

# The Famished Road, by Ben Okri (1991)

## Excerpt

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### Chapter 10, Book II of *The Famished Road*

This chapter tells the story of Azaro, a spirit child, or **abiku**, who exists between the world of the living and the spirit realm. In this excerpt, Azaro goes to the market in search of his mother, who is a trader.

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I looked at the pictures a long time and I got tired and the sun was pitiless on my brain, burning through my hair and skull and turning my thoughts into a yellow heat. I went and sat outside our door and I didn't know what else to do; so I set out to look for Mum at the marketplace.

As I walked down our street, under the persistence of the yellow sun, with everything naked, the children bare, the old men with exhausted veins pumping on dried-up foreheads, I was frightened by the feeling that there was no escape from the hard things of this world. Everywhere there was the crudity of wounds, the stark huts, the rusted zinc abodes, the rubbish in the streets, children in rags, the little girls naked on the sand playing with crushed tin cans, the little boys jumping about uncircumcised, making machine-gun noises, the air vibrating with poisonous heat and evaporating water from the filthy gutters. The sun bared the reality of our lives and everything was so harsh it was a mystery that we could understand and care for one another or for anything at all.

I passed a house where a woman was screaming. People were gathered outside her room. I thought thugs were beating her up and I went there and learned that she was giving birth and that she had been in labour for three days and three nights. I asked so many questions that the gathered adults finally noticed I was a child and drove me away. I went on with my wanderings, not knowing where I was headed, except that I had conceived the desire to see Mum.

Every female hawker I saw I thought was her. There were so many hawkers, and all of them selling identical things, that I wondered just how Mum sold anything at all in this world of relentless dust and sunlight.

I walked for a long time, the street burning my soles, my throat dry, my head sizzling, till I reached the market. There were stalls of goods everywhere. And filling the air were the smells and aromas of the marketplace, the rotting vegetables, the fresh fruits, the raw meat, roasted meat, stinking fish, the feathers of wild birds and stuffed parrots, the wafting odours of roasted corn and fresh-dyed cloth, cow dung and Sahelian perfume, and pepper-bursts which heated the eyeballs and tickled the nostrils.

And just as there were many smells, so there were many voices, loud and clashing voices which were indistinguishable from the unholy fecundity of objects. Women with trays of big juicy tomatoes, basins of garri, or corn, or melon seeds, women who sold trinkets and plastic buckets and dyed cloth, men who sold coral charms and wooden combs and turtle-doves and string vests and cotton trousers and slippers, women who sold mosquito coils and magic love mirrors and hurricane lamps and tobacco leaves, with stalls of patterned cloths next to those of fresh-fish traders, jostled everywhere, filled the roadside, sprawled in fantastic confusion.

There was much bickering in the air and rent collectors hassled the women and cart-pullers shouted for people to get out of their way and mallams with goats on leashes prayed on white mats, nodding under the sun, stringing their beads. The floor of the market was soggy with mud and decomposing food and the children ran around mostly naked. The women wore faded wrappers and dirty blouses; their faces were like Mum's in her suffering and their voices were both sweet and harsh, sweet when attracting customers, harsh when haggling.

I went about the market confused by many voices that could have been Mum's, many faces that could have been hers, and I saw that her tiredness and sacrifice were not hers alone but were suffered by all women, all women of the marketplace.

At an intersection of paths there was a fight raging. Men were shouting, stalls were overturned, dogs barking, sticks whizzing through the air, fish stinking, flies buzzing. There were so many flies I was amazed that I didn't

breathe them in. I circled round the fight; I went from stall to stall, my head barely reaching the heights of displayed goods. I often found myself staring into the dead eyes of fishes, into basins where great crabs and giant lobsters were entangled in their mass of claws, in buckets where hammer-headed fishes and eels whipped their tails against the aluminium.

I searched for Mum till my eyes hurt with too much looking and my head spun with too much exertion. Then, suddenly, with the sun burning itself into evening, with so many people around, everyone active, everything moving, I was overcome with a strange panic. I couldn't see a single familiar face in that jostling universe.

And then just as suddenly, in flashes of lightness and dark, I began to see Mum everywhere. I saw her writhing in the basin of eels. I saw her amongst the turtles in the plastic buckets. I saw her amongst the amulets of the sellers of charms. I saw her all over the market, under strange eaves, in the wind that spread the woodsmoke and the rice-chaffs; I felt her everywhere, but I couldn't break the riddle of the market's labyrinths where one path opened into a thousand faces, all of them different, most of them hungry in different ways.

I saw women counting their money and tying it at the ends of their wrappers. Children, abandoned temporarily, cried on the floor, under the stalls.

I walked round and round the market spaces, unable to go any deeper, unable to find my way out, unable to go on because my feet hurt, and unable to stop because of the perpetually moving crowds who pushed me on or shoved me aside or trampled me or shouted at me, and I was confused by everything and I sat under a stall of snails and wept without any tears.

Then time changed. Darkness slowly swallowed the day. I came out from under the stall and struggled through the crowd till I arrived at another stall where an old man sold all kinds of roots and herbs.

He was an old man with the youthful eyes of a dove and white hair on his head, a white moustache and an ash-coloured patch of straight beard. His stall was the quietest place in the whole market. He sat alone on a bench. He called no one to buy his wares and no one came. Behind him, dangling from multicoloured ropes and threads were yellow roots, blue roots, pink

tubers, the skull of a monkey, the feathers of a parrot, the dried heads of hooded vultures and ibises, the fierce paws of a lion, the wings of an eagle, and a mirror that changed colour with the lights. His stall was quite clean; behind the ropes and threads and bizarre items was a tarpaulin tent, stained with mud. If he was a herbalist, he must have been a learned and highly selective one, for before I reached him a man in an immaculate white suit approached him, nodded, and they both went inside. They stayed in for a while.

I stared in wonder at the items on his table, the rusted stems of gum trees, red leaves dried in the sun which smelt of distant journeys, carved roots that resembled the crude shapes of human beings, strangely angled bones, the beryl-coloured seeds of rare medicinal plants, transparent seashells, dried flame-lilies, berries and aniseeds and the green pimples of peacocks, dazzling blobs like the eyes of cats that refuse to dry in the sun, crushed cane-brakes and broken rings from the depths of the sea, and a hundred other oddities, all scattered on a dirty blue cloth. I sat on the old man's chair and waited. And while I waited I listened to the whooping noises behind me in the tent. The noise kept changing into the spectral sound that only spirits can make. Then it changed to the noise of a thick rope being whipped round fast. Then into the sound of mermaids sifting the white winds through their long hair on golden river banks. Then came a scream that was not a scream of terror; it stayed sharp; then it resolved itself into laughter. The man in the immaculate white suit came out sweating, with a little blue sack over his shoulder. The old man also came out. He wasn't sweating. He regarded me.

'I'm looking for my mother,' I said.

'Who is your mother?'

'A trader in this market.'

'Do I know her?'

'I don't know.'

'Why are you looking for her?'

'Because she is my mother.'

The old man sat down. I stood.

‘Where did you lose her?’

‘At home.’

‘Are you a message?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Did she send you on a message?’

‘No.’

‘Did spirits send you to me?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Does she know you are here?’

‘No.’

‘Does she know where you are?’

‘I don’t think so.’

The old man stared at me with his strange eyes. He picked up a root and turned it over in his hands. Then he bit a little from it and chewed, thinking. He offered me the root. I took it but did not bite into it. He studied me.

‘So does anybody know you are here?’

‘No.’

He smiled and his youthful eyes became clouded, their colour changed. For a moment he reminded me of a hooded bird.

‘So why did you come to me?’

‘I don’t know.’

He picked up another root. It was shaped like a child with a big head. He bit off the head of the child, spat it out, and bit at its arm, and chewed.

‘What is your name?’

‘Lazarus.’

‘What?’

‘Azaro.’

He looked at me again, as if I were some sort of sign.

‘Are you clever at school?’

‘I’m looking for my mother.’

‘Does your mother teach you things?’

‘Yes.’

‘Like what?’

‘How to fly to the moon on the back of a cricket.’

The old man’s expression didn’t change.

‘Do you have brothers and sisters?’

‘Only in heaven.’

He studied me, touching his beard. He looked round the turbulent marketplace. He got up, went into his tent, and came back with a cracked enamel plate of yam and beans. I was hungry. Forgetting Mum’s warning about strangers, I devoured the food. It was delicious. The old man watched me with a gleam in his eyes. He kept muttering low incantations under his breath.

I thanked him for the food and he said:

‘How are you feeling?’

‘Full up.’

‘Good.’

He took the plate in and came out with a plastic cup of water. The water tasted like it came from a deep well. It was sweet and smelt faintly of rust and the strange roots on his table. I drank the water and felt thirstier than before.

‘How are you feeling now?’

I was about to speak when it occurred to me that the world had become dimmer. A faint spell of evening had settled on my eyes. I felt curiously light and inside me there were wide open spaces. I tried to move. But my spirit felt lighter than my body. My spirit moved, my body stayed still. And when I thought I had moved a considerable distance I found that I was actually at the beginning of the movement. Then I felt everything turning round and round, slowly at first, like a circling wind that was itself the evening settling; and then things went faster and dimmer and the old man’s face grew abnormally large and then it grew so small I could hardly make out his eyes. And then from a great distance I heard him say:

‘Lie down, my son.’

Then, with the sound of feathers beating behind him, he left in a hurry, dissolving into a bright wind.

The sounds of the marketplace took on a new quality. A million footfalls magnified on the earth. Voices of every kind rose in massive waves and distilled into whispers. From afar, I heard the muezzin calling. I felt it was calling me, but I could not move. Bells and angelic choirs sounded close to my ears and then would melt away.

I watched a fight start across from where I was sitting. The two women flew at one another and when they were dragged apart their wrappers drifted in the air like monstrous feathers. They pounced on one another again, in great rage and velocity, and bits of their wigs and kerchiefs and blouses floated around them in slow motion. I was fascinated by their fury. I was about to move closer when a voice, which seemed to come from nowhere, and which was not the voice of a spirit, said:

‘Where is the old man?’

‘Gone.’

‘Where?’

‘He ran away.’

‘From what?’

‘From me.’

‘Why?’

‘Because I am looking for my mother.’

Pause.

‘Where did he run to?’

‘Into the wind.’

‘What direction?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Who is your mother?’

‘My mother is in the market.’

‘How do you know that your mother is the market?’

‘I didn’t say she was the market.’

‘What did you say?’

‘She’s a trader in the market.’

‘Why are you looking for her?’

‘I don’t know.’



‘What is your name?’

I answered the question, but obviously my answer hadn’t been heard, because the question was asked three times, each time fainter than the last. The wind blew my answers away and my head hit the hardness of silence and the world went dark.

From the moon, which was suddenly above me, close to me, and which had the luminous face of the great king of the spirit world, I heard other voices, full of darkness, which said:

**‘Look at him.’**

**‘He is looking for his mother.’**

**‘She has big eyes all over the market.’**

**‘People pay her to shut her eyes.’**

**‘Her eyes never shut.’**

**‘They see everything.’**

**‘They see all our money.’**

**‘They eat all our money.’**

**‘Our power.’**

**‘Our dreams.’**

**‘Our sleep.’**

**‘Our children.’**

**‘They say her son flies to the moon.’**

**‘That’s why he has big eyes.’**

**‘Look at him.’**

The voices continued, turning on themselves, as in a numinous ritual. The moon lowered over me. My face became the moon and I stared, one-eyed, into the darkness of the marketplace. And then, with the moon’s light inside me, filling the wide open spaces, I felt myself being lifted up by the darkness, pushed on by invisible hands. And the voices followed me, voices without bodies.

**‘Maybe he’s not well.’**

**‘Maybe he is mad.’**

**‘Strange things are happening to us.’**

**‘To our children.’**

**‘They say he is looking for the spirit of Independence.’**

**‘They say he is looking for himself.’**

**'For his own spirit.'**  
**'Which he lost when the white man came.'**  
**'They say he is looking for his mother.'**  
**'But his mother is not looking for him.'**  
**'They say she has gone to the moon.'**

**'Which moon? There are many moons.'**  
**'The moon of Independence.'**  
**'So he is looking for her moon?'**  
**'Yes.'**

**'Strange things are happening.'**  
**'The world is turning upside down.'**  
**'And madness is coming.'**  
**'And hunger is coming, like a dog with twelve heads.'**  
**'And confusion is coming.'**  
**'And war.'**  
**'And blood will grow in the eyes of men.'**  
**'And a whole generation will squander the richness of this earth.'**

**'Let us go.'**  
**'Look at him.'**  
**'Maybe what is to come is already driving him mad.'**  
**'Maybe he is not well.'**

And then the voices drifted away on the air. A bright wind blew over me. The lightness in me found a weight. The invisible hands became my own. Darkness settled over the market as though it had risen from the earth. Everywhere lamps were lit. Spirits of the dead moved through the dense smells and the solid darkness.

And then suddenly the confusing paths became clear. My feet were solid on the earth. I followed the bright wind that made the paths clearer. It led me in a spiral through the riddle of the market, to the centre, where there was a well. I looked into the well and saw that there was no water in it. There was only the moon. It was white and perfectly round and still. There were no buckets round the well and the soil around it was dry and I concluded that no one could fetch water from the moon at the bottom of the well. And I began to climb down into the well because it seemed the best place to lie down and to rest in a deep unmoving whiteness.

But then a woman grabbed the back of my shorts and lifted me up and threw me down and shouted:

**‘Get away from here!’**

I followed the waning brightness of the path and came to a place where white chickens fluttered and crackled noisily in large bamboo cages. The whole place stank profoundly of the chickens and I watched them fussing and beating their wings, banging into one another, unable to fly, unable to escape the cage. Soon their fluttering, their entrapment, became everything, and the turbulence of the market seemed to be happening in a big black cage.

Further on, deeper into the night, I saw three men in dark glasses pushing over a woman’s flimsy stall of provisions. They threw her things on the floor and she patiently picked them up again. She cleaned the soiled goods with her wrapper and put them back on the table. The men tipped over the table. The woman cried for help, cried out her innocence, but the marketplace shuffled on, went on with its chaos, its arguing, its shouting and disagreeing, and no single voice, unless it were louder than all the voices put together, could make the market listen.

The woman abandoned her pleas. She straightened her table and picked up her provisions. The men waited calmly till she had finished and tipped the table over again. I went closer.

One of the men said:

**‘If you don’t belong to our party, you don’t belong to this space in the market.’**

**‘Where will I find another space?’**

**‘Good question,’** said one of the men.

**‘Leave. Go. We don’t want people like you.’**

**‘You’re not one of us.’**

**‘Everyone else in this part of the market is one of us.’**

**'If you treat people like this, why should I want to be one of you, eh?'**  
the woman asked.

**'Good question.'**

**'True.'**

**'So go.'**

**'Leave.'**

**'We don't want you here.'**

**'But what have I done? I pay my dues. I pay the rent for this space, nobody has ever complained about me.'**

Two of the men lifted up her table and began carrying it away, blocking the path. The woman, screaming like a wounded animal, jumped on the men, tearing at their hair, scratching their faces, clawing off their glasses. One of the men shouted that he couldn't see. The two other men held the woman and hurled her to the ground. One of the men kicked her and she did not scream.

A thick crowd had gathered because of the blocked path. Enraged voices filled the air. The woman got up and ran among the stalls and after a moment reappeared with a machete, which she held with awkward and fearful determination in both hands. And, uttering her murderous cries, she hacked at the men, who fled in different directions. The man with his glasses clawed off went on screaming that he had been blinded and he lashed out, flailing, and the woman rushed at him and raised the machete high above his neck and let out a strangled grunt, and a great unified voice gathered and broke from the crowd, and they surged round her, and for a moment all I saw was the machete lifted high above the shadowy heads.

Women began clearing their stalls. One of them said:

**'This Independence has brought only trouble.'**

And the moon left me and everything became dark, and I found myself briefly in a world inhabited by spirits, with voices jabbering ceaselessly. The

commotion settled around me, and the old man with the ash-coloured beard was saying to the woman:

**‘Pack your things and go for the night. You almost killed someone. You were lucky we stopped you. Go home to your husband and child. Those people will be back. Don’t come to the market for some time. You are a brave and foolish woman.’**

The woman said nothing. With a stony face of rugged sweetness, she packed her provisions into her basin. She stopped now and again to wipe her nose and her eyes with her wrapper.

When she had finished packing, she lifted her basin onto her head and, standing tall, walked through the crowd. The old man disappeared amongst the masses. The moon left me completely and I saw the woman’s face in the lamplights.

And when the night stopped turning, I saw Mum in the woman I hadn’t recognised.

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I went after her and held her feet, and she pushed me off, forging on in her defiance. And I held on to her wrapper and cried:

**‘Mother!’**

She looked down, quickly dropped her basin to the floor, and embraced me for a long moment. Then she held me away and with stony, watery eyes said:

**‘What are you doing here?’**

**‘I was looking for you.’**

**‘Go home!’** she commanded.

I pushed through the crowd and could hear her sobbing behind me. She stayed behind me till we cleared the market. As we left, I saw the old man at another stall, with the moon in his eyes, watching me with a subtle smile.

When we got to the main road, Mum dropped her basin, picked me up, tied me to her back with the wrapper, and lifted the basin onto her head.

**‘You are growing,’** she said, as we carried on home.

**‘Not everything grows in this place. But at least you, my son, are growing,’** she said, as we made the journey through the streets.

There were lamps burning along the roadsides. There were voices everywhere. There were movements and voices everywhere.

I planted my secrets in my silence.