The Spirit

I can't tell nice stories, I simply can't! My experiences have mostly been dark, shaped largely by external forces. The "goods" in it are mine, I found them, made them, just as the "goods" in it could be yours, to find, or make.

I hope not to slice off my head in the bid to play the disinterested role of writing myself from without.

I'm afraid I am being sent to the gallows, what with the insistence that I must be vulnerable as I tell my story.

Prologue: The world of my beating was not shaped by beauty. It was one filled with death. My refusal to cry from a beating was reinforced by what was about me. Madness was rife. Death was common. The love of money had risen to new heights as babies were the target of ritual killings to monetary ends. My infant brother was stolen from our home, found later in woods to be used for money. There was such a time, more like a season when one had to take hold of their privates for fear of them being taken by black magic. We all walked about funnily, clutching at our crotches and breasts. It was such a bad time for a child who must endure seeing dead bodies fester on the streets without paramedic intervention, nearly every day. It was bad for mothers too, who must scold as they must love. Mothers were victims of a double consciousness that must love or tear down, and it was often with their first born.

"Omo to bani iya e oni sun, owun no oni sun." "A child that says his mother will not sleep, that child will not sleep too."

Part 1: The Beatings
I remember the first time I was beaten and was mindful of it. Oode sare! O duro, on wo mi! "Why won't you run, why do you stand there and stare?" It was by my mother. I should have cried but didn't especially when it was a toilet brush broken over my head. I stood there, motionless, staring at my mother as the blood trickled. I knew what tears were, felt them when I had fallen down stone steps or when I had tried to run from my mother's beating hand and had fallen headlong into the door's keen edge. I was four. But by the time the toilet brush was broken over my head, I had been beaten so many times by my mother that rather than run, something else had replaced a normal reaction. I would just stand there and stare. Why my mother admonished me to run as she inflicted what was to her, precautionary discipline one could only wonder, what was sure was, she'd cry at seeing me

injured so, or rush me to the hospital after beating me so badly. It was not her fault, she wanted me to live, grow up, be a man, one beyond the government's hand, for criminals were killed by firing squad, and televised to warn young men away from armed robbery. I was not blameless. I had my shenanigans, told fibs and got in trouble for mixing with the wrong crowd. My mother feared the worst for me. Who could blame her? "The good child belonged to the father, the bad one the mother," as the saying goes in my culture. Driven perhaps by foreboding fear that I was on the wrong path, she took charge of the situation and shipped me off to boarding school.

The beating got worse. It was not only mother who beat me now but men, senior boys who by power of some position or just sadism exacted some of the cruelest punishments on boundary breakers and I was one of them. You woke up spending the first light dawn fetching water for some senior or the other at the infamous 24 Taps, ironing their clothes too, or doing some chore for them before proceeding to take care of yourself at the expense of dining and morning assembly; a lot of the time, you missed breakfast and went to class on an empty stomach. In the afternoon your siesta was often interrupted by bullying or fagging by one of the eldest boys. I "dodged" the hostels electing to avoid any interaction with anyone above my class. Soon I was labeled the artful dodger and thus *hunted* by every senior who must beat a pupil. Though the wilderness in which the classrooms were was filled with every myth told by a boarder, such as the high-flying white shirt at night, strange creatures like the bush baby, it was there I slept most nights to escape the hands of the bullies who must beat me. Whenever I was found, these *monsters* would gather about me and in turns beat me, the intensity of their flogging growing with my refusal to run or cry. Coming home for the holidays was no relief. Boarding school had exposed *all* of my shortcomings and I brought home a report card filled with a litany of wrongdoing from my teachers, housemasters, and the principal. Mother's love was not lukewarm, it was hot with two shades; it was a love that quickly gave a hard hand as it was one that quickly kissed and felt you in incomprehensible ways. My mother never yelled at me when she beat me, she spoke poetry, one attendant to social milieu. The beating would carry on till the spirit came.

Part 2: The Spirit

It was I who brought the spirit. This was my mother's accusation. My brother, her pride and joy, had fallen sick all of a sudden, and as she proceeded up the stair from work that afternoon, I had heard her say, "that good-for-nothing boy has brought this illness on my son."

The day before the accusation, I had run away from home and for the first time, not from the beating I had received to that point but from what my father might have done to me during the beating as he stopped, hissed and went to fetch whatever from his wardrobe. It might have been a charm, who knows, something worse than the horsewhip I was being flogged with.

The spirit took, that was what it did. For when it took, it shook the person, tossed them vigorously about, flung them into the fire if the flames were close to the frenzy. When it took my brother, it imbued him with the strength of three men, the rage of paranoia taken hold too. “Lord take him,” my mother would say, “please take him, the suffering is too much,” she’d cry out whenever the spirit took my brother. I would send my mother out and lock myself in with the possessed, taking on the blows of madness. Whenever the spirit took him, my brother would grab his stomach as though there was something in it he must spit out. I never knew what happened when the spirit took me, it was what my brothers told me after I had gotten back home from being in the hospital for three days. The boys didn’t talk to me at first, they simply marveled at my swollen arm, taken in by the sores on either side of my mouth, till one of them gave up the incident.

The spirit took me Christmas morning of 1989 and according to my brother, I grew paranoid and ran from everyone, calling for my cousin, screaming with dilated eyes, “they are trying to kill me! they are trying to kill me! they are trying to kill me!” It took the entire neighborhood to put me in the car for the hospital and this was after I had kicked out one of car doors off its hinges.

Our heads, my brother’s and I’s were the subject of a thousand neurological pins. Next were the native doctors who, despite having me travel into some for forest to fetch seven stones, could not figure out the spirit. Last and before leaving us and the spirit be, were the Islamic sheikhs who marked me and my brother seven times with a knife on both our chests and backs. My mother didn’t beat me anymore, my father too. On the strength of my parents’ love for my brother, I was loved also, given attention like an only child. My brother gave up his ghost to the spirit at the age of 19. My father cried. My mom wept. My siblings too. Despite the funeral arrangement falling on me as the eldest child, since according to my culture, parents were not allowed to attend their children’s burial, not a tear marked my face.

Part 3: The Tears.
Several years passed and the spirit came and went, taking me as it pleased, only less and less.

I was at the university now, the darling of all eyes, my mother and father proud, on to be an engineer. The spirit gone, gone to God knows wherethe marks on my chest lost to the washings of time. I prayed now, not from fear but from gratitude; I lived now, unburdened by responsibility of a first born who must count. But the day came when responsibility for someone else found me, it was a cold night of fright and contention.

It was 2 am; hush was the college dormitory. Panic seized the serenity forged out of sleep all of sudden. “Where is he, where is he, where is the priest?!” There was a throng outside my door and a guy with it screaming “metaphysics to you I shall not concede”.

He was strong, lost, eyes dilated like the possessed. The men who had brought the crazed, looked at me with expectation; *to what*, I thought, *heal the boy?*

With a few good men, I carried the ailing boy to the dispensary. On getting there, he’s belted about and jabbed with lagatin.

The nurse singled me out to stay with the disturbed boy overnight. I slept on the floor next to the troubled man, my sleep punctuated by occasional shrieks and screaming in the night.
I held him like he was my own. Understood that like me and my brother the spirit had come for him.

At dawn’s first light, I traveled to inform the boy’s mother of what had befallen him.

“Was he speaking gibberish?” “Was he talking a lot of jazz?” she asked, her beautiful face maudlin.

The hospital in which she worked was squalid, its walls an unkempt red. She was with spirits, maladies and deformities beyond anyone could have an inkling of treating. It was such a horrible place to see but she was in it like an expensive painting stuck in the mud. In her eyes was something, something I couldn’t explain. Her husband had abandoned her because of the troubled child. In her face was the unreadable look of a two-sided love known so well.

I groaned as she spoke, and tears fell from my eyes.
***The End*.**