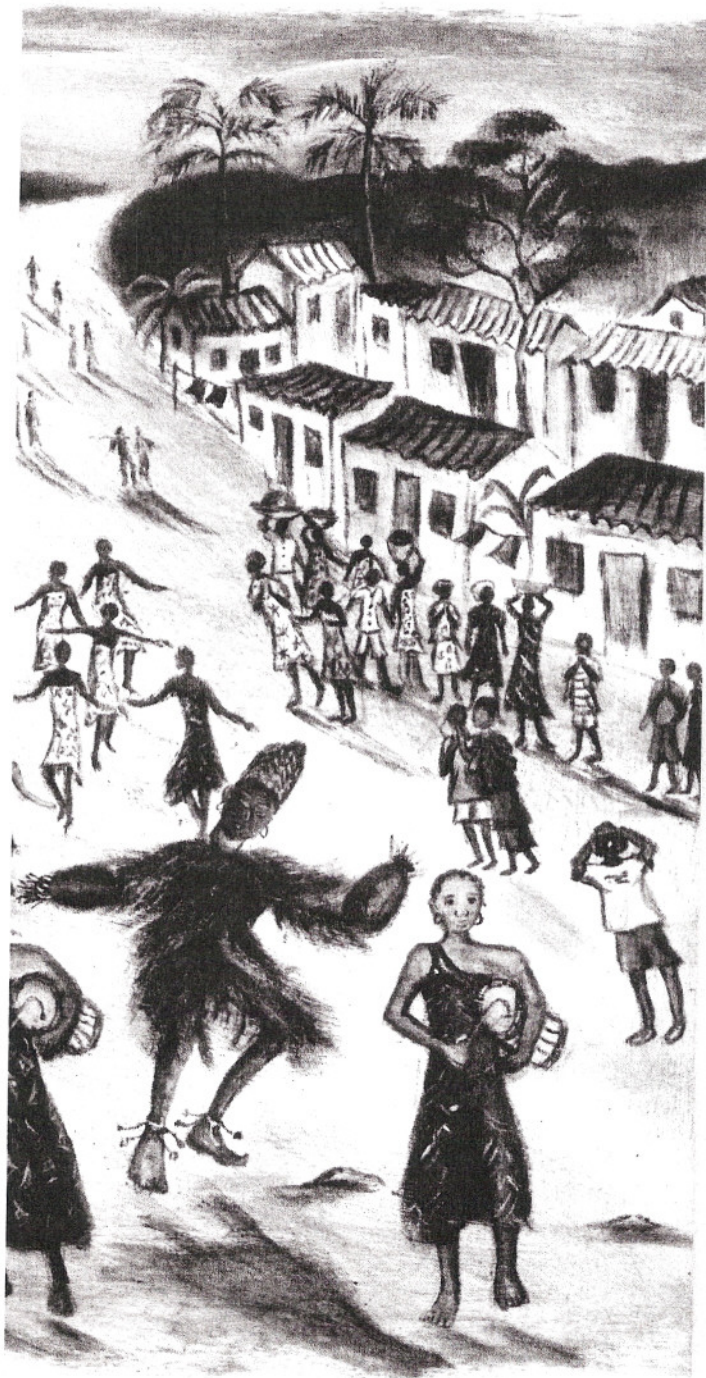


Unanswered Cries

Osman Conton

Macmillan Writer's Prize for Africa



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CHAPTER 1

On the day the gods wanted her circumcised, Olabisi was sitting, restless, on a low stool, washing dirty dishes in a large, plastic bowl. She caught hold of the hem of her flimsy skirt, tucked it between her slim legs and reached into the plastic bowl for the last dish. *Nothing exciting happens in this place*, she thought. *There is nowhere to go except to another, boring part of the village.* As she began to scrub the dish, the wind brought her news of an approaching group of singers.

She sat up, listening like a dog sensing an intruder. It was, indeed, the sound of drums and singing. After a whole week of feeling caged in this village, something exciting was happening at last. And the sound was getting closer. *I must see this.*

She dropped the dish back into the plastic bowl and sprang to her feet. The tucked skirt fell into place, three

inches above her knees. She began to wipe her hands dry on her legs, against the skirt.

'Where do you think you are going?' Olabisi's mother Makalay asked, stepping out of a kitchen made of rusty, corrugated iron sheets. It was leaning so badly, a careless wind during the rainy season would collapse it. 'Finish your work, Olabisi. My husband will be here soon, and he hates waiting for his meal.'

Olabisi fidgeted on her feet. 'There is a group of singers coming from somewhere up the village.'

'So?'

'I ... I just wanted to go outside and watch.'

'Not until you finish your work.'

'By then they will be long gone, Mama. Please, I don't want to miss anything before I go back to Freetown.'

'Well ...'

'I brought the camera Daddy bought me and ...'

'I don't want to hear a word about your useless father in this house. Hear me?'

'Yes, Mama.'

The singers and drummers were closer than before. Olabisi could hear them as if they were about to pass the house. 'Mama, I have to take pictures. Daddy told me ...'

'Are you deaf? You are here to spend your holidays with *me*, not to sing your father's name in my ears. Do we understand each other?'

'Yes, Mama.' *Can I go now?*

'Useless man. Skirt chaser. Is he still chasing women?'

'No, Mama.' *Except that lawyer, Oyah, and she has never called him useless.*

'Hmmmfff! You lie with a straight face, just like you

hopeless father.' After a thoughtful pause, Makalay's angry frown slowly cleared from her face. 'Alright, I'll go with you to watch the dancers. You can become like one of them, you know.'

'Who are they, Mama?'

'Members of the *bondo* secret society. You become a member when you get circumcised.' Makalay released a sweet smile. 'Would you like to become a member?'

'I just want to take pictures.'

The smile froze on Makalay's face, then she sighed. 'Alright, Olabisi, let's do it your father's way for now. Come, let's go.'

Olabisi sprinted ahead of Makalay, dashing into the house through the back door. She bumped a chair out of her way and darted into her bedroom, the one with the window facing the dusty road outside. She had no intention of doing photography from behind a window. Besides, her father had told her to get close to any object she wanted to photograph, wild animals excluded.

Where is the camera? She twisted around on her feet as her eyes searched the room for her back-pack, the bag where she kept most of her favourite things. She remembered shoving the camera inside the bag. *But where is the bag?* There it was, sitting on the floor, at the foot of the bed.

She took two quick steps, grabbed the bag, sat it on the bed and zipped it open. Her hand disappeared into the bag up to the elbow, fingers searching for the camera. She could not find it.

The drummers and singers were almost passing the front door and here she was in her room with her hand

lost inside her bag, rummaging for a camera. Olabisi became frantic and began flinging out of the bag *anything* that did not feel like a camera.

Last week's laundry flew out! Brassieres smelling of sweat, unwashed panties she would kill for if anyone else tried to see them, dirty jeans slaughtered at the knees, slippers, skirts, over-size T-shirts, stolen lipstick ... *the camera*.

She snatched it out of the bag, scattering her remaining things all over the place. Now her room looked as if it had been hit by a bomb. *I will pack later, before Mama starts screaming*. It was time to take the best photographs in the world. She scrambled across the bed on all fours, like a giant crab. Then she flung the window open, leapt out and fell on Makalay like a wild animal.

Her mother exploded. 'Are you going crazy?'

'I'm ... I am sorry, Mama.'

'Did you have to jump out of the window?'

I have said I am sorry. 'No, Mama.'

'You are as hopeless as your father.'

'Yes, Mama.'

Makalay sucked her teeth, hissing like a cobra. 'Foolish girl. Your father is just letting you grow up wild in the city.'

Then she turned to watch the *bondo* women dancing their way up the dusty road. With her camera in her hand, Olabisi took up position a few feet away from Makalay, away from the reach of her quick hand. Some children were running all over the road ahead of the group of dancers. They were noisy, excited, fighting and falling on their distended bellies. Olabisi ignored them and focused on the *bondo* women.

Two drummers and a female masked dancer were leading the group. Each drummer, a woman, had a small drum gripped tight under her armpit, beating it with her palm and a curved, little stick. Olabisi raised the camera to her face and click-clicked away.

The masked dancer wore a giant raffia skirt, extending from the base of her neck to her knees. She was quick on her feet, dancing on her toes in small circles, then in triangles and squares, twisting every which way in harmony with the drums. Her giant raffia skirt fanned out, swishing this way and then that way, with each powerful twist of her body. Olabisi edged closer, trying to capture each breath-taking twist with her camera. *Daddy is going to love this*.

People rushed out of their houses to watch, most of them women and children. Some huddled in front of their houses, while others stood in crowded groups along the road, applauding, hugging and crying. Olabisi took photographs.

Then came the group of half-naked girls. Olabisi counted six. The oldest was about twelve, two years younger than Olabisi. The youngest looked six years old. Each had a *lappa*, a piece of cloth, tied under her armpits, the way women tie towels after having a bath. Their hands, feet and faces were painted bright with white clay.

They were dancing barefoot on the stony road. If Olabisi had danced like that, she would end up with bleeding feet and not wear shoes for days. Yet these girls, including the six-year-old, were stomping the earth without flinching. *They can handle pain*, Olabisi admitted, with grudging respect.

Their song was catchy. Infectious! Even in the short time that she had been taking pictures, Olabisi had mastered the lyrics and was humming along under her breath.

I must take close-up pictures. She began to dance her way down the steps, singing along with the *bondo* girls. For the time being, this could take the place of the nightclubs she was missing until she got back to Freetown. Suddenly, Makalay's hand clamped down on her shoulder and yanked her back. She skidded backwards, as if she had stepped on a banana peel, and landed on her bottom.

'Where are you going, singing and dancing like that?' Makalay was so angry she was shaking. 'Do you think this is Freetown?'

'I ... I ...' Olabisi picked herself up from the ground. 'Daddy said ...'

'Shut up about your father. He is not God.'

'Mama, you are a school teacher, you should understand. I just wanted to take close-up pictures of the girls.'

'Don't you dare go near them, hear me?'

'Yes, Mama.'

'*Gborka!*'

Olabisi frowned. 'Mama ...'

'Yes, I called you *gborka*,' Mama snapped. 'Stupid girl. One day you will come and stay with me permanently and learn your native tongue. You are not a Creole, like your useless father. You are my flesh and blood. You are *Temne*. Understand?'

'You called me a *gborka*.'

'You are a *gborka*. Uncircumcised! That's what *you* are.' Olabisi looked over her shoulders at the half-naked dancers. 'You mean those girls ...'

'They are not girls! They have become women, so talk respectfully when you talk about *them*.'

'There is a six-year-old *child* among them.'

'Did you not hear me say they are now women?' Makalay grabbed Olabisi's left ear and twisted it, hard, like a driver twisting the ignition key of a stubborn car. 'Did you not?'

'Yes, yes, Mama,' Olabisi cried out. 'They are woo-oo ... men!'

Makalay shoved her away. 'If you ever try to go near them again, I will beat you until your skin peels. Do you understand me?'

Olabisi rubbed her left ear. It felt hot. 'I just wanted to take pictures and ask a few questions about the *bondo* secret society.'

'*Subanallah!*' Makalay gasped. 'Go away from here before I lose my temper. In fact, go to the back and finish your work. *Gborka!*'

Olabisi shut her camera, turned around and went to the back of the house to finish doing the dishes. Her heart was heavy with the pain of rejection. *Mama does not know me*, she thought. Back in Freetown, she had been face to face with danger and survived without a scratch.

She had sneaked out of the house and gone with Eddy, her boyfriend, to join a student demonstration against the government. The demonstration had turned into a riot and violence erupted all over the streets. Students ran in panic, scattering from the brutal police

like cockroaches at the flash of a light. Olabisi had been in the thick of it. She was pushed, shoved and knocked about until she thought she was going to die, but did not. Why?

Because I am a woman, she wanted to cry out loud for Makalay to hear. *I can handle pain.*

When she reached the yard, she sat back on the three-legged stool, put the camera on her lap and began to wash the last dish again. Then Makalay came by and stood beside her, as if she wanted to get something off her mind.

'Olabisi,' she said.

'Yes, Mama?'

'If you get circumcised, you will no longer be called a *gborka*. You will be respected as a real woman, fit to be the wife of a paramount chief.'

I don't need a paramount chief. I have Eddy. She shifted to the right and started rinsing the dishes in a near-by bucket.

'Olabisi?'

'Yes, Mama?'

Makalay sat on her heels beside Olabisi, rubbing her back with a gentle hand. 'If you don't get circumcised, no one in this village will ever respect you. No man will ever want to marry you. The riff-raff boys will be after you for sexual fun, like dogs. But if you get circumcised, none of these ugly things will happen to you.' She paused deliberately, to let her words sink into Olabisi's heart. 'Would you like to become a *bondo* woman? I can arrange everything.'

'I ... Daddy will ...'

'Your father will never know, until you tell him.'

'I ... I ... I ...'

'Think of the glory, Olabisi. You will be taught how to be a real woman, how to cook a meal that would make your husband lick his fingers, like a child.'

Eddy eats with a spoon, not with his hands.

'You will be taught how to be a good housewife,' Makalay continued, 'and how to be a wonderful mother to your children. Think of that day, Olabisi. Think of the passing out ceremony, graduation day. You will be dressed in the most beautiful clothes ever, with gold earrings, gold trinkets and all types of jewellery.'

'But Mama, if you love me so much, you can still dress me that way without ...'

'Unless you get circumcised,' Makalay snapped, 'I will not dress you in gold and silver.'

A flash of memory passed through Olabisi's head, like the replay of a movie. Eddy's mother had given birth to a baby boy named Durosemi. After Duro was circumcised, his little penis was wrapped up with fine gauze and regularly soaked with baby oil, to take away the pain of urinating. What a fat joke! The neighbours up the street could hear little Durosemi screaming as if his body had been invaded by military ants.

Olabisi glanced sideways at her mother. 'Mama?'

Makalay dressed her face with an encouraging smile. 'Yes, dear?'

'How do you circumcise a girl when she's not a *boy*?'

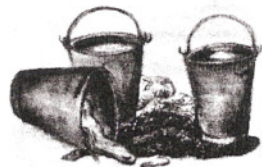
The smile vanished.

'Boys have penises,' Olabisi continued, 'but girls don't. How do you ...?'

Makalay's slap hit Olabisi in the face like a small bomb, toppling her off the stool. The plate she was drying flew from her hand and the camera rolled into the bowl of water. She lay on the ground, eyes and nostrils wide with shock.

'You have started sleeping with boys!' Makalay screamed. 'Gborka!'

I will not cry, Mama, Olabisi did not say out loud. I can bear pain because I am a real woman already.



CHAPTER 2

Olabisi was returning home from a stream later that day, trying to balance a bucket of water on her head, just like Salay and Rugiatu, the two girls ahead of her. Salay was short and stocky, like a well-fed pig, while Rugiatu was tall, skinny and hungry-looking, like a shaved bird.

They were expert bucket-carriers. Since they had left the stream about five minutes ago, chattering like birds, their hands had not even touched the buckets on their heads. Each time Olabisi tried doing the same thing, her bucket began to slide down her head, slopping water all over her body. It happened several times. Now the bucket was half empty.

The girls walked barefoot confidently, while Olabisi hobbled along in slippers. Each girl had her *lappa* tied under her armpit, while Olabisi was wearing a short skirt

and a T-shirt with the words BEACH BUM splashed across the front.

Why are they so different? Olabisi asked herself. *Are they so confident and relaxed because they are circumcised?*

'Hey!' She called out, hurrying after them and spilling more water from her bucket. She did not care. She was trying to investigate a very important matter here. If Mama would not supply the answers, maybe these girls would. They looked like nice girls, about her own age, chatting and laughing without a care in the world.

'Hey, Rugiatu,' she called out, 'are you a *gborka*, or have you been ...' The words died in her throat as the girls ... *froze!* They stood rigidly beneath a cluster of mango trees.

Then they turned to face Olabisi, mouths hanging slack in shock, as if she had snatched their brains. Slowly the look of shock drained from their faces and was replaced by one of anger. Olabisi stepped back, away from the reach of their hate.

'It was just a question,' she said, 'not an insult. You don't have to answer.'

Rugiatu swung down her bucket to the road, then marched up to Olabisi. She looked as if she had swallowed a fly by mistake. She pushed Olabisi hard in the chest. 'What did you call me?'

'Hey!' Olabisi stumbled and fell heavily. The bucket rolled out of her grip and into the bushes. The remaining water ran out. She did not want a fight, but these girls were acting as if she had stolen their chickens and slaughtered them. The short one, Salay, was also putting down her bucket.

Olabisi scrambled back to her feet. 'Look, I don't want a ...'

Rugiatu pushed her again. 'Did you call me a *gborka*? 'It's just a word, okay? A label. I apologise. I take it back. I didn't mean to be rude.'

'No, it's not okay,' Salay joined in. 'You think because you are from the city you are superior to the village girls.'

'That's why you walk around with your chin stuck up in the air like you are somebody special,' Rugiatu continued. 'You are wrong. You are *nothing*.'

'Come on, girls. It was a joke.'

'Then why aren't we laughing?' Salay asked, edging closer.

'Did you call me a *girl*?' Rugiatu gathered the hem of her *lappa* and tied it firmly around her waist, like a belt. 'You need a lesson in manners.'

'Look, we don't have to fight over this.' Olabisi switched on a quick smile, like a politician. '*Gborka* is just a word like ...' She searched her brain for ideas. '... like mango, banana, Chinua Achebe, Shakespeare, things fall apart ...'

Then things really fell apart.

Rugiatu spat in her face, a thick wad of mucus. Olabisi's breath stopped in her throat. Without stopping to think she kicked Rugiatu in the stomach, unexpectedly, the way Eddy had taught her to protect herself. Rugiatu doubled over with pain and Olabisi punched her jaw. Hard! Rugiatu fell like cut wood.

Salay rushed forward with fingers ready to scratch Olabisi's face to ribbons. Olabisi stepped aside, gripped

Salay's *lappa* and ripped it off her body. The effect was electrifying! Salay's eyes flew wide open with shock. She was standing naked, except for a pair of cotton pants. Around her waist were several heavy layers of coloured beads.

Olabisi started to laugh.

Rugiatu immediately attacked Olabisi like a mad dog. Olabisi felt her face burn as Rugiatu's fingers scraped some skin off the back of her neck. She screamed and lashed out blindly with her fists. The first blow missed. The second one caught the slighter Rugiatu on the side of the head and she fell like a sack of rotten potatoes.

Olabisi had not planned it, but a feeling of madness had filled her head. She pounced, sat on the chest of the fallen girl and began to rip off her *lappa*. Nothing in the world could stop her now. She tore the *lappa* to shreds, then went for the pants and beads around Rugiatu's waist. She gave them a sharp jerk. 'Now, I am going to see what you have between your legs that was circumcised,' she shouted.

She was aware of a shadow *rushing* at her, then something blunt and heavy hit her on the head like a falling coconut. She saw stars, plenty of them, before a dark cloud came and blotted them out.

Later, when focus returned to her eyes, Olabisi found herself in her bed, staring up at Makalay's worried face. It was so close she could feel her mother's hot breath on her skin.

'Why did you do it?' Makalay hissed, like an angry cobra. 'Why did you try to look at the circumcised state of the *sowey's* daughters?'

Olabisi tried to sit up, and pain shot through her head. 'Ouch! My head.' She clutched her head between her hands. 'What happened, Mama? Why ...' Then it all came back in a flash. 'She hit me on the head. Salay hit my head with a rock.'

'Why do you have to bring me trouble instead of peace in this village? Is this the way you behave in Freetown?'

Olabisi examined her head with her fingers. 'At least my head is not broken,' she said.

Makalay grabbed Olabisi by the shoulders and shook her so hard her teeth rattled. 'Are you listening to me? Those girls are the daughters of Yah Posseh, the *Digba sowey*, the head of the circumcisers.'

'I am not afraid of her. Her daughters started the fight.'

Makalay slapped Olabisi's face. Once! Twice! 'Oh Olabisi! Don't you realise that Yah Posseh is very, very powerful? She controls the spirits, the *bondo* gods, whose law you have broken.'

Olabisi held her stinging cheeks. 'All I did was ask a question, and they started fighting me as if I had killed their goat.'

'You did worse than that, you stupid girl. You stripped two *bondo* girls naked and looked at their private parts. You! A *gborka!*'

'They didn't respect me, Mama. When I was bathing in the stream, they did not look away. They were staring at me, like I was amoeba.'

Makalay's hands shook near Olabisi's throat. 'You are a *gborka*, a stupid, uncircumcised girl. How many times do I have to explain it? They can look at you naked, but you should never so much as glance at their nakedness.'

'But they are not boys, Mama. What do they have that I don't have?'

'They are virgins.'

'Me too!'

'Liar!' Makalay slapped her again. 'It seems to me that you are like your father. How do I know if you can control your sexual appetite?'

'I can, Mama. I am a virgin, just like your *bondo* girls.'

Makalay snorted. 'Stop your lies! I examined you while you were unconscious. If you are a virgin, then I am the wife of a paramount chief.'

Olabisi flushed with shame. She felt invaded, assaulted, raped! By her own mother. *What do you do with a mother like this?* 'How could you do this to me, Mama?' she asked plaintively.

'If your father cannot control you, I can,' Makalay blazed. 'I will reduce your appetite for boys. You will be circumcised.'

'I don't want to be circumcised.'

Suddenly, there was an uproar outside, like that of an outraged mob of women, yelling for blood.

'What is happening, Mama?' Olabisi's voice was full of fear.

'Yah Posseh is here, with the *bondo* women, to demand that you be circumcised for what you did.'

Olabisi shrank back from her mother. 'I have not done anything wrong. I ... I was just ... I was just ...'

'That's enough. Shut up!'

Olabisi shut up.

'You cannot escape the consequences of your wrong doing,' Makalay gave Olabisi a furious look, then marched out of the room. She slammed the door so hard that Olabisi thought the shaky house might flip on to its side. The moment Makalay was gone from the room, Olabisi sprang to the window and opened it a crack. She pressed an eye to the narrow opening. What she saw outside made her flesh crawl with fear.

Madness! A crazy mob of women was in front of the house, waving knives, machetes, sticks and other assorted ugly weapons. They had enough to start a civil war. Olabisi began to sweat.

A stooped woman, walking as if she were about to fall on her face, was leading the madness. She was as black as midnight, with flat eyes like a snake's. Her raffia skirt went past her knees, but did not reach the bells chained to her ankles. She was wearing enough amulets to break a camel's back, Olabisi thought. On either side of her, like two stone gods, stood her daughters, Rugiatu and Salay. *This is Yah Posseh*, Olabisi realised.

She is very, very powerful, Makalay had said.

Olabisi began to feel like a mouse watching a cat. She shivered. From the crack in the window, her eye caught movement. It was Makalay stepping out of the house to face the heaving mass of women. They wanted blood! *Can Mama control them?*

Yah Posseh lifted her hand, like a salute, and the madness subsided. The women stood in brooding anger, like a range of volcanoes, waiting for their leader to give

the word. Then they would erupt all over the place if necessary.

'Makalay?' Yah Posseh's mouth was full of missing teeth.

'Naa,' Makalay replied.

'Your daughter from the city has offended the spirits of our ancestors, the gods of our traditions. The spirits demand that she must be circumcised.'

'Whatever the spirits say,' Makalay said, 'I will do.'

Olabisi could not believe her ears. *Is Mama crazy?*

'Bring her to the camp this evening. If you disobey, the spirits will make things difficult for you during childbirth.'

'Don't say that! Please. I am pregnant.'

'That is why you should tell your husband to help you bring this child to the *bondo* camp.'

'Dauda is not here. He went to ...'

'He is on his way.'

Dauda is *on his way*? Olabisi closed the window and leapt down on to the bed. She dragged her back-pack towards her, sat it on the bed and began to stuff it with her dirty slips, pants, blouses and jeans.

Jeans! She stepped out of her skirt and wriggled into the jeans. She put on her running shoes and did up the laces. Then she hoisted the back-pack on to her back, passing her hands through the shoulder straps. She squared her shoulders to distribute the weight of the back-pack and hurried over to the door. She opened it a crack, and stuck out her head. There was no one around.

She tip-toed across the sitting room to the back door. *So far, so good*, she thought, *there is no one around*. Then the

front door burst open behind her. 'Olabisi! Stop right there.'

Mama's husband! Olabisi whipped the back door open and sprinted out, running as if her feet were on fire. She could hear Makalay and her husband give chase. There was nothing to fear from Makalay. She could not even outrun a snail.

Mama's husband, Dauda, was a different case. He was as stubborn as a brainless goat. Already, Olabisi could feel him shortening the distance between them.

God, please don't let him catch me. Fear gave power to her legs and she raced away like the wind. Dauda was behind her like a shadow, closing the gap between them so fast, Olabisi imagined she could feel his hot breath at the back of her neck. She began to panic.

Then she saw her bucket! It was still lying beside the footpath where it had fallen from her grip, beneath the cluster of mango trees. An idea lit up inside her mind. Would it work? There was only one way to find out.

Without slowing down, she stooped, scooped up the empty bucket and flung it behind her in one smooth move. The bucket flew towards Dauda's legs and crashed into them. He fell like a roll of thunder. Olabisi was sure she felt the ground shake under her feet. She threw a brief glance over her shoulders. Dauda had fallen on his face as if he wanted to eat the earth. It would be some time before he felt like running again.

Olabisi disappeared into the thick bush.