the emblematic wood.
Wood gatherers of Ìlòkó mind that you do not
Desecrate the emblematic wood,
Aketàlónà-òsì's emblem, rife with taboo.*

*Three sons your mother bore.
The one, Ólùgbón
Who leads the king's way.
The other, Arèsà Ajèjé,
Who brings up the rear.
And you, Onìlòkó, staff bearing,
Stately, with steps regal,
Dealt death by beheading.*

....

As the cadence of Mother's voice reached a pitch, I let go the flood of tears I had been holding back the minute she started. Her own voice trembled, betraying her sadness. But that didn't stop her. She merely dug in, increasing her fervor.

*Strong-armed wielder of the sword
For whom joy is complete only amid tumultuous, chaotic gunfire
And minor skirmishes spell complete boredom.
Father of Akíkúnmi,
The one who dons pantaloons in disregard of his opponent
In a fist fight,
Husband of Òsúnyorí,
The one who derives joy in the thundering
And rumblings of the skies but hears them not.
Even though the sky had been thundering and rumbling endlessly,
Yet we heard none of it.
Olómù, father of my husband.
Rider of a war-horse mightier than all other war horses, combined.
You, the mighty stick that chases the snake into a burrow.
Long and mighty, the straight stick that hunts
Down the snake around the farm.*

Mother's head-swelling panegyric was still going strong when I picked up my bag and turned my gaze toward the Ìkèrèkú motor pick-up stop. Dælápö gave me a hand with my luggage. Mother, my big sister, Àyöká, and a few loitering children trailed behind us. Iyiælá, with head bowed as if in mourning, brought up the rear, a few feet away.

It wasn't long before Mother, my sister, and a number of the escorting party turned back. Only three of us remained – Dælápö, still carrying my luggage; Iyiælá, still silent and brooding; and me, the heavy-hearted traveler.

The Ìkèrèkú motor stop was empty when we arrived, so we sat conversing under a shed and waited. To dispel the awkwardness and torture of these final moments of separation, we discussed the possibility of writing letters to each other.

As we chatted, an automobile approached slowly, silently from the direction of downtown Ìkèrèkú. It was a 'Hillman' that belonged to one Mr. Adéyalé, one of Father's long-lost friends who we had not seen for quite some time. Mr. Adéyalé was a manager in the Civil Service in Ibadan. The car, a sedan, glided very slowly towards us – Mr. Adéyalé was never one to reach let alone push the speed limit. To tell you just how slow the man drove, a cyclist, I wager, could ride faster than Mr. Adéyalé drove that automobile. And talk about cautiousness – he was *Mr. Concentration Personified*. At the wheel, Mr. Adéyalé would look neither right nor left, but would have all eyes trained, nay glued forward, looking straight ahead. He always gripped the steering wheel with both hands. Should a hen carelessly run in front of his moving vehicle, Mr. Adéyalé would lean on the horn for what seemed like minutes at a time, supposedly tooting the creature away. He neither slowed down to greet those who greeted him, nor did he ever acknowledge even with a brief wave of the hand passers-by who waved at him. Adéyalé did nothing but look straight ahead and crawl at snail's pace in his 'Hillman,' muttering:

"Y'all, don't mind me now, this is a mighty delicate machine I'm operating. You all will have to forgive me, but you see, I can't just bring it to a sudden halt at a whim." Frankly, I think the man knew next to nothing about the machine beyond driving it forward.

As he drove closer to us, we began waving our greetings in hopes that he might stop and offer me a ride to Ibadan. But what do you know? The man didn't as much as look in our direction. His gaze fixed straight ahead as usual, he hugged the steering wheel for dear life and just glided stealthily past us.

Not too long afterward, a passenger truck, a.k.a. "God's Will is

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Laru," roared up the road and within a few minutes was filled up with the many passengers that had queued up, waiting. I scurried on to grab a window seat so I could see and continue to talk to Dælápö and Iyïälá. We chatted some more and began saying our goodbyes.

The truck driver started up the engine and eased forward slowly. Tears began rolling down my cheeks. Iyïälá and Dælápö stood watching and waving. Suddenly, the truck stopped. Apparently, the driver had stopped to exchange greetings with someone. Iyïälá and Dælápö came running after the truck, but a few feet before they reached us, the truck kicked into gear and sped off. Undeterred, the two kept waving and waving until the truck rounded a bend in the road, and we could no longer see them. Now, I truly was alone!

Awash with depression, I began thinking about all the wonderful memories we had shared these many years past. I remembered the many nightly games under the moon-lit sky. I remembered our hunting forays into the bush during the dry season. I remembered our home, our teachers too. I remembered Ejíníkêê. I remembered Arísáyà (Isaiah), the snake oil hawker. I remembered all the kids in our class.

Alas, town life can never match the bliss of pastoral life on the farm. Gone are the golden days of a carefree childhood. Gone are the simple pleasures of catching a fish or two in the pond without ado. Lost forever is the delight of trap setting to catch game. There's no more trapping of snakes or smoke-snaring bush meat from their burrows.

Àkánmú was now somewhere, someplace. Dælápö has gone his way, as has Bödé as well. So too have Àyöká and Iyïälá – everyone flung far and wide. Is there any chance, any hint of hope that we might ever recapture and live again those precious yester years of childhood? Alas, the precious gift of childhood memories, certainly not the stuff games are made of, but of golden moments which the passing of time and circumstances have since flung afar and asunder. Forever gone? Perhaps, but they certainly will never be forgotten.