



Witnesses to Tears

Abubakar Gimba

Innocent, beautiful Hussaina is the tragic heroine of Abubakar Gimba's intricately woven tale of love and inordinate ambition, and of the law of retribution. Hussaina's inherent good nature, through a twist of fate, is rewarded with the worst kind of evil as her beloved husband's and best friend's conspiracy unleashes an unspeakable horror which underlines man's disregard for the value of life in his quest for wealth.

However, beyond the spate of gruesome killings resulting from attempts at covering up old evil tracks which form the opening of Gimba's gripping tale are deep lessons and virtues to be learnt.

Abubakar Gimba, OFR, has worked in both the private and the public sectors. He served in the Niger State Civil Service, rising to become a permanent secretary before departing for the banking industry where he has Executed Director of Union Bank of Nigeria Plc and United Bank for Africa Plc at different times before retiring in 1996.

He is the Chairman, Evaluation and Implementation Committee (EAIC) of IBB University, Lapai, Niger State, a former national president of ABU Alumni Association and a past president of the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA). He writes in virtually all the genres of literature and his works include *Trail of Sacrifice*, *Innocent Victims*, *Sunset for a Mandarin*, *Sacred Apples and Footprints* (all novels); *Inner Rumbblings and This Land of Ours* (poetry); *A Toast in the Cemetery* (short stories); *Letter to the Muslim Fundamentalist and Letters to my Children* (Social dialogue) and two books of essays, *Once Upon a Reed* and *Why Am I Doing This?*. He has also been a columnist with some Nigerian newspapers, notably, the *Nigerian Tribune* and *Weekly Trust*.

Since his retirement, Gimba has lived in Minna, capital of Niger State.

FICTION



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DEDICATION

For Ben Umar, Hassana
And the ladies of the house,
Hauwa and Aisha K.

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the screen. Could you relay information, please?"

"B8, expect relay. Screen on, please," returned the computer nurse at the Data Centre.

Remi switched on the computer as she was ordered and held on to the receiver. Presently some display began to show on the screen: PD ... B8 ... ACCIDENT ... FEMALE ... XXX ... INFORMATION INCOMPLETE ... CONTACT RECORDS DEPT ... STOP

"Well, you see that?" uttered the computer nurse, "I expect the Records Department to send me the personal data of your new patient in about ten minutes. If they don't, I'll contact them. And I'll call you back in five minutes. Okay?"

"Okay. Thank you," said Remi, a little disappointed. She felt five minutes was too long. She would talk to the Records Department herself right away. It was unusual, she knew, but she had to do it. Immediately she was put through.

"Records Department here", came a male voice, "can I help you?"

"Thank you. This is Remi from FTW. ... Personal Data for patient B8 not supplied to Data Centre"

The man at the other end interrupted her.

"Yes, I know. I'm waiting for the gentleman who brought her. A doctor. He said the patient was in a critical condition and therefore requested that she be taken straight to FTW and he would return shortly to supply the necessary data"

"And you allowed him to go like that?"

"I didn't. Sani Tanko did. The man came here around 8.55p.m. Tanko was still on duty then. He admitted the woman. I relieved him at 9.00 p.m."

"So you don't even know the fellow, I mean the doctor?" asked Remi.

"No. Anyway don't worry. Tanko knows him, and besides, he told me the doctor left in the company of the senior nursing sister in charge of Maternity Ward. Now, what's her name? ... Right, Serah Bello. I expect the two back any minute."

"Okay, thank you," returned Remi and she replaced the receiver. She switched off the computer and made to provide the necessary care for the occupant of B8: a patient without identity.

Some twenty minutes later, Remi went back to B8. She switched on the computerised TV and pressed the PD button, anxious to know who the lady in a coma was. Again, 'XXX ... ASK CENTRE ... STOP,' said the screen.

"Nonsense!" hissed Remi, a little impatient. Could something be wrong with the computer? But she knew well that the self-activating powers of this automated diagnosis device were restricted to providing information on a patient within the reach of the overhead TV — like cameras hung above each bed in the FTW. Personal data that established a patient's identity were not only far out of reach of the cameras' focus but beyond their scientific capability. Such information were fed to the Data Centre, and relayed as required. For one moment, Remi wished the automated device in front of her could provide such information all by itself.

She stood there staring at the lady in B8 for a while. She thought of grabbing her in her unconscious state and shouting in her ear, "who are you!" She shuddered at her own thoughts. Cruel. She recoiled and made to walk away as if from some unseen demon urging her to do the detestable.

But just then the unexpected happened. She couldn't believe it. Was she day-dreaming? No, what was unfolding before her eyes was real. B8 occupant had opened her eyes! The computer was right after all ... Critical but safe. Remi watched to see whether the recovering comatose lady might speak. But for full five minutes, she did no more than open her eyes. The only thing Remi could say about them was that they were not dead. Yet at the same time, they seemed to possess an immobilizing passivity and a powerfully penetrating force. Remi felt as if the eyes were piercing through the ceiling of the ward into the great heavens beyond. This frightened her a little and she felt like bolting away. But quickly she took possession of herself and stood firm. She had seen all sorts of eyes before: the eyes of the mad. She would not cower before a pair of motionless eyeballs! As if to reassure herself, she mustered a smile to the recovering comatose lady... or was it to the eyeballs that had not expected any response, though when she didn't receive any, her heartbeat increased slightly.

Remi remained hopeful, nonetheless, that sooner than later,

her B8 patient would regain full consciousness. Her eagerness to discover her identity heightened. If only she could talk!

"Remi Bakar." It was one of the doctors on call that night. Remi's expectant stay at B8 was shortened. "What are you standing there for? C'mon, get the Blood Bank. I need 600cc of group A blood. Quick." The doctor's voice was calm but firm, betraying however, a note of desperation detectable only by his aides. It appeared he had a case which the automated computers would term EXTREMELY CRITICAL. PRECARIOUS ...

Remi understood. Quickly but meticulously, she moved to her table and dialed the Blood Bank. She then made her request.

"But", began a male voice at the other end, "we have only about 300cc of group A left in storage"

"Just send it, even if it's 100cc, that could make some difference between life and a transition to heaven or hell tonight ... send it quick please ... Any group O?"

"Yes."

"Please send some of that too," Remi put down the phone.

A couple of minutes later, the blood came, and Remi had it sent to the adjacent Operation Theatre into which the doctor had disappeared. She then left to attend to the other patients in the FTW.

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At twenty-five minutes past midnight, she was at her table writing progress reports on each of her patients. At intervals she would break off and stare at the ceiling, turning the end of her ball-point pen in her mouth as if thinking of what to write next. But in fact she was thinking about her profession, wondering why she should be sitting down there in the middle of the night instead of enjoying the warm comfort of her bed. She thought of the oddity of sitting there amidst people who did nothing other than just breathe, mostly through gadgets: sitting among people who were not in her world, yet were clinging to it with the aid of machines in a frantic effort to avoid the other, the unknown. Only patient B8 appeared to be the closest thing to a living person. Yet, even she, with her eyes wide open and seemingly motionless, was as

far away from her as stars from the earth.

On occasions like this, Remi often felt she made a mistake in her choice of profession. She loathed night duty — as the 9.00 p.m. to 7.00 a.m. shift was called. One day, she hoped, she would be far removed from that odd shift ... when she would have become a nursing sister.

As she sat there ruminating, her telephone rang. She took the call. It was the computer nurse for the twelfth time — as usual she said she called to tell Remi that neither Serah Bello nor the doctor with whom she had left had turned up with any PD on the lady at B8.

"It's okay, thanks," returned Remi without any more enthusiasm. In fact, she held the receiver wondering whether or not to tell her not to call FTW on B8's PD anymore until such time when she had something to display on the screen. She hesitated, and just replaced the receiver without even saying her usual bye. Not that she wanted no more PD on B8, but she was confident somehow that B8 patient would recover before long to identify herself and fill in the gaps. Her situation appeared to be improving with the ageing of the night. Within the last fifteen minutes, she had not only moved her eyeballs but also shifted her head from side to side, though very slowly. Remi had felt very encouraged.

Serah's, as well as the doctor's disappearance or non-appearance, puzzled Remi. Indeed, by twelve midnight she had felt like calling Serah's apartment, and actually did so. But no one answered the phone. Perhaps Serah was asleep, she thought, and gave up any idea of further calls. As for the doctor? Well, she didn't know who he was in the first place. However, a certain curiosity to know his identity buoyed insider her. Doctor who? She felt slightly cynical against Serah for bringing a patient without supplying the necessary details, as well as failing to return in violation of a promise to do so. Suppose the comatose lady simply passed on

"My child." Remi's thought was interrupted by a very low voice, feeble yet powerful, as it tore through the quietness of the night, and the even more intense stillness that filled the FTW, was as awesome as death. She was not sure from which direction it came. But she was certain, absolutely certain, that she heard a voice. A