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AKÍNWÙMÍ ÌSÒLÁ : “Respite at the Farm”  
(Excerpt from the novel, *Ogún Omodé*, Chapter Two)

TRANSLATED FROM THE YORÙBÁ BY PAMELA J. OLÚBÙNMI SMITH

One of the most delightful, cherished seasons on the farm is the dry season, when everything around is imbued with a special kind of quiescence – no roadways made muddy by sappy dewdrops. No chilly weather, no noisy mosquitoes to contend with, at least none to disturb one’s sleep. One could sleep peacefully for as long as one desired in the lull of the quiet breeze. My most favorite part of this season was the plentiful game. It was a time when children got the chance to learn the art of trapping and hunting game in the bush. And those who had not yet honed their trapping skills could start out by setting metal traps. Those who couldn’t afford metal traps could, at least, fashion simple rat traps from stretched rope. As for me, my catapult was always at hand and my pockets were always bulging with the rocks with which I always filled them. I had used this catapult to hunt many different species of birds and game. One time, within the space of three days, I had bagged a plump squirrel. Then there was this particular day, I remember. It was cocoa leaves I went after – an errand for my mother, who wanted them for wrapping and storing salt. Always, on such errands, I never left home without my catapult, my sure protection against all kinds of startling rodents and birds, especially.

As I began cutting down the leaves, a scurrying sound caught my ear. A quick upward glance, and there it was. I saw the underbelly of what looked like a huge squirrel stretched out lazily on a short tree branch. It was busy munching on seeds from a ripe cocoa pod. Obviously, it was unaware of my presence. My heart raced! My pulse quickened as I stealthily cocked my catapult with a good-sized round rock. I primed and pulled it taut, firing the missile squarely into the fool’s underbelly. It slumped and fell to the ground on its back, all fours pointing skyward. I fixed my gaze on it. I couldn’t lift it off the ground yet; I had to be cautious lest it spring back to consciousness and bite me. I could tell it wasn’t dead but was only dazed from the impact of my projectile. I also realized it could come to and slip through my fingers if I didn’t move quickly to retrieve it. So, I cast about, looking for a stick but found none. To be sure, within minutes, the squirrel’s legs began to twitch, showing signs it was about to come to. What do I do now? I wondered. Then, a thought came into my mind. I took another

rock, primed my catapult, aimed and released its fire into its upturned abdomen. It convulsed briefly, and then held still, dead! Just to be on the safe side, I pummeled its head repeatedly, smashing it with the handle of my catapult first before retrieving and tossing it into my bag. My bag bulged happily with game! Gathering another handful of cocoa leaves, I turned my heels homeward, happy as a lark.

As soon as I arrived home with the bundle of leaves, I unpacked and presented my catch to mother's surprise;

"Ha, child, I sent you to bring me a bunch of broad leaves, but instead you went game hunting. What if you had walked into a trap?" my mother complained, worried.

"I did not enter the forest. I netted this fool right there in the cocoa farm. Besides, it is not a mere squirrel... See? It is some type of sun-squirrel. Don't you see how large it is?" I corrected Mother.

"Well, I could care less what you call it. I sent you leaf gathering not *mere-squirrel*, *sun-squirrel* or whatever-squirrel hunting. There are far too many poisonous snakes in the forest," Mother complained.

After she had examined the game, she couldn't help but concede it was a good size indeed. She then promised to dress and cook it later that night so my buddy that's visiting me from Ìkèrèkù the next day would have a savory dish to eat. I, too, thought about the visit and agreed it would make an excellent treat. It was then that the thought came to my head to go after more game so that there'll be a lot more meat for us to eat. You see, Adéwolé, my Ìkèrèkù buddy was my very dear friend, and I wanted to impress him with a big spread. He was best friend coming to share a play-day with me.

I thought hard and long about the best spot for finding game. Then I remembered that father had stored a small metal trap in the farm cabin at the farmstead. If I set a trap to nab a few of those partridges sitting, preening in the cassava patch at the edge of the farmstead, I'd be sure to increase our meat supply, or so I thought. Consequently, I sneaked out of the house and raced toward the farm. We had finished lunch a while back. Father was still away at our other farm at the opposite end of the farmstead. As soon as I arrived at the farm, I hastily carried the small trap out of the farm cabin and set it in the cassava patch where a partridge had just finished preening its feathers. Since there were so many of them in that spot, that was bound to snag at least one partridge before nightfall, so I reasoned.

The village was a good distance from the farm, hence my resolve to stay on till nightfall to keep from having to return to the farm to retrieve my prospective catch. The best thing, I thought to myself, would be to net and carry home a partridge or two tonight and have them cooked along with the bush meat in time for my guest's arrival the next day. I sat down tight inside the farm cabin and settled in for the long haul. The sun went down slowly. The noise of a flock of partridge nearby was music to my ears. 'They must be on their way to my trap,' I assured myself. I cocked my ear and listened, anticipating the distressed sound of the unlucky partridge, snared and fighting noisily to free itself. No such clue came. I sat and waited and listened and sat and waited and listened, but heard nothing. While I sat and waited, sleep overcame me, and I must have drifted off on the raised platform on which I had laid, waiting.

Later, when I awoke, 'heaven have mercy,' I prayed, shocked that darkness had completed its blackest cycle. An unimaginable lull had descended on the forest. I couldn't even see an inch in front of me. This darkness I speak of was pitchy. At first, I couldn't place my bearing, barely being able to see my own hand in front of my face in the dark; I thought I was in a room. But when my hands grazed the climbers along the wall and above the stack of dried palm leaves, and felt the mound on which I had slept, and the unevenness of the mud floor, I stretched out my hand to feel for the center post of the cabin, I needed no convincing that there was a heaven and a hell and that I most certainly was in the latter. Suddenly, I was covered in sweat. To shout would do no good, even if my vocal chords would allow me to do so. Do I begin walking? But how would I start when I couldn't even lift my feet off the ground. I finally stood up and crouched on top of the raised platform. I cradled my face in both hands and sobbed until I literally ran out of tears. My head exploded from fear. I didn't even know what I could do, so I resigned myself to my fate, whatever that was, as I stared into the pitch darkness the way a cow dumbly eyes its instrument of slaughter. Then I resolved to hazard going home. I arose. Without seeing a thing before my face, I tried to feel the floor with my feet to no avail. With both hands outstretched in front of me, I chanced feeling my way through the darkness to the cabin's entrance to the unnerving hoot of an owl's '*toot, toot.*' Fear paralyzed my entire body. Adjacent to the cabin was a large cocoa farm. I must first cross it to get my bearing. As I began to walk, the dry brush beneath my feet began to register and broadcast every step I took. I shook with fear. I hadn't gone far when something made a slithering sound in the dry cocoa leaves, like the sound

of a large snake hastening away. I froze. When I no longer heard the noise, I pressed on, gingerly.

A child finds himself trapped on the farm after dusk, and people say, "Wow, what a brave kid!" But, pray tell, what has bravery got to do with being trapped in the dark of night? What has bravery got to do with anything – as if the trapped kid had a choice whether or not he wants to be brave! As I moved forward with every step, I envisioned all the truly terrifying spots in the forest through which I had no choice but to pass: A humungous anthill in particular; a deep furrow and the pathway along which I was convinced huge, poisonous snakes would've coiled up, certainly waiting to devour me; the awe-inspiring, infamous Cactus tree that's said to be quite the epitome of danger; the huge rock near the three-way intersection; the mighty, evil fairy-infested African teak tree by the roadside where torrents had dug up a deep gully! With my heart literally in my mouth, I soldiered on...

Just as I reached the edge of the Cactus tree, I saw an incandescent light in the distance. I froze. 'Death is near!' an inside voice said to me. I was convinced it was indeed the infamous puckish fairy of the Cactus tree on the prowl for its nightly feed. The light was bright, like the full-beam brightness of a motorcar's headlights, except that it was a singular light like a hunter's headlamp. The light was making its way up the old dirt track, heading straight towards me, but it was still some distance away. I quickly darted into the forest and crouched behind a huge tree. By now, my fear of the forest was beginning to abate. As the elders say, all diseases are not equal; indeed, all situations are not the same. My earlier fears of the forest itself paled compared to the mounting fear of this encounter with the light! So, if a leper sees a madman, he darts into the woods. I barely breathed where I had crouched. The light steadily bounded towards me, and soon was quite literally a few yards away, and then it planted itself directly across from me. Suddenly, it held steady! I was petrified. I could've sworn my heart stopped beating momentarily. I noticed that there was a human form behind it, perhaps a hunter's, or, who knows, maybe a troll in a human body. Whatever it was, it too had a hunch something or some other presence besides its own was lurking about. The figure trained the lamp on the forest towards my hiding spot. I almost cried out from fear, but then thought better of it; what if the form wasn't a hunter after all, the creature could still fire its weapon all the same in the direction of the sound. Since darkness had shrouded the forest, what business would any mortal have in it in the dark of night? If not a beast, then what

else but a thief, and which of the two wouldn't be rightly deserving of death? I kept perfectly still in my crouched posture behind the tree. The lamp's rays lit up either side of my tree cover, but did not shine on me. When the creature turned to one side, I too shifted ever so slightly. As the saying goes, 'great wits meet.'<sup>1</sup> The creature was a distance away but soon gave up the search, it appeared, as it turned its attention back to the road and moved on. I breathed a deep sigh of relief, arose and picked my way gingerly back to the main dirt track. Just as I reached the last few feet or so, before I actually stepped onto the track, the creature turned, lighting up the entire surroundings. Providence it was that held my feet back for those last few steps. Without a doubt, I would have been caught flat-footed in the bright beam of the creature's lamp! Who knows what it would have done then?

Satisfied, he turned once again, and headed his way. I promptly jumped out, turned a corner where I was confident he couldn't possibly see me should he turn around again, and I pressed my feet into overdrive in the race of my life. I was less afraid now. After all, a heavier load that crashes on top of a lighter load inevitably crushes it, as the saying goes. At that point, tackling the rest of the journey paled compared to the harrowing experience in the cabin and my near encounter with the creature. By this point the worst seemed over so much so that I did not even notice that I had gone past the notoriously frightful Cactus tree. I raced on and on, my feet shaky on the ground from walk-running so fast. In fact, I seem to have been bounding this way and that like a drunk even though I had imbibed nothing intoxicating, except fear.

In the meantime, one can only imagine what a frenzied place the farmstead was over my absence. My family had searched for me high and low, not a soul knew where I had gone. Conflicting information after conflicting information complicated matters. Those who had seen me fleet past them earlier that day as I raced toward the farm cabin said I had gone toward the dump site. A search party had gone looking for me at the other farm and at the play field and had scouted to all my friends' homes. I was nowhere to be found.

Complicating the search effort around that time was widespread news of child kidnappers. Abundant stories of their antics had circulated far and wide: stories about the use of medicine and magic to lure their victims into their snare; stories about how when they strike the chest of a child with conjuration-laden

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<sup>1</sup> Literally, "ayáá (amonkey) is clever, so too is Ògùngbè." Thus we have a case of one not able to outwit or outmaneuver the other.

rings, the child loses his voice. Some accounts even told about how the very act of slapping a child on the buttocks, transforms him or her into a snail, which kidnappers then easily pick up and throw into their pockets. Sometimes, these kidnappers are said to transform some children into sheep, which they quietly lead away by the rope they tie around the animal's neck. Thus, the kidnapped simply vanish without a trace.

By nightfall my mother, my older sister, *Àyóká*, and all the womenfolk of our household had begun a tearful all-night watch. And still no news. The men of the farmstead had gathered, trying to figure out where I could be. With cutlasses and guns in hand, and each equipped with lighted lamp, they had sorted themselves into different search-and-rescue parties, ready for the all-out hunt. They had searched the smaller farm and the neighboring forest. A group had gone to the stream, looking, per chance, for the floating body of a child but had found no such signs. They had peered into every well, but saw nothing that looked like a human skull bobbing in the dark depths below. Where could I have gone? They agonized. My mother was convinced that I had been kidnapped. She wept bitterly. She assured all that her son had never before stayed out late. The other women consoled with her, incited by their "Better-dead-than-missing" conviction.

Coincidentally, the search party returning from the larger farm was on its way home, and I too, was returning from the smaller farm, all of us shrouded by the pitch darkness of night. I was a short distance from the infamous, fairy-infested African-teak tree when I heard loud and clear voices coming up the road. I made out *Dælápö's* father's voice distinctly. I was able to recognize *Fælá's* voice, as well as *Bödé's*. I could tell the oncoming crowd was a large one. Consequently, I pressed my feet to move even faster. It took a while before I detected the rays of light. Amazing how far voices carry in the dead of night! A short distance before they ran into me, I stopped and waited. Clearly, they hadn't seen me yet. *Dælápö's* father led the party. Remember that I had removed my white shirt to keep from being detected just before I almost came face to face with that hunter, or whatever the creature with the bright light really was. White garments, as you know, are a dead give-away at night. I had taken it off, folded it very carefully, and had it bunched up tightly under my armpit. I'm sure I must've looked like a tiny troll in the dark, standing firmly in the middle of the road. As soon as *Dælápö's* father spotted my human form, he stood still and bellowed:

"Who goes there?"

Silence! I made no reply. The party was perfectly silent! Then he asked again:

"Who is that? Speak up!"

Again, I made no answer. Others in the party had not seen me, it appeared and kept asking:

"Where is the person? Where is the person?"

"That's the damn creature ahead over there, way over there," *Dælápö's* father answered, pointing straight ahead.

Some of them jumped back with fear. Soon after they all had finally made out my form and ascertained it was indeed me, *Dælápö's* father inquired if I had worn a white shirt since there was nothing white about the garment of the creature he had seen ahead. By now I was tongue-tied, too overcome with emotion, quite frankly. After a short while, my father moved to the head of the crowd and, with lamp in one hand and cutlass in the other, he began advancing slowly. As he closed in within a few feet, I broke down in tears. Down went the cutlass swiftly as he rushed to scoop me first into his embrace and then to hoist me onto his shoulder. He asked about my shirt, and I handed the bunched-up garment to him. My mother ran to embrace me. She reached to pluck me from atop my father's shoulder so she could carry me on her back, but Father was not about to let me out of his clutch and sight. Besides, I was now too big to be piggybacked anyway, he teased Mother.

The giddy crowd shouted out my name, still I answered no one. Traditionally, for reasons of security, conventional wisdom forbade the calling of my name out loud in the dead of night. They asked what happened. Where did I go? I still gave no answer. Each person hazarded a guess. One person said, "Might he have been enticed to the farm by conjuration? Only the hand of Providence saved him." Another person said: "This is not a matter of guessing, the boy knows what might've been done to him. The important thing now is to keep a watchful eye on him and guard him against the wiles of the evil ones."

The clamorous search and rescue party followed behind me, celebrating until we entered the farmstead. As soon as we arrived, the rest of the folks gathered outside our house, all of them staring at me like a stranger who had just entered town after a long journey. I was truly exhausted and chilled to the bone. I trembled so like a vibrating, grinding machine, nay like an overloaded passenger bus chugging along with a flooded carburetor. Father brought his cold, brewed medicinal infusion, instructing that I be given a cupful dosage of it. The very

thought of that brew was indeed punishment enough to break my silence.

“Oh, no thanks,” I quickly blurted out.

“Ah, ‘the sick-one-who-refuses-medicine,’” the bemused crowd chimed.

A warm, nutrient-packed meal, on the other hand, was just as good medicine as Father’s notorious concoction, a number of them conceded. I needed no further persuasion. Thankful for this curative alternative, I sat down to my dinner of hot steamed *yam-flour dough with stewed vegetables* and heartily gobbled up the whole lot, happy not to have been forced to down anyone’s bitter decoction. Really, I cannot say enough about how tortuously nasty Father’s *cure-all teas* were!

It is on account of this experience that I came to be viewed as special, a ‘*brave one*’ among my peers. As soon as morning broke, my age mates all flocked to ask me what had happened. I recounted the story detail by detail, conveniently stretching a bit here and a bit there. For instance, I told them that after I had encountered that hunter and had crouched behind the large tree, I saw a bright light at the bottom and top of the Cactus tree. I told them that just before I reached the lights, my head swelled..., but that I walked on bravely like a man, since men were not expected to cry. Things, I assured them, could have been worse and that as soon as I reached the Cactus tree, the bottom light was extinguished, and I heard a voice rumbling unintelligibly, “*yummm, yummm, yummmmm*” but that I did not quite comprehend what the voice was saying. I told them that again, as I passed by, the light was turned back on.’ This was how I ended the yarn, obviously embellished here and there with things seen and unseen. With their jaws dropped in wonder and awe, my playmates took it all in, and thereafter I simply became *aka* “*Spartan!*”