

When we got to Ezi Icheke, cars lined the road almost bumper to bumper. The crowds that pressed around the cars were so dense there was no space between people and they blended into one another, wrappers blended into T-shirts, trousers into skirts, dresses into shirts. Auntie Ifeoma finally found a spot and eased the station wagon in. The mmuo had started to walk past, and often a long line of cars waited for an mmuo to walk past so they could drive on. Hawkers were at every corner, with glass-enclosed cases of akara and suya and browned chicken drumsticks, with trays of peeled oranges, with coolers the size of bathtubs full of Walls banana ice cream. It was like a vibrant painting that had come alive. I had never been to see mmuo, to sit in a stationary car alongside thousands of people who had all come to watch. Papa had driven us past the crowds at Ezi Icheke once, some years ago, and he muttered about ignorant people participating in the ritual of pagan masquerades. He said that the stories about mmuo, that they were spirits who had climbed out of ant holes, that they could make chairs run and baskets hold water, were all devilish folklore. *Devilish Folklore*. It sounded dangerous the way Papa said it.

“Look at this,” Papa-Nnukwu said. “This is a woman spirit, and the women *mmuo* are harmless. They do not even go near the big ones at the festival.” The mmuo he pointed to was small; its carved wooden face had angular, pretty features and rouged lips. It stopped often to dance, wiggling this way and that, so that the string of beads around its waist swayed and rippled. The crowds nearby cheered, and some people threw money toward it. Little boys—the followers of the mmuo who were playing music with metal ogenes and wooden ichakas—picked up the crumpled naira notes. They had hardly passed us when Papa Nnukwu shouted, “Look away! Women cannot look at this one!”

The mmuo making its way down the road was surrounded by a few elderly men who rang a shrill bell as the mmuo walked. Its mask was a real, grimacing human skull with sunken eye sockets. A squirming tortoise was tied to its forehead. A snake and three dead chickens hung from its grass-covered body, swinging as the mmuo walked. The crowds near the road moved back quickly, fearfully. A few women turned and dashed into nearby compounds.

Aunty Ifeoma looked amused, but she turned her head away. “Don’t look, girls. Let’s humor your grandfather,” she said in English. Amaka had already looked away. I looked away, too, toward the crowd of people that pressed around the car. It was sinful, deferring to a heathen masquerade. But at least I had looked at it very briefly, so maybe it would technically not be deferring to a heathen masquerade.

“That is our *agwonatumbe*,” Papa-Nnukwu said, proudly, after the mmuo had walked past. “It is the most powerful *mmuo* in our parts, and all the neighboring villages fear Abba because of it. At last year’s Aro festival, *agwonatumbe* raised a staff and all the other *mmuo* turned and ran! They didn’t even wait to see what would happen!”

“Look!” Obiora pointed at another mmuo moving down the road. It was like a floating white cloth, flat, taller than the huge avocado tree in our yard in Enugu. Papa-Nnukwu grunted as the mmuo went by. It was eerie, watching it, and I thought then of chairs running, their four legs knocking together, of water being held in a basket, of human forms climbing out of ant holes.

“How do they do that, Papa-Nnukwu? How do people get inside that one?” Jaja asked.

“Shh! These are *mmuo*, spirits! Don’t speak like a woman!” Papa-Nnukwu snapped, turning to glare at Jaja.

Aunty Ifeoma laughed and spoke in English. “Jaja, you’re not supposed to say there are people in there. Didn’t you know that?”

“No,” Jaja said.

She was watching Jaja. “You didn’t do the *ima mmuo*, did you? Obiora did it two years ago in his father’s hometown.”

“No, I didn’t,” Jaja mumbled.

I looked at Jaja and wondered if the dimness in his eyes was shame. I suddenly wished, for him, that he had done the *ima mmuo*, the initiation into the spirit world. I knew very little about it; women were not supposed

to know anything at all, since it was the first step toward the initiation to manhood. But Jaja once told me that he heard that boys were flogged and made to bathe in the presence of a taunting crowd. The only time Papa had talked about ima mmuo was to say that the Christians who let their sons do it were confused, that they would end up in hellfire.

We left Ezi Icheke soon afterward. Auntie Ifeoma dropped off a sleepy Papa-Nnukwu first; his good eye was half closed while his going-blind eye stayed open, the film covering it looked thicker now, like concentrated milk. When Auntie Ifeoma stopped inside our compound, she asked her children if they wanted to come into the house, and Amaka said no, in a loud voice that seemed to prompt her brothers to say the same. Auntie Ifeoma took us in, waved to Papa, who was in the middle of a meeting, and hugged Jaja and me in her tight way before leaving.

That night, I dreamed that I was laughing, but it did not sound like my laughter, although I was not sure what my laughter sounded like. It was cackling and throaty and enthusiastic, like Auntie Ifeoma's.