

Miranda

By

Dr Wilson Orhiunu (Babawilly)

'The gifted perform miracles when they work hard'. Those were the words of Pa Onoriode, Ochuko's late grandfather. He had spoken all those years ago, in response to his wife Ma Onoriode. Ochuko had voiced an ambition to go to university one day and was put down scornfully by his grand mother. 'Only a miracle will make that happen' she had spat out of her mouth and immediately procured the wrath of her husband. Ochuko never forgot that day.

Ochuko, now thirty-five years of age, had already performed many miracles. In his primary school he was the best in virtually every subject. In secondary school, his nickname was five alive. So named because he was deemed to be the fifth member of the A team, a popular TV series at the time.

Ochuko got As in everything. Long after he left Urhobo College the story was still being told of how a lazy NYSC teacher had given him an A in a Physics test without reading it. Word got out and the principal had the paper re marked by Head of department for science. Ochuko scored 100% and the grade was changed to A-star.

At University he bagged a first class in Petroleum engineering and was begged to stay back in the department and complete his NYSC year with them. This he did, working very hard on research projects for a private oil company. When his time to leave came his professors all wanted him to do his Masters degree with them. The research work Ochuko did brought a lot of money into the department, money which grew wings and flew away.

When it became obvious he wouldn't change his mind, the threats started. He was told he would never get a job in the country's oil industry and no university will touch him. One of the drivers in the department visited him one night and advised him to run away. No reason was given. 'My brother, run o' he has said before disappearing into the night.

Ochuko had his plans. He had been awarded a scholarship to study in Scotland 6 months ago and had kept it secret. He had told only his parents and girl friend, Nene about the letter from the University of Aberdeen when it came and had sworn them all to secrecy. The day before he travelled out of Nigeria he told his head of department he was thinking of taking up the job offer.

Ochuko saw snow for the first time during his postgraduate years. He missed Warri and more than that he missed his Nene. Inenevwerha was usually referred to as 'that girl wey no sabi A-B-C' by his equally illiterate relations. They all wanted an educated girl for him. Nene had no time for books or newspapers but he loved her. She could cook for Nigeria in the Olympics. He fondly called her his 'professor of Palm oil'. She retaliated with 'my professor of crude oil'.

Before he left for Aberdeen she warned him she would never leave Warri. Ochuko knew he couldn't live without her so he studied hard and got his Masters and PhD in record time.

Ochuko turned down three jobs abroad before returning to Warri. Within a month he was married and working on an oil rig.

He worked two weeks on and two weeks off. When Nene saw his first pay packet she burst into tears. 'I knew the job was well-paid but still' she said between sobs.

Ochuko talked about talking the money to his father to share amongst the elders, as was the tradition with every first salary and meet stern resistance.

'Your people are poor. Show them this money and you will never have peace. Just buy wine for your father, that is enough' Nene had said. Ochuko didn't like what she said but he was not about to waste his two weeks with her quarrelling.

The oil rig was an exciting place. It floated on the Atlantic a few kilometres off the southern coast of Nigeria and was anchored to the seabed. There were over two hundred men and women all very busy generating oil wealth. They drilled for oil in 12 hourly shifts. Cooks, all kinds of engineers, technicians, health and safety officers all lived together at sea. The food was good, the lodgings up to hotel standards and there was an Internet room, a gym and a games room.

Ochuko loved it here. Throughout his life he had always gone far from home to improve himself.

In primary school he lived with a teacher who was a distant relative. His existence was divided into School term and Holidays in the village. In secondary school he was in boarding house, away from distractions. The school was divided long lines of boarders and day students. Ochuko lived like he was in a monastery; totally dedicated to the acquisition of good grades. In University it was on campus and off campus. Isolated on campus he spent a lot of time in the departmental library. In those days he was particularly obsessed with solving mathematical problems. Once he saw a blank sheet of paper, it soon filled up with numbers and letters.

Now his life was divided into on shore and off shore. Off shore was where he bettered himself. On shore had Nene. After four years on the oil rig Ochuko felt it was time to build a house. He had been on the move for such a long time and he felt that his rented accommodation was just like the oil rig, somebody else's investment. He wanted his own place and so did the children.

Inenevwerha meant there is joy in motherhood, in Ochuko's Urhobo language. Everything about the three children had been pure joy to Chukka. The first child delayed in coming. He was always at the rig when Nene ovulated. She once threatened to paddle a canoe to the rig when next she was on heat and he was away working but it never came to that. She conceived and two more followed in quick succession.

Whitney Houston's; *saving all my love for you* was their baby-making anthem.

Now the babies were fast growing and needed a bigger house.

It was a big shock. Ogaga cried and bit his finger in regret at a life wasted. Ochuko was expecting his senior brother to scream and hug him. Shout 'congrats' and slap his back but no. It was as if a loved one's death had been announced.

'Ogaga, I have only bought two plots of land now. You should be happy. Nobody in the family has ever built a house' Ochuko said.

'Must it be you?' said Ogaga biting his index finger and gently shaking his head.

That night, Ochuko told Nene about it. She didn't say much. When he had finished she just said 'jealousy'.

'But we have two cars. They actually cost more than the land. Why wasn't he jealous when I bought the cars? The restaurant I opened for you, that cost more than the land abi?'

'My dear Professor of petroleum, PhD but no sense. Can't you see? He has a car even though it is not as good as ours. Land is different. Do you know his friends will make fun of him? His younger brother has a house and he lives in a one-bedroom squat. Celebrating with you for passing exam is one thing but land, land evokes all kinds of emotions' Nene had said. He knew at that instant he could never be close to his senior brother again, that they were in some kind of deranged competition.

'From now on, tell no one about our plans. Especially those your family members. I don't want anybody to come and kill me in this Warri because of house we haven't even built'.

Ochuko became paranoid. When the foundation of the house was laid he told no one. Everyone in Nene's family knew and seemed genuinely happy for him. Why couldn't his own blood be happy for him Ochuko thought. The thoughts soon began to eat at him.

The restaurant was a big success but it brought with it added pressures. When he came back for his 2 weeks on shore, Nene no longer had the energy to dot on him. She complained he kept the children up too late, that he didn't discipline them well, he spoilt them, he undid all the work she did on them for two weeks on the first day of his arrival. Ochuko actually began to feel like an intruder. Once he broke a glass tumbler accidentally and his son screamed 'you have broken mummy's glass. I will report you when she returns. She will smack you' he had laughed at his five year son.

'Mummy cannot beat me' he said

'She can' he replied. 'And I will tell mummy you sat on her settee and put your feet on it' he added.

'Does this boy think I don't own this house' Ochuko wondered. To amuse himself, he took his son on a tour of their new house. 'Who owns the TV' he asked.

'Mummy, she bought it' he replied. The little one thought mummy owned everything because he saw mummy pay for everything. From that day he began to study the children and Nene. What they said. How they acted. He soon realised he was becoming a paying guest in his own home. The Nene Hotels he called it.

Feeling ostracized from his immediate family and his extended one, depression began to set in.

Back on the oil rig he confided in his closest friend Eseoghene, an engineer they all called MC Garri on account of his loud singing and enormous appetite.

It was a particularly windy day and it wasn't very busy. Eseoghene broke out into song, '*Marvin Gaye, you're gone, but your spirit lives on!*'

'Look, not in the mood for your Tony Gray songs MC Garri' snapped Ochuko.

'Woman trouble?' asked Eseoghene.

'How did you know?' asked Ochuko.

Eseoghene took off his helmet and scratched his head. 'Every man on this rig has woman trouble. Why do you think the divorce rate is so high? You have been in love all this time and we have been waiting for you. Welcome to the club' said Eseoghene.

'Look try and be serious. That my wife thinks she is an oga' said Ochuko.

'You have one of the best wives on this rig so shut up. There is a technician here, I wouldn't mention his name but when he resumes here for his two weeks, another man resumes at his house in Warri for two weeks on shore, if you know what I mean. At least Nene is making money' said Eseoghene.

'That's one of the problems. Can you imagine, last month she made more money than me? I have Phd, but all she does is cook rice and Ukodo and she made more than me. Do you know we had a row before I came here? She said I should stop working off shore and go take up the research job at my old university' said Ochuko angrily.

'And what did you do?'

'I didn't talk to her for two days. Didn't eat her nonsense food. Moved into the boys' quarters' said Ochuko angrily.

'You fool pass garri. The first rule of marriage for oil rig workers is settle all quarrels before you come off shore. There are many men on shore with eyes on Nene's bakassi. Don't say I didn't warn you'.

Ochuko was frustrated with life. Frustrated with this floating anthill he called an office. It was looking more like a prison today. He longed for a normal life. An air- conditioned office, a secretary, meetings on land and relatives he could confide in who wouldn't be overcome with jealousy.

By the time the shift finished Ochuko was going mad with inexplicable emotions. He walked to the edge of the rig and began to talk to himself. Then He looked down at the Atlantic and spat in it. He began to curse it. Abuse it.

'Stupid waters. You just sit there looking. Why didn't you sink the slave ships when they came? Big for nothing ocean. They sailed on your belly and you just laid back like a prostitute. Why did you not swallow up the slave ships? Ugly blue waters' said Ochuko. He spat again. He was very angry with the Ocean.

'Illegal oil barges and ships. Smuggling guns. Sink them now. Nonsense!' he screamed. MC Garri found him.

'Bros, no come craze here o. You will only loose your job' he said. They both walked over to the canteen. Eseoghene spoke with Garri in his mouth. 'Your problem is you are spoilt. One quarrel with your women and you are breaking down. People like us who fought physically during our honey moon, na we understand marriage'. That made Ochuko laugh.

That night Ochuko had a visitor. An apparition. A beautiful woman with flowing wavy black hair walled through the walls of his room and joined him in bed. He knew he should be frightened but all he felt was pleasure when she kissed him fully on the lips. In a tight embrace, they both rose from the bed, suspended in the air for what seemed like an eternity.

Then as fast as lightening his clothes were off and they both flew through the wall at great speed, still locked at the lips. Through the air and down into the water they went. Ochuko had love like he had never had it before. They frolicked on a magnificent bed on the ocean floor. In an instant they were back in his room talking.

'So who are you?' Ochuko asked

'Miranda. I was sent to you but my master. He told me you were a bit rude to him. The Atlantic is such a sensitive man. He told me to teach you a lesson' she said.

'That was the best lesson ever'.

'He would have come himself but that would have meant death for all on this rig. He is a considerate man. You see, he doesn't sink vessels. If man decides to bunker oil or trade in slaves, that's none of his business. Thank is all I came to tell you. But I couldn't resist having you. Good night' said Miranda before disappearing.

Ochuko told MC Garri about his vivid dream. 'Chai! Miranda. Do you know she is sleeping with half the men on this rig?' he exclaimed. Ochuko was too embarrassed to continue he conversation.

Miranda came every night after that however never showed up on shore. The first time he saw his Nene when he had been with Miranda, Nene looked completely unattractive.

One night on the rig Miranda said she had a jealous man friend called the Egbesu Ice man. He had been thrown over board from a slave ship because he developed diarrhoea and a contagious rash, which the ships captain feared will spread. Miranda saved him but he was a wicked spirit. He blamed his people in the creeks for selling him off to the white slave traders and haunted the villages.

'When he is angry he turns to ice and you can see his skeleton so clearly. He has this flaming afro that burns so brightly and he rides his motorcycle on water. Through the creeks onto the open ocean. I sometimes ride with him. He kills children though. On the second day of their lives. That is his revenge' said Miranda laughing as she spoke.

'How does he feel about you being here, loving me?' asked Ochuko

'Who said anything bout loving you? I only want so little children for my seabed palace. Then I can go on sore and kill all your children. Ha!' said Miranda.

Ochuko was very worried when he woke up. It was the start of his two weeks on shore. On the helicopter back, he asked MC Garri about the Egbesu Ice man.

'A myth being propogated by these militant youths. All nonsense. These little terrorists claim when they go to war their Egbesu ice man goes with them, gilding on the waters and killing all their enemies. Nonsense' said MC Garri.

When Ochuko got home he was surprised to see Nene's jeep still in the driveway. He found her in the living room and knew something was wrong. She had a wrapper across her chest and sat motionless on a tall stood.

'Professor, wetin happen' he asked.

She stood and let the wrapper fall to the ground. They were scratch marks on every part of her naked body. She turned round and her back was worse.

'Who is Miranda' she asked with her back still turned at him.

They drove in silence to the prophet's house. Nene's mother recommended him. 'Very strong anointing for mami water spirits' she had said over the phone.

They walked into the large office and he went straight to business.

'Your mother has told me about it but let me heard from you'

Nene shifted uncomfortably in her it before blurting out the side of her story.

A handsome prince makes passionate love to her every night. He claimed it was retaliation for what Ochuko was doing to his girlfriend. I told no one as I thought it was just a silly dream' said Nene

'A silly dream' repeated the Prophet stroking his beard. A nodded his head for Nene to continue.

'While he was with me last night, this Miranda walked in. She had a head full of serpents. When the Prince saw her he screamed and turned to ice. He head was just a skull and a block of ice. His hair was ablaze. Next thing a motorbike comes into the room to ferry him off' said Nene. Now crying.

'To ferry him off' said the prophet. He then nodded to Ochuko.

'Miranda has been visiting me for weeks. The last time I saw her she threatened to kill my children' said Ochuko

'Kill my children' said the prophet.

The prophet had them on their knees and he prayed loud and hard. So hard that Ochuko felt the words like a hammer hitting away at his insides.

When he vomited, he surprised himself. Stuff he couldn't remember eating. Bits of hair, a black ring and small moving creature that was half snake and half snail all in a slimy foul green jelly.

Nene's was even more colourful. She had a bit of blood mixed with what she brought up. Ochuko thought he saw Miranda's face appear on his vomitus but he wasn't sure. Nothing in his life to date had prepared him for this moment.

'I curse you foul marine spirits in Jesus name!' scream the prophet. Nene and Ochuko were too scared to say Amen to the prayer so the prophet id it himself.

The exorcism lasted for one hour after which someone walked in with a mop and buttock to clean up the mess.

'Now you know why I don't have carpets' said the prophet.

'I will never work off shore again' said Ochuko, still in a daze.

'Off shore again' said the prophet.

In the silence the looked at each other not knowing what to say. The man with the mob left the room leaving behind a strong disinfectant smell.

'You can leave now. Come to church on Sunday in your best clothes. You are going to be renewing your vows' said the prophet.

*The End*