The Iroko Fell at Oke-Ariwo

A Novel

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The Iroko Fell at Oke-Ariwo
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Chapter 1: The Last Bar of Signal

The tarred road ended forty minutes after Ogbomoso, and my father said, "Hold on to something," as if that were a normal thing to say in a car.

The Highlander dropped off the edge of the asphalt onto red earth and kept going. The whole car tilted. Kemi, in the back seat beside me, grabbed the door handle and started praying out loud, which was what Kemi did about everything. My cousin Seun, squeezed in on her other side with his knees against the seat in front of him, said, "Uncle, is this a road or a suggestion?"

"It's a road," my father said. "It was a road when I was your age, anyway."

"When you were our age, was it this red?"

"Redder." My father glanced at us in the rearview mirror and almost smiled. "There were no cars then. Only bicycles and okada and one lorry on Thursdays."

My mother, in the front passenger seat, held her phone up toward the windshield. "One bar," she said. "Tobi, if you want to send anything to anybody, send it now."

I already had my phone out. I had been watching the signal disappear for the last half hour, one bar at a time, the way you watch the last biscuit in the packet. I opened my group chat with the boys from my football team in Surulere and typed fast.

Entering the village. If I don't come back, tell Coach I was a good striker.

I pressed send. The little circle spun.

The car hit a hole the size of a bathtub. Kemi said, "Jesus!" which was a prayer and not a swear, at least when Kemi said it. My phone flew out of my hand and landed under the front seat.

By the time I found it, the message had a red exclamation mark next to it, and the signal bar was gone.

*

I should explain why I was in that car at all.

It was the second week of August, the rainy-season holiday. I was sixteen, in SS2, and I had plans. Real plans. A football tournament in Surulere. My friend Bayo's cousin was coming from London with a new PlayStation. There was a girl from church named Toyin who had once laughed at

something I said, and I was fairly sure that if I stood near her at youth fellowship for two more Sundays, she would do it again.

Instead, my father announced at dinner one night in July that we were going to Oke-Ariwo for two weeks.

Oke-Ariwo was his village. The place he was born. I had been there exactly once, when I was five, and the only thing I remembered was a goat that ate my sandal while it was still on my foot.

"Why?" I had asked.

"Two reasons," my father said. "First, I'm going to run a free clinic. Your mother and I. There is no doctor within sixty kilometers of that village, and I have been meaning to do this for twenty years." He put down his fork. "Second, your grandmother is seventy-nine years old and lives alone at the end of a dirt road, and I am going to try one more time to convince her to come and live with us in Lagos."

"She'll say no," my mother had said, very gently.

"I know," said my father. "I'm going to ask anyway."

So here I was. In a car on a road that wasn't a road, with a dead phone and a sister who was praying about potholes and a cousin who wouldn't stop talking.

*

Seun had joined us in Ibadan that morning. He was my father's brother's son, sixteen like me, born two months after me, which he never let me forget because, according to him, it meant he was younger and better looking. He was tall and thin and had a laugh that started in his shoulders. He made jokes about everything. It took me years to understand that he made the most jokes when he was the most afraid.

He was making a lot of jokes on that road.

"Uncle, if we die here, who gets my phone?"

"Nobody wants your phone," said Kemi.

"Kemi wants my phone. Everybody can see it in her eyes."

"I'm praying," Kemi said. "Leave me alone."

Kemi was thirteen and small for her age and had decided, sometime around her ninth birthday, that God was listening to her personally at all times. She prayed before meals and after meals. She prayed for traffic. She prayed for the cat next door. She prayed out loud in public, in the market, in

the bank, while strangers stared. I found it embarrassing. I also found, if I was honest, that I didn't have anything like it.

I had gone to church every Sunday of my life. I knew the songs. I could find any book in the Bible faster than anyone in my youth group. I had said the sinner's prayer at a camp when I was ten. But if you had asked me, that August, whether I had ever needed God for anything, I would have had to think about it for a long time.

I didn't know yet that I was driving straight toward the answer.

*

We crossed the bridge at 4:40 in the afternoon.

It was the only way into Oke-Ariwo from the south. A narrow concrete bridge, old and cracked, with rusted iron rails on both sides and a dip in the middle where the concrete had sagged. Below it, a river ran fast and brown, swollen from the early rains. On the far bank, the forest came right down to the water, thick and dark, so tall that the trees leaned over the river like people trying to see what was coming.

"The Odo-Aro," my father said quietly. "The Black Water."

"It's brown," said Seun.

"At night it's black. You'll see."

The car rolled slowly onto the bridge. I felt the concrete flex under us. Just slightly. The way a diving board gives before it throws you.

Kemi stopped praying out loud and started praying silently, which was worse, because it meant she was actually scared.

In the middle of the bridge, right where it dipped, there was something tied to the left railing. A strip of white cloth, faded and gray from the weather, knotted around the iron. Under it, on the concrete, there was a small clay bowl with something dark and dried inside it, and three cowrie shells.

"What's that?" I asked.

My father kept his eyes on the road. "An offering," he said. "For the river."

"For the river?"

"For what they believe lives in it."

Nobody said anything else until we reached the other side.