

## ***The Shaman***

By Frankie Patman Maguire

Emily followed Baggessogo up the red dirt trail, clutching her wad of francs in one sweaty hand. With the other, she fondled the pocket where she had tucked Snuggybunny. The jungle seemed to taunt her. It pressed in as though it would swallow her into its dank green gullet, only to open again onto sun-filled compounds, where grannies too old to work the fields pattered around pots of yams. She had never ventured this far beyond the perimeter of the mission compound without an adult. And she had never done anything so forbidden as to consult a shaman. Fear and anger pumped her spindly legs over roots and rocks. Fear that her father, lying a continent away in a Paris hospital bed, would die. Anger that she had been left behind in the care of the other missionary families.

The missionaries prayed fervently for her father, gathering after dinner to sing hymns and read scripture and petition their heavenly father for Brother Gordon's healing. Her mother's best friend, whom Emily called Aunt Sue, sang with a passion that embarrassed Emily, throwing her head back and swaying like a palm branch. "Our sweet Lord Jesus is so good, honey" she said to Emily, trapping her with her earnest blue eyes. "He's got your daddy in the palm of his mighty hand, and everything's going to be all right. He promises us in his Word, 'All things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to his purpose.'"

Emily cringed. She knew she had not been called. Every night, clutching Snuggybunny, she lay awake sending silent pleas through the mosquito netting and out into the heavens, begging for the personal relationship with Jesus she had been told she could have if only she invited him into her heart. She quieted her thoughts, listening for the still, small voice that would be God's.

She watched her heart for even the feeblest flame of joy, and she parsed the moments of the day, looking for any sign that God had chosen her. Only the insects answered, droning their million-year-old liturgy of wings and legs in praise of the generation that would follow them.

Emily pictured her tall, laughing father lying mute and immobile on the stretcher, as the thundering medevac helicopter sucked him and her mother into its belly. She could no longer bring him his morning cup of coffee with the extra lump of sugar from his Specially Especially Emily, or surprise him with a gecko or a stag beetle or a vase of flowers she had picked and arranged herself. She could not offer him the stories she had written and watch his black eyebrows and boomerang lips perform their peculiar *pas de deux* as he pored over them. She could not even pray for him. Her stomach tightened like a vise, fastening her to his absence.

It was Baggesogo who had suggested the shaman. The girls had carried their lunches to a shaded spot along the fence that enclosed the mission school. They squeezed onto a small stool, just wide enough for one buttock each, and opened their leaf-wrapped packets of fish cakes.

“You know, you can find out what is going to happen to your father,” Baggesogo said. “My mother’s uncle knows how to talk to the spirits. He can tell you if your father will live.”

“How can he do that?” Emily challenged. “Why would anybody ever make a mistake if they could just ask the spirits what was going to happen?”

“Sometimes our ancestors speak through the tarantula,” Baggesogo explained, pinching off a piece of the white cake. “The men in our tribe who have powerful magic can ask the tarantula what they want to know. If it answers them, they know the spirits have spoken.”

“And what happens if it doesn’t answer?”

Baggesogo shrugged. “Then we aren’t meant to know that.”

Emily chewed her fish cake and breathed in the faint sweet scent of fermenting cocoa that wafted from her friend’s school uniform. This was the taste and smell of her life, what had cocooned her as a baby, wrapped in a *pagne* on Mama Efosi’s back. Aunts and uncles, mothers and fathers and ancestors, dancing and grieving, feasting and toiling, birthing and sleeping, all immediate, all as much a part of one another as the two sides of a paper. This was what she wanted to believe – this place her father had brought her to be born and to live. If her parents’ god had no use for her, perhaps the spirits of Baggesogo’s people would welcome her as one of their own. Perhaps they would speak to her.

“We’ll go see him on Saturday,” Baggesogo said. “You’ll need to bring money as a gift.”

And so Emily had emptied her piggy bank and told Aunt Sue she would be at Baggesogo’s compound to practice for the school musical. Her tongue had tripped over the lie, but Aunt Sue didn’t notice.

The jungle thinned and then abruptly parted around a broad field, planted with neat mounds of pineapple, manioc, and yam. Beyond the field lay the mud brick walls and thatched roof of the shaman’s home. Tangled *gris-gris* hung menacingly from spikes that bristled across the fields and along the path, and crouched like spiders on the roof. Emily averted her eyes and stared at the backs of Baggesogo’s feet, watching her flip-flops suction the dirt and then come loose with a resounding slap.

In the middle of the compound, two old men sat on a bench in the shade of a spreading tree, sharing a gourd of palm wine. Baggesogo greeted them and asked her uncle if he was well. He nodded at her perfunctorily and glowered at Emily.

“Why is this white girl here?” he growled. Emily cowered behind Baggesogo, holding her hand.

“Baba, this girl is Emily, my friend,” Baggesogo answered. “Her father is very sick, and they’ve taken him away for white man’s medicine.”

“I know about her father,” he cut in. “What is that to me?”

“We wish to consult the tarantula,” Baggesogo replied. “We want to know if her father will live.”

“I have money,” Emily interjected, and held out her handful of bills.

The old man regarded her, working his grizzled jaw.

“And why do you want to know this?” he said at last. “Do you not think there is sorrow enough when death arrives, that you must run to meet it? If the fight is tomorrow, then why should you clench your fist today?”

“I don’t know,” Emily blurted. The tree loomed over her accusingly, and she felt herself small and alone. “If my father dies, they’ll take me away. Where else would I go?” Her voice trembled against the tears swelling her eyes.

The shaman leaned over and whispered into the ear of his white-haired companion, who nodded gravely and then whispered something back.

“Come then. We will consult the tarantula,” he told the girls, rising and picking up his cane. From his house, he collected a packet of leaves and a large metal basin, and then the four of them entered the forest on a narrow trail.

The old men stopped beside a tidy hole dug into the ground by the spider near the roots of a large tree. The shaman removed the packet of leaves, each one patterned with notches, and scattered them over the opening of the hole. He covered the hole with the pot.

“Now we wait,” he said. He led them away to a nearby clearing where a felled tree had been cut into crude block seats. Emily sat on the hard seat until it seemed her bones would crack. She watched ants make their tortuous way over the forest floor. She silently concocted tales for Snuggybunny.

At long last, the two men rose. “Wait here,” the shaman instructed. “We will go read the leaves now.”

The vise clamping Emily’s stomach tightened. She felt faint and wondered if she had forgotten to breathe. The minutes crawled by on the backs of the ants.

A twig snapped, and Emily looked up to see the old men limping back to the clearing like tattered sigils from a crusade.

“The tarantula says that your father will live,” the shaman announced. “But the day will come when you will learn the truth of the proverb: ‘The tears of the orphan run inside.’” He scowled and shook his cane at them. “Now go home to your people and make yourself useful, both of you.”

The girls leaped up and raced down the path. The shadows on the fields had lengthened, and the insects had begun to chant. Their paeon reverberated through the trees, calling into life the great legions that would wriggle and crawl and march forever beneath the canopy of leaves. Emily felt it like a drumbeat in her blood, beating a rhythm to the tears that ran already inside her.