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A DIP IN THE SEA

DAPO ADENIYI

Front of the house. High noon with sun-spots. A light sound of breeze and waves from the backwaters. Iscariot is lying face-up on the ground, his box for a head-rest; he swipes at a fly, rolls over on his side where his face is now trained directly on Bakhud's quarters. The window up is shut. Silence. Humbi enters, and Iscariot rolls over in the opposite direction, turning his face to the road. Humbi goes across and taps him.

HUMBI: Iscariot Iscariot.

ISCARIOT: Ughn?

HUMBI: Iscariot

ISCARIOT: Ughn?

HUMBI: Wake up, wake up.

ISCARIOT: What is it? *[Going back to sleep, Humbi gives him a pinch in the side so he rises sharply on his buttocks.]*

ISCARIOT: You nut?

HUMBI: He is back.

ISCARIOT: Who? Habibu?

HUMBI: No, not Habibu, the man, the one who came before.

ISCARIOT: *[Rising, anxious]* And he told you he will like to see the box now?

HUMBI: *[Aghast]* What box?

ISCARIOT: *[Sinking back again, slowly]* I thought he might be willing to take his measurement, that's all.

HUMBI: What measurement?

ISCARIOT: *[Puts his head back on the box. Philosophically,]* He'll have to take measurement some day anyhow. We'll all take measurement.

HUMBI: What is he talking about? Get your friend down quickly because I think it's him he wants to speak with.

ISCARIOT: *[Staring at the sky, thinking]* Nobody ever wants it yet it is a necessity. Nobody ever comes forward willingly.

HUMBI: *[Shaking him awake from his day-dreams]* I said get him to come down you heard me before the man wanders off again.

ISCARIOT: Where's he wandering to this time?

HUMBI: How do I know? He's right there now standing his face turned to the sea. He wouldn't even reply if you talked to him; that's what I can't understand, why he keeps mute, he hasn't spoken a word since.

ISCARIOT: But you saw him go off the last time. I should like to know where he wanders to each time.

HUMBI: Oh hurry Iscariot or he... *[looking the way back to the exit]* he might just go drown himself. I don't

know what is the matter with him.

ISCARIOT: Why would he do a thing like that to himself? Is he a couple of screws loose or something?

HUMBI: You should have seen him yourself Iscariot, acts like he's never seen water all his life. He's been running about in the water his hands stretched out probing the sand under the water with his hands *[demonstrating]* sometimes he would run up east and race back westward with all his dress on. It's dangerous doing a thing like that in the sea but he doesn't seem to realise it.

ISCARIOT: You don't know him who he is, where he comes from?

HUMBI: I believe he's a mute Iscariot

ISCARIOT: But why does he prefer it drowning? *[Rising again as if on the spark of an idea]* perhaps you could talk with him and persuade him about the other options.

HUMBI: What are you talking about!

ISCARIOT: *[Sinking back again.]* I should have known.

HUMBI: *[Glancing again at the exit]* We must get Bakhud before it is too late. *[The rams bleat from the house, Humbi pauses, heads for the side of the house and picks a number of grass tufts, returns and pushes them through the window to feed them. Iscariot keeps his blank indifferent gaze at the sky. Rams bleat again - suddenly Humbi makes a discovery. Whatever it is makes him look in Iscariot's direction with suspicion, puzzled and fearful he looks again into the house, peeping in, looks back all the way again to Iscariot]*

HUMBI: *[Hushed tone]* Iscariot. *[Iscariot giving neither reply nor motion, Humbi draws close to him.]*



Photograph of the Bar Beach by Ako Amadi, exhibited last year in Lagos.

HUMBI: Iscariot.

ISCARIOT: *[Without movement]* Something eating you ?

HUMBI: *[Tapping him, nervous]* Look look Iscariot its no joking matter. You know what I found?

ISCARIOT: That your friend has gone dipping himself again, of course ...

HUMBI: It's the rams Iscariot. Look do you know what I have been noticing for some time now, the rams have been vanishing one by one for a while. Between how many days and now, I tell you the number has reduced again by two rams.

ISCARIOT: And that is why you are going to burst your arteries, because a ram or two have decided to duck behind planks and you can't see them?

HUMBI: *[Stubbornly]* If they ducked I will know. And why will they duck ! You can even hear it from their bleating. Look ... *[Glancing shortly at the exit]* there was a whole crowd

of them less than five ...

[Movement of the bolts behind the door up, but door is not opened. Humbi starting crawls rapidly on his hands for the safety of the house' lower section, waits. Iscariot also has raised his back from the ground in expectation. Silence. Prolonged silence. As Humbi plans to rise and return, door up the stairs is jerked open and Bakhud starts to race down the staircase, one opened scroll in his hand, followed closely by Ighuahide with the usual load of scrolls. Humbi petrified, scrambles under the staircase but with one leg partly visible. Iscariot has risen to his feet but Bakhud does not even appear to take any notice of him or of anything else save the top of Iscariot's box which he makes his goal. He stoops by the box and starts to crease his brows grasping some meanings which he proceeds to compare with the inscriptions on the opened page of his scroll.]

BAKHUD: *[Stooping still, looks up to Iscariot]* I thought you said you had no dossiers on those ones they took care of the other time.

ISCARIOT: Which Bakhud ?

BAKHUD: The ones that went into the ground.

ISCARIOT: I tried hard but, no cooperation.

BAKHUD: What cooperation?

ISCARIOT: The men of the town hoarded all the facts.

BAKHUD: Town. You don't mean you got as far as the town? I can't remember giving any leave that you get in touch with them.

ISCARIOT: Of course, Bakhud

BAKHUD: *[Thinking, looks down to the box and on the scroll]* But then what you have here sure looks like the dossiers all right, or what I think they ought to be.

ISCARIOT: *[Embarrassed]* I hadn't thought of that Bakhud.

BAKHUD: In that case let's just see.

[Continues to probe through the signs on the box] It is the same dossiers all right Iscariot. yes ... [Checking] a head-on collision, all right, two locomotives ... Yes ... one having a ... what is ... [Squeezing his brows harder to grasp] premonition of a coming clash - [Looking up, excited] you are actually sure of these facts Iscariot? Now dear me you really got yourself something here ... the first lorry dashed its foot against a bump and then the drone of the engine-cries lowered. [Looking up again] I don't get it. What you are trying to say is the first vehicle sank into a pothole and because of the severity of this the engine almost gets cut out. Am I right? [Thinking.] It is safe to deduce from this then that the engine caught cold, catarrh, asthma, bronchitis, never mind the precise prognosis for now, you interpret this to mean a premonition that a disaster is lying ahead ... I am right? So that there was this clash or head-on with another van which yet was more than a thousand feet away. Interesting. This is really interesting. [Rising, his face a flood of excitement.] I'll really suggest that you come up right away and give me the full picture so I can arrange them in one neat calligraphy. [Near to whistling, beams sweetly but as he peers down the South and his eyes catch the roadside post, he appears to whince and lose some sweetness, glances down at the box for reassurance.]

BAKHUD: Wait. Wait ... Iscariot. We have to cross-check certain details of this occurrence. This being, we might say, an eye-witness account ...but can you swear to the accuracy of the distance with the on-coming van? I mean did you take a tape-measure unit along to double-check?

ISCARIOT: I ... didn't think about that Bakhud.

BAKHUD: Well then. Well so it means we have to take a little risk on that point. It's a reasonable risk I should think for no one in his right frame of mind except of course one disguising as your well-

wisher but in fact wishing you anything but well will expect you to run between two fast moving vehicles with a tape to take measurement. [For a moment looks down thoughtfully on the box.] Not bad. Not bad at all. [Motions to Ighu, turns towards the staircase, he stops.] I nearly forgot. There is one other thing I meant to ask you, I don't know if you have an idea. There is this riddle that I still believe defeats the carpenter's tape-measure: the riddle of the distance between the road and death. Has that never occurred to you Iscariot? Now I am sure no metricology can speak with certitude that the road boasts an equidistance with dying. The immeasurable medium-lane burrows through dug-out holes of the earth, that road to the other life knows no reverse. There we have a straight and uncontested FACT - no man plying on that road once comes back hereinafter to tell a tale.

[Looks to Iscariot for a response but Iscariot keeps staring blankly. Bakhud waits some more, gives up.]

No idea. No idea. All right, still you've not done badly.

[He begins to climb the stairs, looks down and catches a view of Humbi's protruding leg.]

BAKHUD: Somebody it seems forgot one of his legs here. (to Iscariot) know whose it is? [Starts to descend back, looks deliberately toward Iscariot's legs.] No I think you have your two intact so it can't be yours. Except you've begun to keep spares. [Bakhud hands Ighu his scroll and edges close to the spot where the leg is, attacks it as though it were a great snake while Humbi struggles to draw his legs in. Bakhud pulls at the leg and a struggle ensues, Humbi continuing in his bid to rescue it. Humbi loses out and Bakhud drags him all the way to the open, Humbi crying out a plea. He breaks free and struggles out of the reach of Bakhud's hands, particularly Ighu who is handicapped by the luggage of scrolls.]

BAKHUD: [Panting] The .. the ...

bloody rascal. What's he doing in there as if he were a rat that I know he is? [To Humbi] Come, come on, you bloody thing.

HUMBI: I, I brought petitions about the rams Bakhud.

BAKHUD: [Aghast] What!

HUMBI: I came to report about it Bakhud.

BAKHUD: And what about them?

HUMBI: They ... they've been vanishing, vanishing for some time I noticed Bakhud.

BAKHUD: [Stealing a glance through the house] Vanishing. Who appointed you a keeper over the rams Humbi?

[Glancing rapidly round the faces of the men about him. To Humbi -]

Yes. I said who made you an advocate for the rams? We've got little or no business with those creatures - true, we took over their habitation and forced ourselves upon them as compulsory neighbours. The best we could undertake at any stage, if one or two of them came into mishap or accident from time to time or even took a short stroll into the second life is organise a mourning session on their behalf. I've never heard of it - and so I guess is Iscariot - no, never have the fates of rams afforded the luxury boxes, Never. [A rustle of leaves and sound of feet on gravel from beside the house. All attention is diverted that way, a man appears. His turban wrapped round his cap is drawn downward to his chin so that his cheeks, mouth and jaws are covered. He is dripping wet from his head to his feet, his sandals from the same country as Bakhud. He is tall and thin, his long dress and turban making him look like a staff. He advances up slowly to a reception committee that is too surprised and wonder-struck to know what to do.]

(Excerpted from a full-length play, *The*

Return of Habibu Timbuktu) [GR]