**Uncle Ben’s Choice, by Chinua Achebe**

In the year nineteen hundred and nineteen I was a young clerk in the Niger Company at Umuru. To be a clerk in those days is like to be a minister today. My salary was two pounds ten. You may laugh but two pounds ten in those days is like fifty pounds today. You could buy a big goat with four shillings. I could remember the most senior African in the company was one Saro man on ten-thirteen-four. He was like Governor-General in our eyes.

Like all progressive young men I joined the African Club. We played tennis and billiards. Every year we played a tournament with the European Club. But I was less concerned with that. What I liked was the Saturday night dances. Women were surplus. Not all the waw-waw women you see in townships today, but beautiful things like this.

I had a Raleigh bicycle, brand new, and everybody called me Jolly Ben. I was selling like hot bread. But there is one thing about me – we can laugh and joke and drink and do otherwise but I must always keep my sense with me. My father told me that a true son of our land must know how to sleep and keep one eye open. I never forget it. So I played and laughed with everyone and they shouted “Jolly Ben! Jolly Ben!” but I knew what I was doing. The women of Umuru are very sharp; before you count A they count B. So I had to be very careful. I never showed any of them the road to my house and I never ate the food they cooked for fear of love medicines. I had seen many young men kill themselves with women in those days, so I remembered my father’s word: Never let a handshake pass the elbow.

I can say that the only exception was one tall, yellow, salt-water girl like this called Margaret. One Sunday morning I was playing my gramophone, a brand new HMV Senior. (I never believe in second hand things. If I have no money for a new one I just keep myself quiet; that is my motto.) I was playing this record and standing at the window with my chewing-stick in my mouth. People were passing in their fine-fine dresses to one church nearby. This Margaret was going with them when she saw me. As luck would have it I did not see her in time to hide. So that very day – she did not wait till tomorrow or next tomorrow – but as soon as church closed she returned back. According to her she wanted to convert me to Roman Catholic. Wonders will never end! Margaret Jumbo! Beautiful thing like this. But it is not Margaret I want to tell you about now. I want to tell you how I stopped all that foolishness.

I was one New Year’s Eve like this. You know how New Year can pass Christmas for jollity, for we end-of-month people. By Christmas Day the month has reached twenty-hungry but on New Year your pocket is heavy. So that day I went to the Club.

When I see young men of nowadays say you drink, I just laugh. You don’t know what drink is. You drink one bottle of beer or one shot of whiskey and you begin to holler like crazeman. That night I was taking it easy on White Horse. All that are desirous to pass from Edinburgh to London or any other place on their road, let them repair to the White Hot cellar…God Almighty!

One thing with me is I never mix my drinks. The day I want to drink whiskey I know that that is whiskey-day; if I want to drink beer tomorrow then I know it is beer-day; I don’t touch any other think. That night I was on White Horse. I had one roasted chicken and a tin of Guinea Gold. Yes, I used to smoke in those days. I only stopped when one German doctor told me my heart was as black as a cooking-pot. Those German doctors were spirits. You know they used to give injections in the head or belly or anywhere. You just point where the thing is paining you and they give it to you right there – they don’t waste time.

What was I saying?...Yes, I drank a bottle of White Horse and put one roasted chicken on top of it…Drunk? It is not in my dictionary. I have never been drunk in my life. My father used to say that the cure for drink is to say no. When I want to drink I drink, when I want to stop I stop. So about three o’clock that night I said to myself, you have had enough. So I jumped on my new Raleigh bicycle and went home quietly to sleep.

At that time our senior clerk was jailed for stealing bales of calico and I was acting in that capacity. So I lived in a small company house. You know where G.B. Olivant is today?...Yes, overlooking the River Niger. That is where my house was. I had two rooms on one side of it and the store-keeper had two rooms on the other side. But as luck would have it this man was on leave, so his side was vacant.

I opened the front door and went inside. Then I locked it again. I left my bicycle in the first room and went into the bedroom. I was too tired to begin to look for my lamp. So I pulled my dress and packed them on the back of the chair, and fell like a log into my big iron bed. And to God who made me, there was a woman in my bed. My mind told me at once it was Margaret. So I began to laugh and touch her here and there. She was hundred percent naked. I continued laughing and asked her when did she come. She did not say anything and I suspected she was annoyed because she asked me to take her to the Club that day and I said no. I said to her: if you come there we will meet, I don’t take anybody to the Club as such. So I suspected that is what is making her vex.

I told her not to vex but still she did not say anything. I asked her if she was asleep – just for asking sake. She said nothing. Although I told you that I did not like women to come to my house, but for every rule there must be an exception. So if I say that I was very angry to find Margaret that night I will be telling a white lie. I was still laughing when I noticed that her breasts were straight like the breasts of a girl of sixteen – or seventeen, at most. I thought that perhaps it was because of the way she was lying on her back. But when I touched the hair and it was soft like the hair of a European my laughter was quenched by force. I touched the hair on her head and it was the same. I jumped out of the bed and shouted: “Who are you?” My head swelled up like a barrel and I was shaking. The woman sat up and stretched her hands to call me back; as she did so her fingers touched me. I jumped back at the same time and shouted again to her to call her name. Then I said to myself: How can you be afraid of a woman? Whether a white woman or a black woman, it is the same ten and tenpence. So I said: “All right, I will soon open your mouth,” at the same time I began to look for matches on the table. The woman suspected what I was looking for. She said, “Biko akpakwana oku.”

I said: “So you are not a white woman. Who are you? I will strike the matches now if you don’t tell me.” I shook the matches to show her that I meant business. My boldness had come back and I was trying to remember the voice because it was very familiar.

“Come back to bed and I will tell you,” was what I heard next. Whoever told me it was a familiar voice told me a lie. It was sweet like sugar but not familiar at all. So I struck the matches. “I beg you,” was the last thing she said.

If I tell you what I did next or how I managed to come out of that room it is pure guesswork. The next thing I remember is that I was running like a crazeman to Matthew’s house. Then I was banging on his door with both my hands.

“Who is that?” he said from inside.

“Open,” I shouted. “In the name of God above, open.”

I called my name but my voice was not like my voice. The door opened very small and I saw my kinsman holding a machete in his right hand.

I fell down on the floor, and he said, “God will not agree.”

It was God Himself who directed me to Matthew Obi’s house that night because I did not see where I was going. I could not say whether I was still in this world or whether I was dead. Matthew poured cold water on me and after some time I was able to tell him what happened. I think I told it upside down otherwise he would not keep asking me what was she like, what was she like.

“I told you before I did not see her,” I said.

“I see, but you heard her voice?”  
“I heard her voice quite all right. And I touched her and she touched me.”

“I don’t know whether you did well or not to scare her away,” was what Matthew said.

I don’t’ know how to explain it but those words from Matthew opened my eyes. I knew at once that I had been visited by Mami Wota, the lady of the River Niger.

Matthew said again: “It depends what you want in life. If it is wealth you want then you made a great mistake today, but if you are a true son of your father then take my hand.”

We shook hands and he said: “Our fathers never told us that a man should prefer wealth instead of wives and children.”

Today whenever my wives make me vex I tell them: “I don’t blame you. If I had been wise I would have taken Mami Wota.” They laugh and ask me why I did not take her. The youngest one says: “Don’t worry, Papa, she will come again; she will come tomorrow.” And they laugh again.

But we know it is a joke. For where is the man who will choose wealth instead of children? Except a crazy white man like Dr. J.M. Stuart-Young. Oh, I didn’t tell you. The same night that I drove Mami Wota out she went to Dr. J.M. Stuart-Young, white merchant, and became his lover. You have heard of him?...Oh yes, he became the richest man in the whole country. But she did not allow him to marry. When he died, what happened? All his wealth went to outsiders. Is that good wealth? I ask you. God forbid.