

## Chapter Thirteen

## Barbecuing My Big Nkisi

Holding her nasty Henckels cleaver high in the air, Chizo is scaring the wits out of me. Chasing me at high speed, her Henckels in her right hand, she explains that I should not be afraid. She doesn't intend to carve me up; she's merely imitating a favorite character in a popular Nigerian movie: the loving but knife-wielding wife given to acting out mock attacks on her husband. "I'm funning you," she says. "Wives in Nigerian movies always funny their husbands by chasing them with knives."

I am twenty feet away from Chizo, separated from her by the width of a quiet street, wondering whether to believe her words while at the same time imagining what the neighbors think of an overweight white man, wearing only a bathing suit and sandals, being menaced by a wiry black woman in dreadlocks who can run so fast with a large knife in a raised hand—as if she's had plenty of practice.

"What if someone calls the police?" I shout. "Can you imagine the report. 'Skinny black woman with giant knife chasing heavy-set white man up and down Francisco Street!'"

I pause to let my words sink in. Sometimes, Chizo is open to persuasion. Maybe this is one of those times.

I watch her carefully for clues that she may choose to relent.

This is not one of those times when my words turn the tide.

Chizo charges toward me, shouting "Four-eyes" (a reference to

my eyeglasses) and swinging her cleaver above her head. She lets out a long battle cry. I gather myself and breathe deeply, weighing where I should run to next. I decide to turn tail and race up the front steps of a neighbor's house.

When I reach the landing, the neighbor's door covering my back, I turn and watch Chizo race after me, stopping at the base of the steps. She plants herself, the cleaver in her right hand dangling below her waist.

I am cornered. I am trapped. My final humiliation is near at hand.

I start to cry.

"Don't funny me now," Chizo says. "You know I'll never hurt you."

I raise my head and our eyes meet. "Please put down the knife," I say. "Lay it on the ground, and step back."

I try to sound like a hard-bitten cop, a Mafia hit man, or at least somebody who is no longer playing around with the woman he loves. My tough talk gets nothing. She won't put down the knife.

I begin to plead. I know in my heart that Chizo is funning me. I know she enjoys scaring her husband. I even believe she got the idea from watching Nigerian movies. I know all this, or do I?

I am still afraid. I cry louder.

"The knife scares me," I say.

I bought the Henckels cleaver from Macy's, and I know its power. I was tired of seeing Chizo destroy serviceable chopping knives on goat bones. The Henckels is a match for any bone Chizo wants to chop.

"Can we please go back to the cottage?" I ask. "You are making a fool of me in front of the neighbors. At least in the cottage, you can make a fool of me in private."

Chizo prefers a public drama. "Let one of the neighbors call the police," she says. "The police will laugh at you. Big giant of America, afraid of kitchen knife and your tiny African wife."

I shake my head, tears rolling down my cheeks. I try to remember how we reached this point. Fear has robbed me of my thoughts.

Oh, that's right. Chizo was cooking. The usual: pounded yam, cassava, plantains, fried goat, coconut rice. I made an innocent comment about the type of oil she was using: big, thick, fattening palm oil, imported from Nigeria and bought for an exorbitant price at the Igbo grocery store in central Oakland. I merely said I'd prefer she fry the plantains with canola oil.

Maybe because she'd heard my advice many times before, and always ignored it, at least when cooking plantains, she dismissed me with a wave of a hand and the warning, "Don't step on my shoe."

I already have, so my effusive apology is lost on her. She is angry. Lately, I have stepped too often on her shoe.

A few weeks later, we are packing our belongings. At long last we are moving out of the cottage in the backyard of my ex-wife's property and into our own house a few miles away.

The move is an opportunity for Chizo to fix a long-festering problem—and that's not her relationship with my ex-wife.

I need to give a bit of background in order to explain the problem, which has to do with my collection of tribal art: wood statues and masks from Africa. I began collecting African art even before I met Chizo, on my very first visit to the continent (a trip to Burundi for *The Wall Street Journal*). I stored my collection in the cottage. When I bought statues in West Africa, I would not keep them in our Accra house but rather would carry them to Berkeley, on my periodic trips back to the United States.

In this manner the cottage became filled with statues. I placed them on ledges and shelves, on top of dressers and tables. I hung masks on the walls above the kitchen and bathroom sinks. In short, there was no position in the cottage from which at least a few statues were not plainly visible.

In Accra, I warned Chizo about how I'd filled the cottage with statues. Because she agreed to live in the cottage, she worried about the growing number of pieces. She believes these statues contain

spirits, some good, some bad, some neutral. While I worried about Chizo and me living in Berkeley within one hundred feet of my ex-wife, Chizo worried about living with my African art collection.

Her first night in the cottage, after two tiring ten-hour flights and a couple of hours of trick-or-treating, she ignored the statues and slept well. But the next morning, after rising from bed, she took me by the hand and we inspected statue after statue. Chizo talked about each one, saying whether she thought this particular statue carried good powers or bad. When she found the red *blolo*, she acted as if greeting an old friend, petting the statue on the head. To those pieces she considered bad, for whatever reason, she mumbled words in Igbo—words she said were intended to rob the statues of evil, or at least keep the evil at a safe distance.

When she came to the largest statue in my collection, she stood mute. The statue is four feet tall and weighs eighty pounds. The head is enormous, with large eyes set under glass, a wide-open mouth and teeth nearly the size of real human choppers. The statue's body is riddled with large nails. Each nail, to the Kongo tribe member who made the statue, represents a promise. Every contract, deal or promise made within the confines of a certain village in the Congo was consecrated by driving a nail into the statue. In the Kongo language, the statue is an *nkisi*, or "nail figure."

My *nkisi* is the centerpiece of my collection: the most striking piece, and the most valuable. I purchased it from an African art dealer, a Gambian Muslim named Musa, who arranges for a buying agent to scour West and central Africa, acquiring a container load of pieces once or twice a year. The agent told Musa that this *nkisi* came from a Kongo village overrun by rebel armies in the late 1990s. Routinely soldiers looted villages and their booty often included artwork, which they knew could be sold to collectors in Europe and the United States (elite Africans, meanwhile, usually steer clear of such work).

Musa's story of the *nkisi* carried a whiff of truth. Besides, my statue is simply too big and beautiful to have been a cheap copy prepared hurriedly by local artists in the hopes of hoodwinking a

tourist. One hundred years ago, German and Belgian explorers of Africa had carried off many *nkisis*, bringing them to Europe. Dozens now sit in museums in Germany, Belgium and Portugal. Only a few months before meeting Chizo in Accra for the first time, I visited a Berlin museum that contains a handsome collection of *nkisis*. The museum's curator gave me a private tour, and we lingered at the section devoted to the *nkisi* statues, marveling at their combination of beauty, size and elegance.

The *nkisi* in my cottage is no equal of these museum pieces, yet the statue is authentic and I more than admired it. I could not imagine giving it up. So when Chizo stood before it, her body shaking with fear, I grew concerned.

"Leave this statue behind," she said. "Don't bring danger into our new house."

I protested and she cut me off. "Okay. Bring the statue, leave it outside. In the backyard. There is a place, protected from the rain, near the hot tub. Leave it there."

I said nothing and the debate ceased. We moved our belongings over a period of weeks, until the new house was ready to go and the cottage was empty of all but the *nkisi*. The statue seemed majestic in the center of the room, as if inhabiting its own house. One afternoon, at the last possible moment, when my ex-wife stands hovering outside, waiting expectantly for my final exit, I come and embrace my *nkisi*. I face a strange choice—between my wife and my most valued statue. For a long time I consider telephoning Musa, asking him to buy back the *nkisi*. Even at a substantial cost to myself, its return to a responsible dealer, who would find the statue a good home, makes sense. Why upset Chizo? She had compromised, after all, in moving the rest of my collection into the new house. Why not let go of the *nkisi*—for her sake?

I don't call Musa. I stand near my statue, which suddenly seems like my little brother. "You are part of my African family," I say aloud. "You are part of my connection to the motherland!"

Then my declarations are interrupted by the sound of the cottage door swinging open. My ex-wife, Nora, ducks her head inside.

"What gives with the statue?" she says.

I sigh and try to speak, but no words come out.

"I'm sending Liam in here to help you get it out. You're supposed to be out by noon."

I check my watch. I'm an hour over her limit.

"I can't decide about the statue," I say, but Nora is already gone. A minute later my son arrives. I take the head of the statue and he holds the base. We lift it, put it into my Volvo and drive to my new home.

All is fine at first. Then one afternoon I find myself part of a drama conceived, produced and acted out by Chizo.

Act one begins innocently enough, with Chizo asking me to sit down on the upholstered swivel chair I keep in my study.

When I sit, she pulls my arms behind the chair and slaps handcuffs on me.

"Where did you get these cuffs?" I ask. "They're comfortable."

These are not police issue but rather leather cuffs.

"Only the best for you," Chizo says.

I nod, pleased.

Instead of asking how much the cuffs cost, which is what I do, I should be rising from the chair and running out of the house. While I wait for Chizo to answer, she's cuffing my ankle to the bottom of the chair. When I try to escape, I fall back into the chair.

Chizo steps toward me and laughs. "The cuffs are strong," she says. "They are reigning. Give in."

"I am at your mercy," I reply. "Please be kind."

Chizo casts her eyes to the ceiling. "Oh Lord, give me the strength to help my husband find the path of righteous. Give me the strength to expel the devil who threatens to terrify me and turn him into a fake husband."

Fake husband?

"What's this about?" I ask.

She pushes the swivel chair into the living room and then to the

front door. Directly across from the door stands the *nkisi*, placed strategically so that visitors must confront the statue and, while we are asleep, it can guard the door against unwanted intruders.

"Oh no," I say. "No."

"I asked you to keep the statue somewhere else," Chizo says. "You ignored me. You brought the statue into our new house. I pretended to go along. No longer. Now I am protecting myself because if I don't, the devil will rule."

Chizo's voice is calm and clear. She is not funning me and I am growing very nervous.

"Release me, darling, and I will see that the *nkisi* gets a new location."

She smiles and says, "Allow me."

From out of nowhere comes a can of lighter fluid, the stuff used to jump-start barbecues. I try to leap from the chair, forgetting my predicament, and come crashing back down.

I moan loudly, feeling pain and seeing clearly Chizo's next move.

"No," I yell. "No, no, no!"

She is squirting lighter fluid on the statue. The liquid drips from the *nkisi*'s ears and mouth and chest.

Now she holds a lighter and snaps it. A flame shoots into the air. Chizo brings the flame near my nose, then swings the lighter to the *nkisi*'s chin. Flame meets wood and I hear a sizzling sound.

"Are you setting my statue on fire!" I scream. "In the house! You could burn down the whole place."

Chizo snaps off the lighter. "You're right. Let's go outside."

She picks up the statue by the head and carries it through the front door. Then she wheels me out into the bright sunshine and I see the statue sitting in an empty driveway, ready for setting on fire.

"I'm so glad you're thinking about safety," I say sarcastically.

She comes over and kisses me, a long kiss that makes me think she's having a change of heart and may remove the handcuffs.

"I'm barbecuing your big *nkisi*—for your own good!" she whispers defiantly.

Alarmed, I once more try to liberate myself. I can't. I fall back into the chair and then watch helplessly as the flame of her lighter meets the statue at four or five places. My body sags. I shake and squirm and jiggle. Then I topple the chair onto its side and roll down the driveway, moaning in pain.

Chizo catches my chair, puts me upright and brushes the dirt off my face. She kisses my forehead while I breathe heavily.

"Please stop," I say.

"Honey, I want you to watch me barbecue your *nkisi*."

I shake my head and watch. The statue is smoldering now. For some reason the fire won't catch, perhaps because the statue is made of tropical hardwood. Chizo sprays more lighter fluid onto the *nkisi* and then runs the lighter over it again. Still, no flames. She grabs a pile of discarded newspapers, layers them onto the statue and sets the papers alight. This time the fire ignites. Flames engulf the body of the statue, though thankfully the enormous, beautiful head won't catch fire.

I feel I am watching a medieval witch burning. At the very instant that I conclude the statue won't possibly survive my wife's attack, Chizo grabs a garden hose and douses the statue with long blasts of water. She keeps inundating it long after I yell for her to stop. Having feared fire damage, I now fear water damage. My pleading goes unanswered. Chizo drowns my *nkisi* with impunity. I slump into my chair, defeated.

"Uncuff me, and I'll dry the statue," I say sometime later. "Water can be worse than fire with old wood."

Chizo decides to dry the statue herself. I watch from the chair, occasionally giving instructions. She deftly scoops out water from the mouth and ears and dries down the body vigorously. She carefully rubs the glass eyes, and the glass box, fixed to the *nkisi*'s waist, where shamans likely kept their potions and herbs.

When she's done drying the statue, she uncuffs me. I rise from the chair, slowly. I groan. I feel stiff and sore. I stand motionless

and erect, a few feet from the statue. I am afraid to touch it. My eyes meet Chizo's and for a long time we stare at each other without speaking.

She finally breaks the silence.

"Bring your big *nkisi* back into the house," she says. "I've killed the evil spirit now. Or chased it away. The danger is gone. You can keep the statue in the house now."

I blink furiously, letting the words sink in. Then I pull Chizo toward me, holding her tight. I break free and touch the statue. Then I hold Chizo again. Our bodies intertwined, I try to make sense of what's happened. I cannot. Instead I let go of my questions and accept the cuffing, the fire, the water—and all the rest of Chizo's improvised exorcism.

She puts her arm around me and draws me close again, while I relish my instant amnesia. Psychologically, I have moved on. I smell her hair, I feel her skin against mine, I look into her eyes.

"I feel safe again," she says.

Me too.

I savor the moment. Unexpectedly, I have triumphed. My statue survives, Chizo is relieved and once more we are happily married.