

Tell my Son to Hold On to His Gun

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My father and I lived in a village called Dawohoso. The population was about five hundred and the majority of them were cocoa farmers. My father owned the biggest cocoa farm, which made him the richest man in the village. By nature, my father had a warm, frank and open personality.

He had a broad mind and was highly respected. This was because he was generous to everyone, especially the old and the needy. I was his only child. He told me that I was two years old when my mother went to farm alone one day and never returned.

It was believed that she was killed by a human-looking killer beast which had terrorised the thick forest long before I was born. At age sixty-two, my father was still strong enough to cultivate his cocoa farm.

In order for me to take over from him some day, my father started sending me to the farm when I was only six years old. Within ten years, I was able to handle the gun like an adult. As for the weeding, no matter how hard I tried, I never could keep pace with my father.

One Saturday, at dawn, I had a dream about the killer beast. He had attacked three hunters in the forest but one had escaped, and just when he was about to tell his story to people who had gathered around him, my father knocked on my door.

"Atoapoma," he sometimes called me by the appellation of my real name, Kwame, "get prepared and let's go to the farm." I looked out through the window and the sky had cleared slightly. I stretched my body to its full length on the bed and wondered why we were going to the farm two hours earlier that morning. I meekly nodded and stood up obediently.

By six o'clock in the morning, we were on the farm weeding. I told my father about my dream but he said nothing. I asked him why we came to farm so early that day. He pretended not to have heard me, so I kept my mouth shut.

We started weeding and because we were weeding in opposite directions, the distance between us kept widening with no conversation between us until I heard him call my name out loud.

"Kwame, go to the village and bring our food." I stood and stared at my father, not quite sure of what to say. He kept on weeding so I also continued weeding, pretending not to have heard him.

When he saw that I was still weeding, he wiped off the sweat on his forehead with his index finger. Then he stared at me blankly for a moment and let out the words:

"Didn't you hear what I told you, Kwame?"

"I did, Father. But we have always gone together to eat in the village. Why is it that, today, you want me to go and bring the food?"

"Listen to me, Kwame," he said, resting his cutlass against a tree, "we have so much work to do so it'd be a waste of time for both of us to walk that distance and back. So you go and bring the food while I go on weeding. By the time you return, the sun would have reached the centre of the sky and it would be time for lunch."

I took my gun and the hunting bag and started moving away

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but a sense of fear gripped me and I stopped abruptly. After a while, he turned and found me still standing there.

"Are you going or not?" he asked with a tinge of anger in his voice.

"I want to, Father, but to walk all the way to the village and back all by myself? What if I meet this killer beast which won't spare the life of anyone who crossed his path?"

"Come here, Kwame," he called, and patted me on the shoulder. "At twenty-two years, you are a big boy, in fact, an adult, so you must behave as one. This whole cocoa farm will be yours someday when I'm dead and gone. You must begin to gather courage and stop being a coward. I took over this farm from my father when I was fifteen years!"

"You know how to handle a gun, and that is good enough. You have to deal with the fear that is growing in you. If you don't deal with it now, it will eventually lead you to total failure. Be courageous, be courageous, Kwame," he concluded.

"That's all I have to say because a word to the wise is enough. Do you understand?" he asked, and stared at me again, this time, the loud silence and the look in my father's face touched my innermost self and urged me to kill that fear, gather courage, and move forward. I smiled in self-satisfaction, nodding my head in total agreement with my father's words of encouragement.

I took my gun and left for the village. For the first time, I was alone on the way. A long, loud roll of thunder broke the stillness of the afternoon, re-echoed among the low hills, but it did not rain, and it did not scare me. Several villages were scattered throughout the forest inhabited by janitors of the cocoa farms, but they were too far apart from each other.

When I got to the village, neither the janitor nor his wife

was there, but food was ready in the kitchen as usual. So I picked it up, made a quick turn, and hurried along the path back to where we were weeding. My father was right. The sun was right in the centre of the sky, so it was time for lunch. Excitement welled up inside me for making a successful trip to and from the village alone. Unfortunately, my father was not there. His gun and cutlass were in the hut, which meant he was on break, so I placed the food in the hut and continued weeding.

After a while, I looked up. The sun had moved quite a distance from the centre and that gave me reason to worry about my father's whereabouts. He had never been late for lunch, so I decided to stop weeding and look for him.

"Father, Father, Father," I called, but there was no answer. I took my gun, my cutlass, and my father's hunting sack. I first checked the nearby farms but I didn't find him.

I rushed down the valley, sounding the forest alarm, *huu! huu! huu!* but to no avail. "Could it be he had entered the thick forest and had been killed by the killer beast?" No! I rejected that thought. "But where else could he be?" I asked myself. Then I heard a voice like my father's.

"Be courageous, be courageous, Kwame, be courageous!"

"I will be, Father. I will be," I answered, and entered the thick forest. I couldn't tell what time it was, but the sun had set. And there I was, all alone, in that long stretch of thick forest controlled by that wild killer beast.

With my gun fully loaded, I moved with caution, calling my father and sounding the forest alarm every now and then until I reached Sabinom, the only river in the forest. It was a wide, swift river with broad, fertile banks. According to my father, it was by that river that the heads of most of the killer beast's victims had been found. He had told me also that

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when the head of the first hunter to fall victim to the beast was found, the village hunters had tried to avenge the death of their colleague by engaging in a week-long group hunt for the beast but did not find it.

Was it safe to be there all by myself? I thought, and almost immediately, a chill wind swept across the river. Then I heard the sound of the trees rustling on the other side of the river.

"Father, is that you?" I asked, but got no response. Instead, the sound of feet movement, quite louder and heavier than normal and getting closer. "Is that you, Father?" I asked again, but still there was no answer. Something told me to run away from that place but I refused and rather climbed one of the trees that provided shade to the river. With my gun still loaded, I leaned against a branch with my feet firmly on another branch.

As the steps drew closer from the other side of the river, a wave of fright swept over me. But it did not put fear in me. This was because my father's encouraging words were buried deep down my heart. I aimed my gun at that direction, and within seconds, there appeared a huge and hairy monster of about seven feet tall. He had oval-shaped ears that dangled about. His nose pointed way above his stiff upper lip, and his eyes extended beyond their normal place on his face. My heart was burning with a wild desire to pull the trigger, but something told me to wait a bit since he might not see me.

The ugly monster stepped into the river, picked a calabash from a nearby branch and drank three calabashes-full of water. He clenched his fists and beat his chest repeatedly, probably to show that he was the boss of the thick forest. I watched him closely, trying to decide whether to aim at his chest or his head.

But, suddenly, an unknown force pushed my finger against the trigger and, 'boom'! went a loud, deep sound from the gun. The monster stood still for a moment. Then his hands flipped

from his chest to his sides as if they had no life in them. When I saw his entire body swaying from side to side, anger struck me like thunder.

"You deserve to die!" I screamed and fired three shots into his chest. His whole body shook as if something was going to explode in him. His face turned pale, and his eyes were filled with the fear of dying. I reloaded my gun and engaged in a one-sided shootout. I fired several shots at him but this ugly monster was still standing. It took another round of firing before he fell to the ground as if struck by lightning. I felt like jumping down but something cautioned me again to be careful.

Then suddenly, the evil monster sat up, clenched his fists again, and beat his chest repeatedly. He attempted to get up but couldn't. I could sense that life was almost over for him but a kernel of something in him was refusing to die.

After a while, and to my surprise, this monster was able to get up but could not move. He stood rooted to the spot. Thank God I took my father's bullets. I loaded them and fired from his head down and up several times until he began breathing more slowly.

He started coughing and sneezing. Then blood began oozing down his mouth and nose. I gave him a slow-sidelong look and anger began to spread over me like fever.

"This bastard must die," I screamed, reloaded my gun, and fired at him again like a sniper. Then finally, there was a long, loud and heavy fall like a roar of thunder. "Go to hell. It's over for you," I said, and jumped down.

For fear he still might not be dead, I loaded the rest of my father's bullets and fired another round of shots until I became convinced that it was all over for the evil creature.

It was a cloudless night with twinkling stars. The busy insects had set up a mixture of loud and disturbing sounds

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under the full moon. A triumphant wave suddenly ran over my whole body as I began to imagine how my father and the village folks would react to the good news.

I beheaded the monster and carried it on my shoulder. The disappearance of my father kept haunting me, but the thrill of having killed the evil monster overpowered my desire to look for him any further. He might be home by now, I thought, and headed home.

A few kilometres away from the river, I saw a piece of cloth like that of my father's hanging on a branch of a tree. I hurried to take a closer look, and behind the tree, of that branch was the head of my father. Anger suddenly spread over me, and my heart felt as if it was being pricked by a needle. I smashed the monster's head against the tree and knelt down.

I lifted up my father's head very gently, supporting it in my arms. I looked at his face. There were marks of the beast's grip on his neck. My lips tightened in anger, and tears that had welled up in my eyes began to flow freely as running water. I, indeed, wept bitter tears of regret and disappointment for not being around to save my father's life.

"Shed no tears, Son. Shed no tears," a strange and hoarse voice like an echo in an empty house said. I looked everywhere but saw no one.

"Who are you, please?" I asked in a soft and muffled voice.

"Shed no tears, Son. Your father was sacrificed for a special purpose. His blood was used to spiritually cleanse you, and give you the strength and courage you needed to bring an end to the era of the evil monster and his reign of terror. You stood up to the challenge, and you have done just that. Congratulations! Special jubilation awaits you in town."

"What! You mean the village folks know about it already?"

"They do, my son, they do," the voice echoed. This must

be a dream, I thought. "You are not dreaming, Son." I got up and wondered how the voice could read my mind.

"Don't be surprised. We started preparing you for this day the very moment your mother fell victim to this evil monster you just killed. That is why your father brought you to the farm so early today."

"You mean my father too knew about this?"

"Yes, he did."

"But why my family?"

"Good question. A spiritual leader had predicted long ago that the first son of the first woman to fall victim to the evil monster had been destined to conquer him."

"So why was my father killed by the wild beast?" I asked.

"Your father was not killed by the monster. I told you his death was a spiritual sacrifice. He was killed by two palace executioners. That is why you found his clothes on the branch. Take the clothes and the two heads home for burial. They will not mourn your father's death."

"Why not?"

"Crying or mourning means fear but your father was a noble and fearless man whose sacrificial death has forever erased the sense of fear that gripped our village folks for ever. Go home. Your arrival will be greeted with clapping and cheering. One more thing.

"What is it?" I asked in a confused state of mind.

"Your father wants you to hold on to your gun. Good bye."

"No, no, no, don't go. I have some more questions to ask you," I screamed pleadingly and woke up suddenly.