

Door Into The Dark

Mama and dada were in Chinatown with Rani. While they were away I introduced mom and dad to Ryszard Kapuściński. There's this Polish journalist, I said, who covered twenty-seven revolutions and coups in Africa and Latin America. Then I took my copy of *The Soccer War* from the shelf, and turned it to a chapter where Kapuściński is in Nigeria. They were intrigued; mom looked at the chapter and, as the three of us sat at the kitchen table, read the first paragraph out loud to us:

January 1966. In Nigeria a civil war was going on. I was a correspondent covering the war. On a cloudy day I left Lagos. On the outskirts police were stopping all cars. They were searching the trunks, looking for weapons. They ripped open sacks of corn: could there be ammunition in that corn? Authority ended at the city line.

She paused, and flipped forward to see how long the chapter was. Six pages. She continued reading, and read the story right through, with minimum editorial interruption from dad and me. Mom's reading was clear and controlled, the reading of a practiced reader, which she was not.

Kapuściński's story centered on UPGA (pronounced as one word, like Apgar), the majority Yoruba party, and NNDP (each letter sounded out), the minority party in the region. NNDP, the Nigerian National Democratic Party, held the power. UPGA, the United Progressive Grand Alliance, was fighting it with an insurgency. Such lovely names. But these splendid organizations were cutting people to pieces.

The story took both mom and dad back to their youth, when they lived in the region through which Kapuściński was traveling, precisely at the time he was traveling through it. They figured out, from his description, the exact route he must have taken on his drive through a country seized with the madness of war. Mom was in her teens then, and she'd known Chief Awolowo well. She had spent some time in his house when he was languishing in a federal jail for being national leader of UPGA.

He's a good writer, mom said, referring to Kapuściński, his sentences are so short and clear. Then she put the book down, and both she and dad began to recount what that time had been like for them. They remembered the road blocks well, the burning buildings, the political fervor. Dad said, he would have gone by that old road, the dusty one that cuts through Ikorodu, up North to Ijebuland. I said, not the Lagos-Ibadan Expressway? Not at all, dad said, the Expressway wasn't built yet.

Kapuściński, as he put it in his narrative, had escaped with a beating or two. Other white men had been killed. Many more (innumerable more) Nigerians had died.

My father was only a schoolteacher, mom said, but he was also the local UPGA chairman. I remember the cries of one man, she said, her voice suddenly darkening like a landscape when it is covered by fast moving clouds. I remember a man who passed in the street in front of our house calling out to my father by name. He was an NNDP man, and some young men were taking him out to a field to kill him. Please save me Olanlokun! This kind of desperate cry. The sound of a man begging for his life is like no other sound in the world, a sound I can never forget. My father was home, but he did not come out. He did nothing. But the man wasn't killed, mom said, they didn't kill him.

I did not believe that last part. I thought mom had changed the story, to make herself feel better. Perhaps she hadn't intentionally changed it, only misremembered. She perhaps later saw someone once who looked like the man who was to have been killed that afternoon, and made herself believe that this was that man, that the executioners had heard his pleas and released him in the field. But that would be unlike executioners, I thought. Once the blood rises, there's no turning back until someone else's blood is spilled.

But another time, mom said, there were some killings by UPGA people. My father wasn't there when it happened, but he must have been involved. As the local boss, he would have known something about it; he might have given the order. Anyway, there was a witness at one of the meetings, and he fingered several people.

Five men were to be arrested including my father. When the police came for him, they arrived with a unit commander who was a friend of his. This was during Ramadan, and there were guests in the house, breaking fast, praying. The commander held his troops back under the pretext that he would check out the situation, then he ran upstairs and warned my father, and my father escaped through the back. Then the commander came outside and brought the unit in: They say he's upstairs, let's go! My father was by then safely in his brother's house, in another part of town. That was where the legend began. For a long time afterward, the whole town believed that my father had a powerful juju that could make him disappear. There was no other explanation for how he gave an entire armed unit the slip.

Later on, weeks later, another unit was sent to arrest him. This time the exits were well guarded, the back of the house, and all along the sides. They led my father away. But the witness, the person who had helped the police crack the case, hadn't seen my father very well. The unit commander this time around was someone else, someone who was coincidentally also named Olanlokun, same as my father. He was not a friend of my father's but he knew him by reputation and liked him. At the line-up, the new unit commander whispered to his namesake to remove his glasses. The witness could not identify my father, who was never seen without glasses, in the line-up. My father was freed, but the other four men who had been arrested, his friends, were all sent to prison. They were in solitary for eighteen months, until power changed hands and they were released.

Kapuściński: The whole land of the Yoruba is in flames. It's a strange thing to read, as if this land of the Yorubas that was in flames were not where I myself grew up, as though it were some life-threatening territory on the far side of the moon.

Who remembers Atobatele, my mother said, or Areogun, or Ogunmakin? They were ordinary men in our town: farmers, government clerks, traders. Mom had a far away look in her eyes. They died for nothing, she said, or we have forgotten what they died for if they died for anything at all.

Even before I brought my parents and Kapuściński together, I had been wondering about the narrator of my novel-in-progress, a young psychiatrist named Julius. How would I bring his grandparents together with my own? I had to decide how permeable to make the boundaries between my fiction and the faraway truths out of which they were growing. The revelations about my grandfather made things no easier: now I was faced with the decision of how to make the private public. In writing this now, in telling these stories which vibrate somewhere around the truth, I defer the matter.

For me, grandpa had essentially been an intelligent old man, a local luminary I was proud to be related to. My forehead was high like his, I wore the same coke-bottle glasses, without which I was also unrecognizable. I had the same small and squinty eyes as he did. We idealized each other as people do when they are more than a generation apart. On the occasions when I spent time with him, he was interested in how I did at school, and he delighted in having amiable youngsters around, especially me, the first male descendant in his line. Grandpa had a son who was younger than me, by a wife who was only a little older than my mother. Until that son, he had had only daughters, eight of them. I was, in a sense, his first son. He did not tell me about his many grim capers before he became grandfatherly. There was nothing, certainly, about bodies dumped in the fields.

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Spending time with mom and dad, the past emerges in sharp, tiny fragments; new facts join the old in creating my picture of what's happened in our lives, and what's happening. I feel this especially through the Yoruba. I speak the language fluently, but with mom and dad, I have to redefine fluency, because theirs far exceeds mine. Their Yoruba speech is garnished with apothegms, allusions and proverbs, an everyday language imbued with luxurious texture. Dad has a habit of using rare proverbs, and when he does, he seeks my face for signs of comprehension. I almost always understand the general outline of what's meant, and that allows me to cover my shame at not having heard the particular turn of phrase before, or in not catching its exact interpretation. My parents, in testing me this way, are my access to things past.

We were talking about Soyinka, and then about Duro Ladipo and Hubert Ogunde. These are the lions of the Yoruba theater. The traveling theatrical troupes

of Ladipo and Ogunde used to come to town when my parents were young. Ogunde, mom began to tell me, was more popular in his approach. He was a specialist in farces; he was also married to all his actresses, all at the same time. There were over a dozen of them. Ladipo, on the other hand, was more scholarly, a Yoruba anthropologist working within the Yoruba tradition. His plays were researches, bringing out forms and stories that were, by the 60s and 70s, lost to the public.

Are he and the members of his company still alive? No, mom said, dead. But she didn't say dead. She used an expression I'd never heard: *awon iyen ti file b'ora*. How struck I was by the beauty of the phrase: those ones have taken earth as a robe. Or: they have covered their flesh with earth.

Mom wasn't trying to be poetic. It was a normal locution, one that was comfortably nestled within the language. It had perhaps occurred to her, instead of the commonplace *won ti ku*, because we were discussing old things. There was something familiar about it, something uncanny, even, something in the intimacy it implied between flesh and earth, that I thought I must have heard it before. But I could not follow the memory, or make it emerge more fully.

My mother, mom said, her attention settling on another aspect of the past, is being troublesome again. She's stuck on the same thing every time I talk to her, and I've told her I don't want to hear it.

My grandmother lives in Nigeria. She's just over eighty now. Her life has been hard, as an itinerant trader, as the owner of a small provisions shop, as one of my grandfather's five wives and by no means the best-treated of them all. But my grandfather's dead, and my grandmother has moved out of his house and now lives in the two-story building her daughters built her. She's a women's leader, a kind of deaconness, at the local mosque. She goes to parties, to market and to evening prayers. She sits in the security of her own house, in the company of her second daughter who, like her, is widowed.

She has a single obsession, mom said, and that's her burial rites. I must be buried the same day I die, she'll say, mom said, and I'll say, yes mother, I hear you. And I must not be buried at the house, because what's rotten must be thrown out. I hear you mother, what's rotten must be thrown out. And for seven days, food must be cooked and taken to the mosque and served to the poor, are you listening to me? Yes mother, yes, cook food, take it to the mosque, serve it to the poor.

And most importantly, my mother would say, mom said, most importantly, in the cupboard in the room that's next to the meeting-room in the house, you'll find my robes, the ones I must be buried in. Those are my burial robes, Kadijatu. Those robes and no other, you are listening? Yes mother, you've told me before. And she would say, yes I told you, and I don't want any mistakes about it. Only those robes, else why did I go to Mecca? Eh? Tell me, why did I become an Alhaja if I'm not to meet my maker wearing the robes with which I approached the Kaaba?

She repeats the same thing until I'm exhausted, mom said, and I just don't want to hear it! I know what her problem is: it's her husband. He was buried in front of the house, the old family house, and that bothers her. She wants the cemetery and

nowhere else. And he wasn't buried in his Hajj clothes. And so she weeps every year on the anniversary. Oh, if they had asked me, I would have told them. I knew where he kept the robes, but no one asked me. Oh, poor Olanlokun, buried in ordinary clothes, like one who had not been to Mecca. And so, mom said, she tells me and she tells my sisters, and she tells her younger cousins, and probably anyone on the street who would listen: This room, this cupboard, these robes. I want no mistakes. No mistakes.

The Hajj had transfigured my grandmother. Through that journey, through the progression through various crowded airports, until she saw Mount Arafat and did her seven-fold circumambulation of the Kaaba, through her accomplishment of one of the central tenets of Islam, she had sloughed off her old life and had taken on a new one that put her into a precise relationship with eternity. In 1998, the year of her journey, most of the Nigerian pilgrims had been turned back, and my grandmother was one of a few hundred who got through. When she came back, everyone took to calling her Alhaja Lucky. To fit the moniker, she wore the perpetually serene mien of someone who had solved a long troubling problem.

My mother, an Anglican Christian, had financed the journey, knowing what it would mean to her mother to fulfil this final pillar of the faith. But, possibly, she'd had no idea how much it would mean. She'd anticipated the social fillip grandma would get from it, but had not counted on the much more serious existential grounding that it brought with it.

This matter of robes, I said, I think grandma's right. Mom shot me a look, having fully expected me to side with her. My train of unspoken thought just then was: Grandma is fortunate to have something in her possession that is so sacred to her, something of such surpassing worth that she wishes to have it on when she meets God. This sense of the sacred was everywhere under threat.

Alhaja Lucky's robes hang in a cupboard in the back room of her house, awaiting second use. I tried to figure what in my life was similarly weighty, and as I searched, I heard in my mind's ear the sweet ping of a lock springing open: I'd suddenly remembered what mom's earlier expression about flesh reminded me of, and it was, of all things, a Middle English lyric:

Erthe took of erthe, erth wyth wogh;
Erthe other erthe to the erthe drough;
Erthe leyde erthe in erthen through:
Than hadde erthe of erthe erthe ynough.

My heart growled with a desire to hold the moment. Mom and dad, young when I came into their lives – much younger than I am now – were getting old, aging before my eyes at a kitchen table in Brooklyn, led by our conversation into the byways of memory, into regions of their life stories that were opaque to me and becoming faint even to them.

Mom had laughed, and dad and I had laughed too when she read, in Kapuściński's story:

On both sides of the road, there was a village and the villagers had been watching the action. The people were silent; somebody in the crowd was holding up an UPGA banner. They all had photographs of Chief Awolowo pinned on their shirts. I liked the girls best. They were naked to the waist and had the name of the party written across their breasts: UP on the right breast and GA on the left one.

What, I wondered to myself, was that thing that was slipping from one generation to another, assuming a different shape in each, from grandparents to parents to children, across oceans and countries?

Then mama and dada and Rani returned from Chinatown. They had come with whole hens, bok choy, herbs, and salmon. Conversations shifted back into English, to accommodate the Indian in-laws, and turned to more immediate matters. The women began cooking, peeling potatoes, breaking the arms off the birds and we, the men, the three husbands, sat in the living room doing what men do when women are cooking, which is to say, nothing.