

High School Short Story
Third Place

The Origin of Courage
By Olivia Gyapong, James Hubert Blake High School

Nadia awaited her interview, sitting in the company's reception room with posture so perfectly erect she wouldn't be surprised if her spine snapped. Her crisp, recently ironed suit coordinated perfectly with the stiff, starched environment of the waiting area. Nadia's foot swam in anxious circles through the air. Everything in her surroundings looked as though it had been bathed in bleach, the floor tiles glaring back at her with a harsh resplendence every time she glanced downward. The purity and order of the room reminded her of some sort of earthly purgatory, and beads of sweat clustered on her dark-skinned forehead. Nadia clutched at her blouse, desperately trying to conceal more of her exposed neck. In those hazy moments, the atmosphere seemed to greedily hoard as much heat as possible, and soon Nadia's ears were flooded with a ringing that seemed to drown all of her sanity.

Then, the bracelet on her wrist slid off. A rainbow of beads spread out as far as Nadia could see, the limp string she hadn't removed since she put it on 20 years ago frayed, the color faded. She allowed a gasp to escape from her frozen lips, scrambling onto her knees to gather the requiems from her past life.

The girl arrived in the village center with her bucket and heap of garments. Much like the stitches on her *iro* woven in between the fabric, Nadia wove in between the cluster of women and let the contents of the rainwater container drip into her own bucket. She plunged the fabrics into the cool liquid and languished there in the damp relief from the brutal sun, listening to the lively hum of the village women's chatter.

The girl heard the clear, strong voice of Auntie Owukwo above all the others. "Are we dancing tonight, sisters?" she asked without asking.

Auntie Owukwo was the village matriarch; whatever she wanted to do, they did. Nadia knew well the mischievous smirk that tugged at the ebony skin enclosing her *soko*-colored lips. That smirk had led to many a palm wine-drunken celebration in which the villagers danced through two sunrises. Nadia watched as her parents swayed to the beat of the drums and felt a panging in her heart. She longed for the day when she was old enough to be swept away by the rhythms that drove the community.

Soon enough, the sun had crept its way across the sky and day melted into night. Nadia found herself entranced, creeping along the cracked dirt path that led to the medicine man's compound and the infatuating, sonorous booming of drums. As she grew closer to the party, the heartbeat that had settled in her throat quickened and throbbed. Nadia hesitated as she

arrived at the mud structure, the oil lamp in the sky beaming on her like a spotlight. What was she thinking? She would never be embraced by this elite circle of women. She would never have the courage or the strength possessed by this echelon. Shaking her head, she turned to walk back to her own compound when a rough hand snatched her inside the threshold.

“Where are you going, daughter?” Auntie Owukwo was donning her ceremonial kaba and slit, pounding her feet on the barren earth. Nadia’s body went into rigid shock, unable to process the sudden, informal induction.

Timidly, she tiptoed around the room. The clay beneath her feet felt foreign and the air felt more substantial, pulsating with life. Nadia caught a glimpse of someone in the corner pounding away on a stool. Her mother.

“Welcome, my daughter,” she cooed. “Join us.” Nadia’s mother changed rhythms, flashing her daughter a smile that encapsulated all the radiance of the midday sun. Just then, Auntie Owukwo pulled her into the mass of feminine forms jumping and bending.

The girl tried to follow the groove of Auntie Owukwo’s hands, tried to follow the swaying pattern of the hips of the woman next to her, but simply stood there, willing the clay beneath her feet to open up and swallow her whole.

“Relax, child. Breathe and find your rhythm,” Auntie Owukwo advised. Nadia relaxed her face and shoulders, let the night air laced with the sweet scent of cassava fill her nose and flood her body. Nadia looked up and caught a chain of nodding that ignited a flame within her. A familiar warmth enveloped her and her insecurities began to ebb. *Tonight, I will dance with the women*, she vowed.

Nadia cleared her mind and allowed the beat of the stool to control her heart. Suddenly, her feet were going one-two, one-two, gliding over the Earth. Her arms were waving side to side, mimicking the swirling she felt her spirit was doing. Nadia’s hips made sharp angles as she twisted and swept around the space she now considered to be sacred.

“You’re doing it child, you’re dancing with the women. No one can take that away from you,” Auntie Owukwo belted as she fastened the bracelet around Nadia’s wrist.

The door to the manager’s office swung open, and Nadia, having collected all the rogue beads, stood up. Her breathing was composed, driven by a familiar rhythm pounding in her heart. Years ago, she had danced with the women. No one could take that away from her. She knew that as long as the rhythm was beating in her heart, she could handle whatever this life handed to her.