

Wednesday's Story

Wole Talabi

My story has a strange shape to it.

It has a beginning and middle and, of course, I need not tell you that it has an end because it is the nature of all things to end, especially stories. But this story . . . well, it bunches up in places and twists upon itself in ways that no good story should. The sharpness of its arcs flare and wane in unexpected places because it is a story made of other stories and there are times when partway through telling it, I could swear I did not truly know it because I am made of so many other stories too. This story is badly shaped, but it is uniquely my story, and the burden of its telling is and always will be mine to bear.

My story has two beginnings, I believe. One of them, appropriately enough, is another story; the story of Solomon Grundy. My siblings and I have told his story before, we tell his story all the time, we will tell his story again. Men also tell each other the story of Solomon Grundy, but they never tell it well. How can they? They are not made of stories as we are.

This is the story men tell of Solomon Grundy:

*Solomon Grundy,
Born on a Monday,
Christened on a Tuesday,
Married on a Wednesday,
Ill on Thursday,
Worse on Friday,
Died on Saturday,
Buried on Sunday.
That was the end,
Of Solomon Grundy.*

I've always thought that was a particularly poor story. I mean, I know it's really a children's rhyme, but it's a children's rhyme that purports to tell the story of Solomon Grundy, is it not? Well, consider it: What does it really tell you anyway? Besides the fact that Solomon Grundy was a Christian man who married a presumably Christian woman, fell ill, and then died of some unspecified illness. As far as stories go, it has a good, linear shape, but it tells you nothing worth knowing. It doesn't tell you that Solomon Grundy was a tall, kind man. That he had firm, skilled hands possessed with a grim determination. That he loved and he suffered and he laughed and he fought. It doesn't tell you that he was the child of a runaway Ifá priestess-to-be and a caddish English boatswain. It doesn't tell you that he had a shock of curly brown hair and honest, brown eyes. It doesn't tell you that he loved his wife more than life itself and that he held her desperately in his thickly muscled arms as cruel injuries slowly withdrew the life from her. It doesn't tell you that she died a few days and an eternity before he did and it certainly doesn't tell you that between Wednesday and Thursday, during the long, dry harmattan of 1916, Solomon Grundy stopped time.

What the hell kind of story is that anyway?

This is how my story ends:

I stab Solomon Grundy with the emerald timestone and he stumbles back with a shocked and disbelieving look in his eyes. He falls down and writhes on the floor in pain

as the timestone communes with his blood and the gears of time correct themselves in his world, pulling him back into it. The correction becomes a glistening black hole in the floor beneath him that looks like the pupil of an ancient eye behind which despair, disease, and death are waiting for him. He sinks into it muttering her name and is gone with a wet, slimy sound, leaving only the glimmering timestone on the ground. When he opens his eyes, he is back in the forest, it is Thursday and it is over. In tears, I fall to the floor and cry out. Each wail is an exorcism of personal failure; each tear is an excision of regret for what I have done.

The second beginning of my story is in darkness. A darkness of place and a darkness of mind. At least this is where I think it should begin. I am unsure.

My siblings and I have just finished telling a story. It is a strange and sad story but it is a good story because we told it well. Perhaps we told it too well. A thin layer of it lingers on my skin like patina and irritates me.

This is the story we told:

A young Calabar girl named Emeh was kidnapped and violated in unspeakable ways by a self-appointed holy man. She died of her injuries a few days later, but the holy man went unpunished because he had friends and family in high places. The girl's father mourned all he could and when that was not enough, he spent all he had in order to take cruel revenge on the holy man. When the deed was done, he found nothing but madness waiting for him on the other side of retribution. He wandered into a forest, naked and insane, and was never heard from or seen again.

In the silence after we have told the story, the darkness of it, of the world we chronicle, seeps into my mind and soon becomes overwhelming. I need to do something. To tell is no longer enough. I light myself a cigarette using one of the candles on the table around which we are seated and ask my brother Sunday, who is the most knowledgeable of us all, a question. "The Òrìṣà once told me that we can go into the world of men by using the timestone to pierce holes in the spaces between us. Is this true?"

He regards me suspiciously, the turn of his head dragging his long, flowing beard across his kaftan. "Wednesday, pay no attention to anything that falls from the lips of an Òrìṣà; it is not the mandate of Days to go into the world of men."

The end of his sentence is the beginning of a speech I have heard before. I know it well. My brother's eyes are the clear green of the sea in the places where it kisses a forest island and his hair is greying at the temples like a cloudy afternoon. His green eyes hold me captive as he tries futilely to make me understand the importance of a principle I have already decided to betray.

"I understand our place brother, truly, I do. I am only asking if what they say of the timestone is true," I lie to make him stop lecturing.

The timestone sits at the centre of our table like an exotic ornament, between two ornate pewter candelabra that cradle the candles that provide all the light we have, all the light we have ever needed. Its emerald edges glint in the candlelight and remind me to look at my brother again. By this time, all our siblings are staring at us, wondering what I am getting at, what will happen, what Sunday will say. Thursday's gaze is hard, like moonbeams falling through cloudless sky and onto a cliff. Tuesday's pale fingers are caught in her lustrous auburn hair like she was braiding it and suddenly forgot how, giving the confused look she wears on her freckled face a powerful puerility. Friday's stare is

intense and focused beneath his thick afro. Saturday seems like she might cry, or scream, or do something strange that is neither but both at the same time. No one else seated at our grand, intricately patterned mahogany table, our vastly varied faces illuminated by candlelight, looks at me directly, but look they do.

“The question you ask worries me, sister,” Sunday says to me, his eyes overflowing with rebuke and suspicion, as though I were a young boy laughing at his own father’s funeral. Saturday turns her face away from us.

I say, “Then worry no longer, brother. I shall ask no more,” as I toss my cigarette to the floor and stomp it out with my heel.

“Very well,” He responds, stiffly.

An awkward silence follows.

“Let us tell another story,” Friday begins. His voice is a roiling bass that makes me feel like my skin is a thin sheet of metal, vibrating with his sound. “Monday, choose a story for us to tell and hear.”

Monday nods gently. I watch him take the tip of his moustache between the thumb and index finger of his right hand and begin to twirl the edge of the thin thing. The lines around his eyes deepen as he considers all the days of the lives of men that have been and will be, seeking out a story for us. He seems to shrink in his fitted pinstripe suit and then, in an instant, he expands with choice, passing the story we all know he has chosen for us to hear and tell. I close my eyes and receive it violently, as a vision.

In it, I see a large, ochre-skinned man in ripped khakis kneeling in the forest, an injured woman in his arms. She is naked and her skin is the dark purple of bruises. There are multiple stab wounds clustered around her swollen belly, the whites of her eyes are shot through with red, and blood is leaking from her broad nose, her round mouth, the cloudy beds of her short fingernails. The vision starts to warp as Monday begins to tell his part of the tale, speaking the story into existence, locking the events that have occurred and will occur into place.

I feel like ash is blowing into my mouth, the heat from the candles is burning my thin skin. I struggle to hold on to the vision but the story has become a sea of pain and sadness, choppy and grey.

Monday says, *“Edward Grundy only ever set foot on the soil of the land that would become Nigeria once. He arrived aboard the RMS Ananke in June of 1896, and after offloading his vessel’s cargo at the port of Lagos, he and his crew mates went off to a local colonial tavern for drinks and rest. There, drunk and taken with well-aged lust, Edward set his eyes on a young woman who worked in the kitchens. Her name was Bamigbàlà and he forced himself upon her behind the lounge. By the time the RMS Ananke sailed off for Liverpool three days later, he had forgotten the incident and Bamigbàlà was with child. She put to bed nine months later, on a Monday.”*

Monday stops speaking and my head feels light, like the petal of an old flower. Tuesday clears her throat, readying herself for her part of the story. Then she says, *“The tavern owner, the Viscount Sydney Phillips, was livid when he discovered Bamigbàlà’s pregnancy and the circumstance by which it came to be, but he did not cast her out, for he had taken her in as a runaway several months ago and did not wish to have the death of an Englishman’s child, any Englishman’s child, on his hands. And so when the child was*

born, he named him Solomon in the hope that he would be wiser than his father, gave him his father's family name, and had him baptised into the body of Christ on a Tuesday."

Tuesday stops and turns to me. I close my eyes, resisting the story, but instinct and duty move my lips and I begin to speak, *"Solomon grew up well and strong, mentored by the Viscount and well cared for by his loving mother. She taught him the names of the roots and the trees and the rivers and the wind, while the Viscount taught him archery and bookkeeping and loyalty and an Englishman's confidence. The Viscount's head servants began to fear that their master would leave the management of his property and affairs to Solomon when he retired, for the tavern had grown to become a famous lodging and it was clear that in all of Lagos the Viscount would find no fitter hands to manage it than Solomon's. They plotted against Solomon in secret.*

In time, Solomon fell in love with one of the Viscountess's handmaids, Atinuke, and she with him. They would often go into the forest, where he would show her the secrets his mother had shown him—the ways of conversing with the old spirits, of communion with the youthful winds, of dancing with the senescent rivers. Some nights they would swim and drink fresh palm wine and make love under the moon's tender gaze before returning to the lodging. Eventually, with the Viscount's blessing, they were married, on a . . ."

I freeze midsentence because I know what comes next, what Thursday will say when I stop. This is a dark, dark story, full of pain and suffering. I keep thinking I can stop the pain from blooming on the horizon of their reality like an evil sun rising. I know it is not my place, the story will happen, is happening, has already happened. Ours is but to hear and tell. I know, I know, and yet, I am overcome with the need to try to stop this terrible story from being. I open my eyes and conclude that it must be done. This is the time, and this is the story.

Sunday, sensing something strange in my sudden silence shoots me a sharp look, and we lock eyes, a frown of unease chiselled onto his face and a grimace of determination onto mine. I act before he can, leaping out of my chair and onto the table. I seize the timestone from its silver base, raise it high above my head and bring it down onto the table, stabbing the narrowed, empty space between Sunday and myself. Everything stops. A hyperborean frost grips my hand and I let go of the timestone. It remains in its place, suspended above the heavy table. Monday is caught mid-protest, his lips parted. Sunday is atop the table, his right hand reaching for me and his face crumpled. Tuesday's mouth hangs open and Thursday's chin rests on the tip of his palms. Friday is halfway between sitting and standing. Saturday's arms are thrown in front of her in some strange motion. All their eyes are locked onto me but they are all frozen in place, like statues.

In the wounded space between Sunday and I, a filmy blackness is spreading like poisoned blood. It expands and expands and expands until it is a hole wide enough for three gluttonous men to fall through. I remove the timestone from the centre of it slowly and the blackness ripples but does not retreat. I dip my fingers into the darkness and the chill I felt initially returns like a persistent suitor. This time I do not withdraw from its frosty caress. I lean forward, letting my hand sink deeper and deeper. Beyond the cold is warmth, the warmth and humidity of tropical night. I continue to lean in until my face is only half a breath away from the blackness, and then I let myself fall into the inky sea that fills the hole I have carved between worlds, focused only on the image in the vision from

Monday's story, using the pain of its characters as a beacon to guide me to a reality shore nearby.

The dark, woody, warm forest wraps itself beneath my feet, above my head, before my eyes. It greets me in the ancient way—with a touch of wind and falling leaves—and tells me that its name is Òkeméji, because it has swallowed two hills. I offer it greetings and ask it where the man carrying the wounded woman in his arms is, was, or will be. I am not sure where exactly I have inserted myself into the story; I only know that I have arrived, as I must, on a Wednesday.

Òkeméji tells me that there is a couple bathing together in the river that flows between its two hills. It asks me why I have come and why I seek them. Clutching the timestone close to my chest, I simply say, "It is an urgent and desperate matter."

I realize that I am near the beginning of the bad part of the story, the part near the end of Wednesday and the start of Thursday, but feel that I may yet be able to save Solomon and Atinuke from the suffering that is to come. I beg Òkeméji to guide me to them quickly and it answers reluctantly with the falling of a branch from a nearby Iroko tree.

The branch is thick and brown and solid and seems shaped like a man in the dim light of the night forest. It begins to bend and twist and warp, as though it is writhing in pain or pleasure or perhaps both. The branch's body becomes definitively human: old, wrinkled, and very hairy. The old man that was a branch rises to his feet on stilt-like legs, leaning forward as though he is always about to fall over. His face is not at all handsome. It looks like a face that has been cut away from one man, stretched over the skull of another and weathered in the desert sun. Forced to fit. Distorted. Beaten. Ugly. He stretches his arm forward and it instantly begins to burn like the finest quality firewood, illuminating the dark forest before us. This is the Iroko-man. We have told his story before, we tell his story all the time, we will tell his story again, my siblings and I. The Iroko-man is a cruel man, as cruel as tree can be.

This is the story of the Iroko-man:

There was once a village where the women had been barren for many years and had forgotten the sound of crying children. The women of this cursed village stripped themselves naked and went together into the forest, seeking the venerable and powerful Iroko to beg for help, for children. The tree that was the Iroko-man asked what gifts they would offer him if he indeed chose to help them. The naked and barren women desperately cried out the names of the things they possessed, hoping one of them would entice the Iroko-man to aid them: yams, kolanut, mangoes, goats, mirrors, palm wine. One of these women—Oluronbi—being the poor wife of a wood-carver, and owning nothing of value, feared that the Iroko-man would heed all but her and so she promised that once she began to bear children, she would bring the Iroko-man her first child. The Iroko-man agreed. Within a year, the barren women were barren no more, and the most beautiful of all the children was the daughter born to Oluronbi. When the other women took their promised gifts to the Iroko-man, Oluronbi did not take her beloved daughter. She bore three more children. Several years passed and as time went by, so did memory. One day, Oluronbi, forgetting her debt, passed through the forest on her way to visit her sister, and the Iroko-man seized her for what was owed to him. He changed her into a small, sad bird, and cursed her to sit on the branches of his tree singing:

*One promised kola,
One promised a goat,
One promised yams,
But Oluronbi promised her child.*

The wood-carver went seeking his lost wife and when he heard the bird's song, it occurred to him what must have happened. He went home and carved a doll of fine dark wood so that it resembled a real human child, placed a gold chain bearing his daughters initials around its neck and wrapped it in beautiful aso-oke. Then he went into the forest and laid it at the foot of the tree in order to trick the Iroko-man into believing it was Oluronbi's child.

When men tell the story of the Iroko-man, they say he took the doll into the body of his tree, tricked into believing he had Oluronbi's daughter, and returned Oluronbi to her former form. They say she returned home and never entered the forest again, living happily ever after.

This is a lie.

When I and my siblings tell the story of the Iroko-man, we tell the truth: that he laughed at the wood-carver's attempted trickery—how can a tree be tricked with wood? That he only took their wooden doll and returned Oluronbi to her former state as part of a trick of his own. That he let her go only so that she could watch as he possessed her husband's body in the dead of night and using the wood-carver's hands, hard and steady as an Iroko tree, strangled their three children. That the Iroko-man, still possessing Oluronbi's husband, beat Oluronbi to death with a log of sandalwood and carved his name into her belly with a chisel. That only when this was all done did the Iroko-man leave the mind of Oluronbi's husband to witness the work of his hands. Weeping followed, then insanity, and soon after, suicide.

The Iroko-man is a cruel man, as cruel as tree can be.

I am sorry; this story is not the story of the Iroko-man, is it? This is my story and this is the part of it where the wrinkled and naked Iroko-man is leading me to the river bank where Solomon and Atinuke are bathing, his wooden hand aflame to guide our way and his back bent like a sickle, like a talon, like an unkept promise.

I watch him walk wonderingly as he silently leads me past trees taller and older than any of the men who walk the earth; past a group of cherubic Àbíkú seated upon a rock playing a game I do not know, and whom I greet in the ancient way; past a blur of leaves and branches and vines and wild creatures, some of whom I have told stories of, will tell stories of; past the paths and windings and elements of the forest itself on my way to intercept the story of Solomon Grundy.

When we reach a clearing through which I can see the moon-polished river flowing by, the Iroko-man stops and turns to me. His eyes are closed. His wooden hand is burned almost to the elbow and beneath the flame it glows the bright red of good charcoal. He opens his eyes. We stare at each other until a sentence takes his face and squeezes its words through his mouth.

"They just left here," he says, then adds, "You should not have come."

I have no chance to answer; the Iroko-man is gone with his words.

In the distance, toward the half-full moon, I can see silhouettes of people. There are more than two of them and it looks like they are either dancing or fighting. I think on the

Iroko-man's words and consider the sight ahead of me, and deep within, in my bone-places, I know they are fighting and I am already too late; this is the part of the story that leads to my vision. The part of the story Thursday would have told if I had not used the timestone to cleave the essence of things upon which all stories are written.

There is a sudden thunderclap so loud I believe for a second that the earth beneath my feet will split in two. Around me, a curtain of water begins to crash down angrily from the sky. I start to run along the riverbank toward the silhouettes and I call out to Òkeméji to help me,

“Eater of hills, crown of the earth; please, stop them!”

I beg him to stop the fighting men before they inflict the pain and suffering Monday's chosen story would, is, has led to. Òkeméji does not answer me; the forest knows I have broken the author's law to be here, that I am perpetrating an abomination by attempting to amend the timestream, by trying to change the story.

This is the thing about stories, regardless of who tells them or how they are told: Every story is created by someone—the author and the finisher of its characters' fates.

Authors do not like their stories changed.

My legs sink into the wet soil with every step, and loose twigs slap against my flesh, slowing me down. I run and run and the silhouettes grow and grow until I can hear the thud of the men's fists striking against each other's flesh. The sky flashes electric white fangs and growls angrily like a guard dog, protecting the story from me. I know I am too late but I keep running toward them anyway, my mascara running down my face like poisoned tears.

Each time my foot sinks into the forest floor, it seems an eternity passes. I am slow. I do not know how to be in time, having existed outside it for so long. And I am being slowed even more by someone, something, everything.

Eventually, I come close enough to the silhouettes to make out three men. They are wrestling like a new-born, six-legged animal learning to walk. Solomon Grundy is the centre of the beast, I recognize him from his story. He is a large man, larger than the two attempting to subdue him. His ochre skin is slick with sweat and his Ankara shirt is torn. He pushes one of the men away from him and throws a punch into the man's gut that doubles him over. The other man has his hand around Solomon's throat and is attempting to choke him. I reach them and launch myself—the only weapon I have—at the man doubled over, tackling him to the wet, grassy ground and evening the odds. From the ground, I see Solomon lift his second attacker and throw the man over his shoulder.

I climb onto the chest of the man I have engaged. His face displays the tribal markings of the assassin's guild and in the blood-coloured whites of his eyes I can see his entire life, his story, up to and beyond the point where he and his friend accept eighteen shillings from Viscount Phillip's head-servants to kill Solomon and Atinuke. I clasp my hands together, interlocking my fingers, and pound his face with all the strength I can muster. With every strike, I alter the shape of his story. With every hit, I try my best to change what was, is, would have been of him. The wind howls its disapproval.

My siblings and I know a lot about stories. For example: For a story to have a good shape, it must, generally speaking, be composed of three parts: the introduction, the conflict, and the resolution. The resolution need not be satisfactory for the story to be well shaped.

When I stop hitting the man, it is almost midnight, it is still raining, and I no longer hear the sounds of struggle. I rise to my feet and turn to see Solomon kneeling beside the body of a woman, cradling her head in his arms. She is Atinuke, his wife, she is naked, and she is dying. There is a constellation of gaping, pink stab wounds surrounding her prominent navel like so many unnatural lips. I have failed. I raise my right arm, my muddy and wet sleeves weighing it down, and reach out to them as though I could will her not to die, will the end of her story to change.

“Who are you?” Solomon asks without looking up from the body of the woman loves.

“I am no one,” I say, then add, “I am sorry, I should not have come here.”

Solomon pleads, his voice breaking like falling glass, “Help her. Help us.”

“I can’t,” I start to explain.

Solomon looks up and stares at me, truly stares at me through his big, wet, brown eyes, and despite (or perhaps, because of) his pain he sees me for what I truly am. There is an understanding in them that no man should have. There is the discernment that comes from constant interaction with Èlegba, the messenger, the teacher. His mother has taught him more than just the rudiments of Ifá divination; she has taught him to confer comfortably with the Òrìṣà, to see the truth of spirit-things.

Then he says in a language older than the forest, “Please, Wednesday. You can help. You have power beyond this world. Help me.”

Something like lightning traces my veins when he speaks my true name and pleads with me in the ancient way. I wish desperately that I could have entered their story in time to save her. I say, “I’m sorry,” and I mean it more than I have meant or will ever mean anything.

Òkeméji will not help me. Nothing in this world will. I have been neutralized like a child locked in a cage made of old giant’s bones. There is now no power I can call upon here. There is nothing I can do now but go back and try to use the timestone to enter this story again, perhaps in a different place, perhaps at a different time. But even as I think this, I already know that I will never be able to change it, that the forest and the rain and the trees and the Òrìṣà and the author and finisher of all stories that is also the maker of worlds will make sure that I never change this story, try as I might.

This is the middle of this story.

It is one of many.

None of them are good.

This is what happens in every middle of this story:

Realizing that I have achieved, am achieving, will achieve nothing, I turn away from Solomon and his dying wife, pull out the timestone, and jam its pointed end into ground beneath me. Where the stone pierces the earth, a hole appears, shimmering around the edges, and expands rapidly, exhaling in all directions, consuming the soil and the leaves and the water with the empty, slimy blackness that is the hole between worlds. The rain does not stop. Where the raindrops hit the blackness, they bounce away like diamonds, as pale as the reflected moonlight, but only half as bright. I lean into the darkness, ready to go back, when I feel a weight crash into me, throwing me into the dark pool of non-time-non-space head first. Around me, I feel a cold, liquid embrace. I see Solomon Grundy’s face, silent but eloquent in its grim determination. We spin and we swirl and we blur and we fall as everything that makes us *us* races across the emptiness, until we tumble out of

the blackness and onto the stone floor of the room where my frozen siblings wait for me like potent gargoyles.

We stare at each other in the stone room, Solomon and I. He should not be here. He cannot be here, out of time. If he is, then it means that time in his world has stopped, paused, waiting for him to return to it, because just as a river cannot flow without the water that defines it, the timestream on which his story is written cannot go on without him.

Solomon's arms tense and his eyes are fixed on the timestone in my hand. He has seen what it is through gifted eyes blinded by pain, and he thinks he can use it to go back, to re-enter his own story and save her, but he is wrong. He is as wrong as I was when I first tried to change his story. Even more. Much more.

In some middles of this story, Solomon charges at me head first, so I swing my right arm behind me sharply, clutching the timestone like it is my own heart, and let his skull crash into my belly, throwing me back against the cold stone wall.

In some other middles of this story, Solomon walks up to me and reaches for the timestone, trying to wrestle it from my vice-tight grip and pushing me back while pleading with me softly but insistently to let him have it, to let him try to save her.

In at least one middle of this story, Solomon sidesteps his way to the table as he asks me what will happen if he uses the timestone to re-enter his own story. While I am answering, he suddenly picks up the empty silver housing for the timestone and throws it at me. I stumble back into the wall, off-balance. Before I can react, his left hand is wrapped around my throat and his right is twisting mine, trying to make me let go of the timestone.

I am not cruel. I am perhaps unwise and impulsive, but I am not cruel. I really wanted to save him, prevent the loss and the pain that now drives him to do this terrible thing. You must believe me. I could not tell and hear his story without feeling his pain, completely and truly. But I cannot let him have the timestone—it's an unspeakable thing in the hands of any man, the power to enter the spaces between stories—and I will do what I have to in order to keep it out of his hands.

There is a story men tell of the folly in trying to help another when one is not supposed to.

This is that story:

A hunter was walking through the forest after he had just killed an ostrich—rare and special game—which he was taking home for his wife to cook. He came upon a dragon trapped beneath a fallen Iroko tree. The dragon groaned and wailed in pain, for he could not free himself from his plight. The hunter was wary but filled with pity at the great beast reduced to such a state. He observed for a while with keen eyes and then he took mercy upon the beast and helped raised the fallen tree, freeing the dragon. Once free, the dragon growled and grabbed him, pulling the hunter's head towards its maw. The hunter protested, but the dragon only said, "All dragons eat men. It is our role in this world. It was not your place to free me. No good deed goes unpunished!" The hunter pleaded desperately, reminding the dragon of his kindness until the dragon finally relented and agreed that he would wait and let the next three travellers they met in the forest decide the hunter's fate.

The first traveller was a tired old horse. The horse said that when she was young, she carried her crippled master wherever he desired. But when she grew old, her bones tired

and weary, her master cast her aside in favour of a new horse. The horse told the dragon to eat the hunter for his naivety and reminded him that no good deed goes unpunished.

The next traveller was a tired old dog. The dog, when told the events that had occurred and asked what should become of the hunter, said that when he was young he herded for his master, but then when his teeth fell out, his master threw him out, for it is the nature of men to replace the things they use, without care or kindness. The dog told the dragon to eat the hunter for his naivety and reminded him that no good deed goes unpunished.

The third traveller was a young tortoise. The tortoise considered the situation and then said that it could not decide unless it saw things exactly as they were initially, for reconstruction is better than testimony. The dragon put its neck below the Iroko branch and the hunter trapped it beneath the tree as it was before. The dragon then asked the tortoise its opinion now that it could see the situation. The tortoise only turned to the hunter and said, "You're free now, go."

The hunter, overcome with gratitude, told the tortoise to come home and share the rare and delicious ostrich meat with him and his wife as thanks for saving his life. The tortoise agreed and went home the hunter. When the hunter told his wife what happened, she was enraged, insisting that there was no need to share precious ostrich meat with the tortoise. She insisted that if they killed the tortoise, there would be more ostrich meat for them and they could also have delicious tortoise soup for a week. The hunter argued with her for a while, but in the end, being a hunter, he did what came naturally to him, what his role in life dictated he do. He killed the tortoise, who, with his dying breath, croaked, "Indeed! No good deed goes unpunished."

I have never liked that story, but it is all I can think about whenever I reach this part of my own story, Solomon Grundy's story, where a desperate and wild Solomon is trying to wring the life from me, the feel of his fingers around my neck as uncomfortable and painful as an unrequited kindness.

All the middles of this story converge at this point: Solomon pulls back and then pain explodes in my side. Solomon's arm ripples as he punches me in the gut. I watch the waves of skin ride his body as everything seems to slow down, even though that is not possible in this place. It only seems slow because I am suddenly hyperaware of what is happening to me and I am resolved to stop it.

I am not a skilled fighter, I have never been in combat before this story, but I have told many stories of great warriors and little bits of their skill have settled somewhere in the essence of me like fine layers of dust deposited over many, many years.

All great warriors move like dancers. Every disciplined fighter is elegant. I lean back into the wall and brace myself against it, lift my knee to my chest and throw my right foot forward in a vicious front kick that crashes into his chest like heartbreak, shoving him back and away from me. I slide forward and jam the pointed end of the emerald stone into Solomon's belly, creating an instant waterfall of blood. He stumbles back with a shocked and disbelieving look in his eyes. He falls down and writhes on the floor in pain as the timestone communes with his blood and the gears of time correct themselves in his world, pulling him back into . . .

Wait.

I'm sorry; I've already told you how this story ends haven't I?

Forgive me; the shape of my story makes it easy to get lost. Although I must say, no story truly ends where it does. We choose our endings and I only end this one here because this is the point at which it merges again with the story men tell of Solomon Grundy. His wound becomes infected, he suffers a fever and delirium, dies, and is buried soon after, just as the rhyme says. There is nothing interesting to tell beyond the ending I have chosen for you. And even the most interesting parts of my story, Solomon Grundy's story, once ended, like the soft, diffuse darkness of dawn, will eventually become pale and fade to the eternal salty grey of lost memory.

So . . .

If I have already told you how the story ends, then which part of the story is this now? I'm not sure.

I think this is the part of the story between the last written word and the bottom of the page on which it is written; the space between the breath with which a narrator exhales the final word of the story and his next in which there is no story; the distance between the height at which belief has been suspended and the solid, hard floor of reality; the empty, fluid places where, for what is even less than a moment, the characters, the audience, the narrator, and the author of a story can all become equally real to one another, become intimately aware of one another, and maybe, just maybe, even become one another, depending on the shape of the story.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Wole Talabi is a Nigerian full-time engineer, part-time writer and some-time editor with a fondness for science fiction and fantasy. His stories have appeared in *Terraform*, *Omenana*, *Liquid Imagination*, *The Kalahari Review*, and a few other places. He edited the TNC anthology *These Words Expose Us*. He currently lives and works in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. He likes interesting flow simulation problems, good stories and goes scuba diving whenever he gets a chance.