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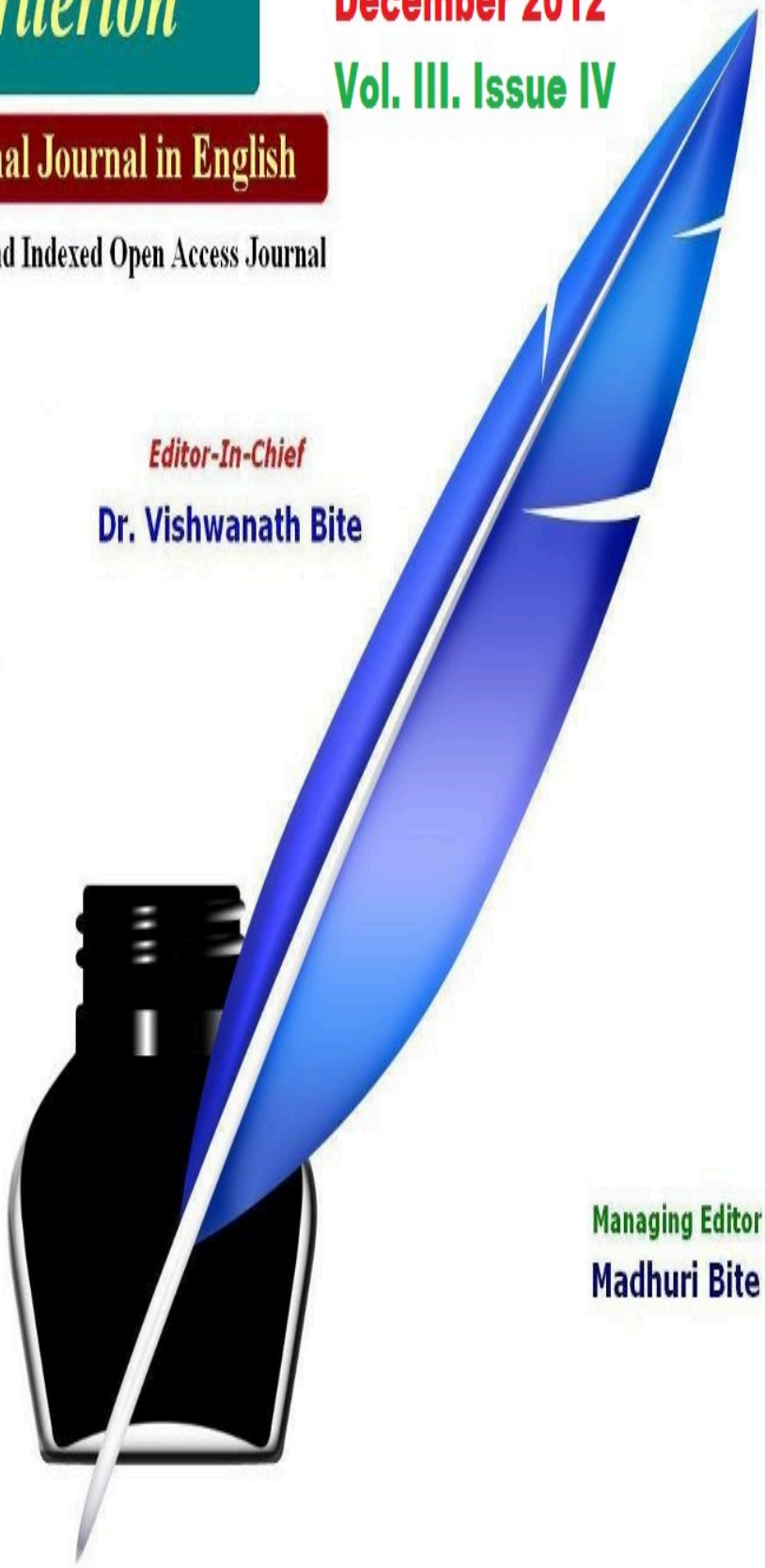

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The Most Dangerous Game

Jéanpaul Ferro

RUMOR HAD IT that he came from a place in Africa where the trees came alive during the night.

On cool mornings he could be seen wandering the earthen gravel paths of the *Volkspark Friedrichshain*. Adedeji Ogunbunmi usually walked an hour in the morning, mostly near the *Märchenbrunnen*, which was known in Berlin as the Fairy Tale Fountain—a fountain in the park that was surrounded by stone sculptures, all from German fairy tales. This part of the park had been created by Ludwig Hofman in 1913 at a time in German history where scores of children had been infected with rickets and typhoid. Now almost 100-years later it was Adedeji Ogunbunmi who didn't feel quite right.

It was a bit cooler than usual that May morning. Adedeji walked up the terrace in *Märchenbrunnen* where there were these cement cocker spaniels poking out of scallop looking bowls. As he walked up to this one happy looking dog its mouth moved and he heard it talk out loud directly to him: "You don't belong here Adedeji Ogunbunmi!"

His feet brushed back a whirl. He had owned a dog like this once back in Nigerian. He loved that dog.

His hand ran gently over the cement torso of the dog.

"Why are you touching me, Adedeji Ogunbunmi? You don't belong here!" the dog said.

Adedeji panicked. As he ran frantically from the park he felt this heaviness weighing down on his chest and at the back of his head.

Half an hour later he was back at his apartment in Treptow-Köpenick. He sat there frightened. He knew not to let his three Nigerian roommates see him like this.

Adedeji was so shaken that he called in sick to work that night. He worked at Ristorante Samirino Portocristo. No one who worked there was Italian, but nonetheless the food was still good.

Adedeji Ogunbunmi holed up in his bedroom—the only part of the house that was completely his. He shared the 4-bedroom apartment with Abassi Malu, a teller at one of the local banks; Mbafor Ogomudia, quite the loquacious fellow who loaded trucks for a living; and Nwakaego Iweala, a kind hearted young man who always seemed to bounce from one job to the another like some cruel letter that no one wanted to open.

As Adedeji lie there in bed he began to feel inebriated. "I can't take you spying on me like that!" he yelled out loud. He could have sworn that he saw the bellowing sage curtain that he

had put up across the entrance way of his bedroom move like someone was standing there on the other side.

Abassi Malu, dressed in a white shirt slid the curtain back. His inquisitive eyes looked down at Adedeji lying there.

"I was in the kitchen," Abassi said. "The others are at work."

Adedeji looked up at him. Abassi was thin with his head shaved. Adedeji nodded his head like he understood.

"Do your bible studies," Abassi told him now. "It'll keep you out of trouble. Trust me, I know."

As his friend stepped back the sage curtain seemed to magically slide shut on its own.

Adedeji lie there. His mind had once been made up of these fine and gentle brushstrokes. He loved tennis, musicals, and video production. But being a Nigerian in Berlin wasn't an easy task. The continental food was difficult. As was the general German view of outsiders. And old Nigerian habits die hard sometimes; he still could not get used to the electricity always working—on the computer he always had to click the save button after each word he typed. He came from a village near Agbor in Nigeria where all the huts were made of straw. His parents cooked meat on skewers and sold it at nearby trucks stops. A distant cousin, one who had migrated to Berlin a decade earlier, had helped Adedeji come over. It had been six years now, but as he lie there that morning he felt like home was somewhere far away.

His Igbo family back in Agbor were all Christians. Twice a week he went to his bible studies in Treptow-Köpenick, where he enjoyed his fellowship very much. There were no Nigerian woman there though, but he liked this one girl, Ana Bennigsen—a tall strawberry-blond German girl with soft brown eyes and whose smile reminded Adedeji of a girl, Genevieve Iweala, that he knew once back in Nigeria.

For one whole day he stayed in his bed. He ate no food and did not shower. He didn't even shave his face which had always been his custom.

The following morning he dressed like he was going to bible study. He put on a nice brown suit and walked down to the Blumenhaus Süd florist, where he bought two dozen roses.

The next thing he knew he was standing there atop the doorstep of Ana Bennigsen.

Ana came rushing to the door of her flat with just socks and a dress shirt on. Her toothbrush in her left hand still had this blue worm of toothpaste curled up on it.

"Adedeji?" she said thoroughly surprised as she opened her front door.

At first he didn't say anything. The cool wind, leftover from a storm that had passed the night before, blew steady and made Ana hold her right arm across her breasts.

The black right hand of Adedeji modestly held out the two dozen red roses he had bought for her.

Her brown eyes looked down at these mistaken flowers like perhaps they had been meant for someone else.

"Why are you bringing me flowers?" she asked. Her voice sounded as nice as it could for the situation.

"Because," Adedeji said very humble. But his voice grew an octave higher like she should have known. "We must go on the airplane!"

His black left hand grabbed her by the waist of her shirt. He then began to anxiously pull her down the steps.

"Adedeji. What's wrong with you? I'm going to tell brother Auermann!"

A passerby, a young Muslim with a thick black beard, took a hold of Adedeji by the neck. The red roses spilled everywhere. Ana frantically slipped away, sobbing, running inside the door of her flat and slamming it hard right behind her.

The young Muslim, who was still holding Adedeji by the neck right there on the sidewalk, said to him: "Are you mad?"

As the young man let go the two young foreigners looked at one another.

"I'm sorry," Adedeji said. His eyes looked confused now.

Adedeji then walked away and headed for *Märchenbrunnen* over to the Fairy Tale Fountain.

Once there he walked up to the same cement dog that had spoken to him one day earlier.

He bent forward and put his ear up to the smiling mouth of the dog. People taking a walk in the park began to stare.

That evening brother Auermann came to visit Adedeji at home.

Brother Auermann was in his seventies with gray hair and a whip smile that seemed able to disarm almost anyone. Adedeji sat meekly in a speckled chair as his roommates kept passing by the living room trying to listen in on the conversation.

"I heard you showed up at Ana's house this morning?" brother Auermann said to him. "Why don't you tell me what happened?"

Adedeji shrugged his shoulders like he wasn't sure this was true. "I went to give her flowers. We are to be married."

Brother Auermann shook his head like he completely understood, but then asked. "Have you ever spoken to Ana before? I mean at our bible meetings? More than just hello and goodbye?"

Adedeji smiled. "No," he said. "But she is kind. I can tell by her comments that she gives during our meetings."

"Yes," Brother Auermann said. "But you can't just show up at her house, Adedeji. There are manners and customs to abide by."

His face began to look more contrite now. His head nodded as this terrible error in judgment seem to prick at his conscience now.

"I see that," he said.

Brother Auermann stood, holding his back as his knees straightened. "Okay. This matter has passed. Just use more common sense next time."

Both men, young and old, black and white, tenderly shook hands, and Adedeji walked brother Auermann and guided him down the front steps outside and down the sidewalk to his bus stop as his back seemed to really be bothering him that day.

The very next morning Adedeji stood there dressed in his brown suit atop the front steps of the flat of Ana Bennigsen.

His left-hand wildly banged on her front door as his right-hand held another bouquet of red roses. When he looked up through the mosaic tile glass of the door he saw those brown eyes of Ana looking terrified out at him.

"Open this door at once," he demanded. He watched as Ana nodded her head no. "And don't you call brother Auermann."

"Don't worry," she said. "I've called the police instead!"

The eyes of Adedeji widened.

He began to run down the street as the riotous sound of a police siren began to grow louder. He ran block after block, going past the Ristorante Samirino Portocristo. He actually ran straight into his boss, Werner Emmerich, who dropped a crisp loaf of Italian bread that he was carrying in as Adedeji ran into him out on the sidewalk.

"Where are you going?" Werner yelled. "You're supposed to be here." But the young Nigerian kept running as though his frightened eyes were suddenly petrified by the mere sight of his boss Werner Emmerich.

Adedeji hid in a cinema for the rest of the day. He sat through showings of *Wer ist Hanna?*, *Die Relativitätstheorie der Liebe*, and *Das Blaue vom Himmel*. After each movie he frantically snuck out into the lobby to see if Werner Emmerich or brother Auermann or the police were there waiting for him.

That evening he went to Her Majesty's Theatre and bought one ticket for *Phantom of the Opera*. As Adedeji sat there he thought of Ana Bennigsen and Berlin and his new life away from Nigeria. And then the song *Masquerade* began onstage as all the characters came down the marble steps of the masked ball. Tears came down from the sides of Adedeji's eyes. This one song struck a chord with him—the loneliness of being thousands of miles from home, loving someone so close to you yet so far away, pretending to be someone else other than who you really are.

Sitting there in his seat in a theatre surrounded almost entirely by glaring white German faces, Adedeji began to sing softly the words of the song:

"Masquerade!
Burning glances, turning heads.
Masquerade!
Stop and stare at the sea
of smiles around you!"

Later that night, Adedeji slept in a cold alley on wet pavement under a full white moon shining beautifully high over the city of Berlin.

In the morning, he returned home to find his three roommates waiting there for him.

In the kitchen, Abassi had his arms folded across his long-sleeved winter T-shirt. "The police were here for you," he said.

"What did you do?" Mbafor asked. "You could get us all in trouble."

"Are you okay?" Nwakaego asked next, going over and putting his arm around the soot covered shoulder of Adedeji.

Nwakaego and Adedeji stared intently at one another. "I don't know if I'm okay," Adedeji said. "I needed to save this girl. It's the right thing to do. I know it."

"Ha!" Abassi interrupted. "Just because you know something doesn't mean you know anything! Especially you."

"But the police!" Mbafor said. "They could deport all of us. You should turn yourself in. For all our sake!"

Nwakaego kept looking at Adedeji with this concerned look in his eyes. "You're not yourself," he told his friend. "I can see this."

Adedeji exhaled through his nose, patted his friend tenderly on the cheek, and then smiled the way he always used to smile.

"I'm fine," he said. "I'm fine."

Later that afternoon, Adedeji waited for a bus that would take him to Ristorante Samirino Portocristo. He knew he needed to explain things over with his boss Werner. But the moment he got on that bus something in his brain clicked like switching over to a different channel. The old German bus driver, a fragile looking man with an oversized silver mustache and matching matted hair, immediately looked at Adedeji with this fear caught in his eyes. This is what turned the channel.

The eyes of the two men locked onto one another. "If you know what's good for you," Adedeji told him, "you'll take me straight to the airport."

Someone else tried to board the bus, but the old German bus driver quickly shut the door on him. His scared face nodded at the middle-aged German who stood outside looking curiously in on the scene.

By the time they arrived at Schoenefeld Airport a disproportionate amount of German police had already gathered there outside along the sidewalk.

Adedeji did not resist as he was dragged off the bus. Nevertheless, he was beaten badly about the stomach and buttocks as the old German bus driver kept yelling: "He hijacked the bus! He hijacked the bus!"

It took several days to get to the bottom of the matter. Adedeji was brought, shackled, by three armed guards to the office of psychiatry at Berlin Prison Hospital. An older gentlemen, Ernst Virchow, quite obviously a doctor, bald with expensive looking eyeglass, sat there behind his desk in a leather chair with a stark white notepad in his lap right down in front of him. To his right on his desk sat a Newton's cradle, which had already been set in motion, its two outer spheres swinging deliriously back and forth so that Adedeji thought this was some sort of magical pendulum.

"*Sprechen sie Deutsch*?" the psychiatrist asked.

Adedeji nodded his head no.

"You speak English?"

Adedeji sat up straight in the green leather chair the guards had placed him in. "Yes," he said.

"Good. Good. Now let me ask you?" the psychiatrist said. "Has there been any mental illness in your family before? Any at all?"

Adedeji looked down at the Newton's cradle swinging back and forth. This sort of personal question was not something a Nigerian was used to answering.

"Yes," he finally said. "A brother. He hung himself at fourteen."

"Any others?"

He hesitated. "Yes. An uncle. He went mad. Ran into the jungle saying demons had possessed him. Three days later they found him hacked to death."

"Any other deaths of someone close to you? Just on a personal level."

Again Adedeji hesitated. "I had a girl friend once," he said. "She was a missionary in Nigeria from Rwanda. She was killed in the Rwandan Genocide when we were both seventeen. They cut her to pieces. Her name was Genevieve. They only found half of her."

The psychiatrist wrote this all down on the stark white notepad. "And you've been on clozapine for several days now? Any hallucinations?"

"No."

"Are you hearing any voices?"

"Only the screams of the other prisoners."

"Good. Good. And how do you feel?"

"Okay, I guess. Tired."

"And do you know why you're here?"

There was a long pause, and then Adedeji said. ""They told me I hijacked a bus."

"You wanted to fly an airplane up to God. Is that correct?"

"That's what they told me."

"Okay." The psychiatrist sat up in his chair, put his hands on each side of the Newton's cradle to stop it, and then looked at his patient with this deeply concerned look about his eyes. "Listen. I will do all I can to help you. I will speak with the judge myself. You're a sick man. You need help. Not prison."

"Yes. Yes. I understand."

After this meeting with the psychiatrist, Adedeji was left imprisoned in the psychiatric ward of the Berlin Prison Hospital for over 12 months. He had a hearing in the *Amtsgericht* court with a German judge who held his fate in her hands.

When Adedeji finally arrived at court he was shackled and led before a female judge whose name he was told was Gisela Scheffler. She read aloud in German from two pages of script that she had prepared before the hearing. Adedeji kept looking around the courtroom. He was horrified and embarrassed to see brother Auermann and Ana Bennigsen herself and his one roommate, Nwakaego, all sitting there together as though they were all rooting for him to be released.

Seemingly out of nowhere this young, dark haired female clerk came over to Adedeji and his lawyer. She explained in full detail, translating in English, how Adedeji had been found guilty of hijacking the bus, but that Judge Scheffler, taking his circumstances into account, had sentenced him to five years probation. All he had to do was stay on his medication and stay out of trouble in all of Germany.

Adedeji's lawyer laughed and smiled and wildly shook his client's hand. "You're a free man. You're free. You'll be home by tonight," he said in English with a thick German accent.

Brother Auermann rushed over and heartily began to shake Adedeji's hand. A relieved looking Adedeji looked over at his roommate, Nwakaego, who came running over and then kissed him on each cheek.

And then Ana Bennigsen came over to him.

As she strode up with a smile on her face, dressed very conservatively in a black skirt with a loose white top, she looked more like an angel to Adedeji than any woman he had ever seen; German or African.

The young Nigerian looked at the red-headed beauty with great shame. "It was like I was sleep walking," he told her.

Ana Bennigsen put her hand under his chin and gently lifted up his face.

"I understand," she said. "A long time ago my mother was sick also. She was in the hospital for twenty-two years. I just didn't realize that it was happening to you too."

Adedeji stared at her intently. He knew in his homeland that he would have been cast out, thrown away, looked down upon as though he were possessed by a spirit, not worthy of the blood and salt that made up his soul. It gave him great strength that he was believed in here; and deep down he knew that everything was going to be okay now.

A few hours later he walked out of court in street clothes. Brother Auermann and his roommate, Nwakaego, walked beside him in front of the courthouse as they all intended to take the bus back to their respective dwellings. As they walked together outside beneath a beautiful pale green twilight that had spread out across all of Berlin, these two nefarious looking blond-haired men in matching black suits walked up on them quickly.

Immediately, and without saying a word, they handcuffed Adedeji.

Pulling him by the elbows they began to drag him toward a gleaming black Audi A8L 4-door sedan. He kept screaming: "Wait! Wait! Wait!"

Brother Auermann ran up to the side of one of the men. He put his hand on his arm. "Where are you taking him?" he asked, his voice shrill. "He was just set free by the court."

The blond-haired man pulled out his government ID. His face stayed calm and he actually began to look sullen and expressive as though he personally felt sorry about what he was about to do.

"I apologize," he told brother Auermann. "He was found guilty, yes? And he's an alien, yes? He just doesn't have the rights a natural citizen has. Under German law he must be deported immediately."

As brother Auermann stood there stunned, the two blond-haired men forced a handcuffed Adedeji into the backseat of their Audi.

A moment later they were driving him away to God knows where as brother Auermann and Nwakaego stood there on that Berlin street watching the tinted windows of the Audi as this car drove away with their terrified young friend trapped inside of it.

One month later, Adedeji ran through the dark jungle back in Nigeria with a group of men armed with machetes and bells chasing after him. These vigilantes, normal men during the day, were the only thing that stood between bandits and the unarmed citizens of Nigeria. But that night Adedeji, who had run out of clozapine, and who could not get any medical treatment back in his homeland, had been mistaken for one of the bandits.

He had been showing up at people's houses with this possessed look in his eyes as he demanded food. He kept saying that someone had to take him to the airport so he could return for Ana Bennigsen as he had to rescue her from the German security forces that were after her now.

The villagers, frightened by his unpredictable antics, asked the vigilantes to intervene.

Adedeji, thin, frail, his bare feet filled full of sores, his beige and maroon button down shirt half torn apart, his white shorts spotted with muck and blood, ran through leaves bigger than he was with a silver-white lit moon shining down through the brush like a night sun that was chasing after him. The dew of the bush kept striking at his cheeks and across his stomach like

the tongues of lizards. These contorted voices chasing him, really just the sound of the excited villagers, sounded alien to him now. He thought of God, and even began to say prayers, but in his condition he didn't know where a prayer began or ended, and sometimes he couldn't even remember who God was from all the noise chattering back and forth in his head.

And after awhile, when his soul could feel his feet and body giving way, he ran to this ancient African mahogany tree that he recognized from his childhood. It was tall and so large that seven or eight men hand to hand could surround it. There was a notch at the base of this tree where a second offshoot had once been struck by lightning and split apart away from the rest of the tree where it left this massive hole about the size of a man.

Knowing the forest as he did, Adedeji calmed a bit as he came upon the old mahogany tree.

As he stood there all these memories began to flood his head—memories of his brother who had died; and his mother and father, both great folk singers; and his father who used to lull him to sleep as a child with lullabies; and the thought of Genevieve who he never forgot.

He quickly disrobed, threw his bloodied and tattered clothes into the notch of the tree, and then set his black body perfectly into the hole, curling up like a fetus, turning his face inward toward the smooth inside of the hole, his hands and feet pressed inside as this band of vigilantes came running past with their machetes flailing about, their bells ringing, their voices screaming and shouting, looking for Adedeji in the dark so they could cut his throat and rid the village of this nuisance that they knew possessed him.

Soon the voices and cacophony of the vigilantes ran off into the bush until there was this quiet whisper of only the muffled jungle. A bird, like a nightingale, began to sing for a split second. The song of insects and frogs rose up through the thick night air. And then this sound of a petrified man, his body pressed up into the lightning notch of a tree, his haunting voice sobbing a lullaby that he thought he knew from childhood but that was from somewhere else completely as the jungle closed in all around him and he lost himself in the shuttering and quivering of all that darkness.