

# Invisible Dust

By Mary Williams

The African walked slowly along the sea front of the small English town, window-shopping. What strange things these people ate - walking sticks made of sugar, and potatoes, always potatoes, everywhere, and hot dogs. What were these things? The street was full of the stink of hot fat and fried onions. It turned his stomach. Back home there was street food, but not like this. At home it was good and spicy, making your mouth water. He crossed the road and admired himself in the reflection of the shop window. Six foot three and lean as a wand, long straight nose, dark skin with a hint of copper, he looked like the Doh tribesman he was. At twenty-six he was fit and strong and handsome, and he knew it. He straightened his tie and walked on and peered through the window of the curio shop, where the owner, having nothing better to do on a midweek morning in early June, was reading the racing pages of the Telegraph.

The owner looked up see a neatly dressed tall young black man come into the shop and look around. He put his paper down. M'Bye had learned that impeccable manners quickly disarmed people.

"Good morning," he said in his slightly accented English. "You don't mind if I have a look around?"

"Not at all," said the owner. "Are you looking for anything in particular?"

"I am interested in the things that have been brought back here from my homeland - Africa - do you have any such things?"

The man behind the counter became quite animated. His old tweed jacket looked shabby in comparison to the young man's suit as he felt in the pocket for his key.

"Which part of Africa are you from?" he asked, trying to establish a connection. The African did not reply. The shopkeeper went on "I have spent time in Sierra Leone and the Gambia - before it was overrun with tourists - as well as Ivory Coast, and I've brought a few pieces back with me from my travels. You might be interested in these -"

He fished behind the counter and unlocked the glass case in front of it. He reached in and pulled out several small objects. One caught the eye of M'Bye immediately. It was four inches long, rounded, like a skipping rope handle, with grooves in it and a leather thong knotted around one end. It was rounded at each end.

M'Bye looked at the price tag. It was high.

"Do you know what this is?" he asked the man, holding it in the palm of his elegant hand. The shopkeeper looked uneasy.

"I was told some fanciful story when I bought it," he replied, "but the fellow who sold it to me made such a song and dance about parting with it that in the end it made me want it even more. It undoes in the middle, so something must have been kept in there, but what I couldn't tell you."

"The fanciful story," said M'Bye, pronouncing the words with an exaggerated emphasis, "was it true?" M'Bye leaned forward and looked closely at the face of the shopkeeper, who took a backward step. "You have paid for magic, my friend," said M'Bye, "strong magic. The story was a true one. I too have used such a thing, when I was a boy and went hunting in the forest. So it's magic in some way. What does it do in this fanciful story?" He snorted the last two words. The shopkeeper kept calm.

“You take the top off carefully and inside there is magic dust, a powder that makes the hunter invisible to his prey. The deer does not see or hear or smell the hunter approaching. Then it is too late and the hunter has killed the deer.”

“You have learned well, my friend,” answered M’Bye. “And does it work, this invisible dust?”

The shopkeeper was perplexed and a little frightened. Africa had come to his door and was asking to be heard. He wished he’d never started this conversation.

“I keep an open mind” he said, “You hear some queer things. Maybe it does work, at that. To be honest, I haven’t opened it since I bought it.”

M’Bye looked at him thoughtfully.

“You could test it,” he said.

M’Bye left the container of invisible dust behind in the shop. He bought only some old books, showing natural history specimens. The shopkeeper thought it was an odd choice, but said nothing. As five o’clock approached his thoughts turned to home, where his wife, Lindy would be waiting for him. He had not long been married to her and she was a good few years his junior. He felt himself to be a lucky man.

*I know, he thought, I’ll sprinkle some dust on me as I go up the path, just for a laugh. She’ll think I’m mad but she’ll like the story.*

He took the small rounded object, feeling as he did so the smoothness of the many hands that had held it in the past. *This should be back where it came from* he thought. It didn’t belong in a rainy seaside town curiosity shop, thousands of miles away from Africa. It felt warm and light in his pocket. He imagined plains and hunters tracking game, shadows and spears and heat.

He noticed a strange car in the driveway as he came close to his home. *Must be one of her friends paying a visit*, he thought. He crept up to the house and took out the container of invisible dust from his pocket and stopped to open it. It unscrewed in the centre. In one half when he peered in, was darkness, nothing else. He could not see any dust; he couldn’t even see the bottom of the small container. He looked in the other half. Nothing. Of course, it was invisible! Somehow he had expected something. He held one half over his head and shook it, just in case. Creeping round the corner, he could see his wife looking in his direction through the window. Someone was next to her on the settee, a man. The man patted her bottom as she stood up, still looking towards the shopkeeper. She put her hand out behind her to quieten him and the man took it and pulled her back into an embrace. Furious, the shopkeeper banged on the door, quite forgetting his plan. There was swift activity inside the house, then the door opened. He stood there, in front of his wife, and she looked right through him.

The young woman looked around her and called over her shoulder to the man on the settee.

“Must be those damn kids again. Nobody here, anyway. Stop worrying, he’s always late.” And she closed the door and went into the house.

Next day the shopkeeper returned the container to its rightful place behind his counter. He spent a boring morning stocktaking, then decided to close for lunch. He chose a small cafe down by the sea front. The African was there, eating fried fish delicately with his fingers. He glanced up when he saw the shopkeeper enter.

“Did it work?” he asked, one eyebrow raised, as he broke off another piece of fish with his tapered fingers.

“You lot and your superstitions,” answered the shopkeeper, sitting at the next table. “Of course it didn’t work.” His grey face sagged slightly. He hadn’t shaved.

“Of course not,” affirmed M’Bye with heavy sarcasm and an enigmatic smile that the shopkeeper found infuriating. He popped another piece of fish into his mouth. “I may come and buy the thing to take home. You will not mind.” It was a rhetorical question.

“Of course not. I’ll even give it to you. I have to get back, if you’ll excuse me.”

The African watched him leave with his dark, steady gaze, and a small twist of amusement around his lips. He had already seen the bloodstain on the shopkeeper’s tweed jacket and drawn his own conclusions.