

## “The Secret Source”

--Ben Okri (1959-)

Ben Okri is a Nigerian poet and novelist, and is considered one of the foremost African authors in the post-modern and post-colonial traditions, being compared favourably to authors such as Salman Rushdie and Gabriel García Márquez. He won the 1991 Booker Prize for *The Famished Road*. His most recent books include the novel *The Freedom Artist* and the short-story collection *Prayer for the Living*. The story that follows was published in the print edition of the February 8, 2021, issue of *The New Yorker*.

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1            One morning, Fisher discovered that something had been done to the water. For many years, there had been people who said that something was different about the water, but no one had really believed them. Their claims were seen as just the latest wild rumors emerging from the confused state of the country.

2            Slowly, the city had been sinking. Its shores were overrun by mice. The foundations of churches were crowded with rats. They could be seen emerging from the graves in broad daylight. Towers had fallen. The streets were potholed and broken. Buses were parked at roadsides. Some of them had been flipped on their sides, and many of them were burnt-out shells.

3            During the previous few days, the voices on the radio had been fading away. A sense of exhaustion oozed through the bland tones of the announcers. The government carried on as if nothing unusual were happening, but the Prime Minister spoke in Parliament of “the enemies within.” This sinister phrase ignited a blaze among the populace. People began to stare at one another in search of signs of this enemy within. Those who looked different naturally qualified more easily for this epithet. There were random attacks in the streets, and the homes of those who seemed to qualify as enemies within were set on fire. Then vigilante gangs rose up in neighborhoods. The police seemed powerless to do anything; poor government funding had decimated their ranks, and public trust in their role had eroded irredeemably.

4            Workers went on strike to protest the high cost of water. It seemed to have gone up dramatically overnight. No one quite knew why this had happened. For a long time now, the nation had been dumping sewage into its waterways. People who went swimming caught strange diseases. And, because the cost of water had gone up, all the other costs went up, too. The truth was that there was a worldwide water shortage. Nations that controlled the world’s rivers saw their economic potential. The oceans had become so polluted that the fish caught there poisoned those who ate them. To make things worse, there had been little rain, and even polluted water was in short supply.

5            What was previously an ordinary commodity, a thing that people regularly wasted in baths and in decorative fountains in the squares, was now rationed to the point where it was as expensive as gold.

6            Every household was allowed only fifteen minutes of water a day. The taps ran for that length of time and then stopped. Squabbles and fights over the use of water were common. People were mugged not for their mobile phones but for their bottles of water. In most households, people learned to compress their bodily needs to an extraordinary

degree of efficiency. They showered in less than a minute. They cleaned their teeth with a tablespoon of water. Where previously cooking had involved much pouring out of water and juices, now every drop was reused with remarkable creativity.

7           But it seemed to Fisher, who shared a flat on the edge of a council estate with a group of school friends, that people were changing. Fisher lived there with Venus, his girlfriend. She was a carer. Unlike most of his flatmates, he didn't have a steady job. He did freelance graphic design and reporting. He spent the rest of his time observing, and he'd noticed that the people around him had become docile, amenable to all suggestions from the government. Even radical journalists seemed to be unusually sympathetic to the most extreme government notions. The opposition parties did not oppose anything. The unions capitulated to conditions that the companies they worked for hadn't even demanded. Firebrand activists and comedians began spewing sentimental statements of alarming conservatism. In the midst of all this, the Prime Minister was often seen smiling. In a recent statement he had said, "It seems we are becoming a nation with a remarkable convergence of views. Dissent has all but disappeared."

8           No one challenged the complacency of that statement.

9           Fisher was in his room, thinking about the strangeness of these occurrences. He was holding his last glass of water for the day. He had been unconsciously looking into the water as he thought. In that state where the mind wanders but the eye is focussed, he noticed that there was something odd about the water in his glass. It was like water, but at the same time had a viscid quality to it. What's more, it caught the light in a faintly troubling way. He studied the water closely. Then he saw it.

10           "It's the water!" he said. "They've done something to the water."

11           He hurried out of his room to find Venus. She was in the kitchen, watching the last dribbles of water fall from the tap.

12           "It's the water!" he cried. "They've made it rare, but they've also made it strange."

13           Under a magnifying glass, they could see curious striations in the liquid. The surface had a quality that looked as if it could be cut. A drop of the water revealed a world. It was with some horror that they drew back from looking. It occurred to them that the water wasn't really water. It was some kind of simulacrum, virtually indistinguishable from normal water. When they rubbed it between their fingers, the liquid had a certain slipperiness. There was something altogether too finished, too real about it.

14           Later that evening, Fisher and Venus gathered with their flatmates to discuss what should be done about their discovery. They agreed that they should consult an expert and have the water tested, but realized that they could not trust any such expert, who might turn them in. They racked their brains but couldn't think of anyone they knew who could carry out a thorough analysis without drawing the attention of the authorities. Their discussion made clear a number of things. They could no longer trust the water they had been drinking. They saw an immediate correlation between the change in the behavior of the populace and the change in the water. They did not know when the water

had been changed. But they knew that it had been this way for some time, because when they looked back they understood that they had all become more passive and less inclined to question things.

15           “There are two things we need to do,” Fisher said.

16           “Get the water analyzed,” Venus said.

17           “And stop drinking it,” one of the flatmates said.

18           “That means it’s crucial for us to find water that hasn’t been corrupted,” Fisher said.

19           “How will we do that?”

20           “I don’t know. We need water to live. Without it, we will surely die. The question is whether we go on drinking this water that is affecting us in some way that we don’t know about, perhaps turning us into morons, or whether we can find water that’s untouched, that’s pure.”

21           They talked deep into the night. At first they thought they could somehow carry on normally. Then they realized that their discovery had marked a turning point in their lives. They had to do something. They decided that they would live off the water in fruit. They would wash the fruit with tap water, but they would not drink it. They realized that they had a limited number of days before they would begin to suffer the ill effects of not drinking enough water. Some of the friends would take on the task of getting the water analyzed. The others would try to find clean water. They drew lots. The task of finding water fell to Fisher and Venus. They went to sleep that night exhausted but clear in their minds for the first time in months.

22           In the morning, they dispersed. The agreement was that they would converge back at the flat in a week. If anything happened, they would abort the meeting. If one or more of them were killed, the others would have to make their own way and try to convey their findings to the rest of society, provided there was anyone left to listen.

23           Those who were meant to have the water analyzed set out first. They headed for the university. They kept in touch with Fisher and Venus through coded texts on their mobile phones. It all went smoothly until they met a member of the chemistry faculty who agreed to perform tests. The tests were being carried out, and findings were about to come in, when the coded messages ceased. And all went silent.

24           By late in the morning, Fisher and Venus understood that they had to begin their quest and that their flat might not be safe anymore. They took some essentials and travelled light. They had no idea where to go. They went to visit friends on the rich side of town. The friends found their suspicions ridiculous. From a top-floor window, Fisher spotted police approaching the house. He alerted Venus and they escaped by a back door, making their way through gardens and over fences. They left town. They visited relatives and soon realized that they were somehow expected wherever they turned up. So they avoided all the people they knew and decided instead to plunge below the surface of society. They changed their clothes and altered their appearance and disappeared.

25           They lived rough with drug dealers and the homeless. They felt safe with the homeless. But water was still a problem. There was a drought in the city. The great river flowed stodgily. Plastic bags and mattresses and garbage and fishing nets in which large squidlike creatures were entangled could be seen floating on the river, along with odd-looking substances of an indeterminate color. At night, in the streets, people sold water at high prices. They had barrels and buckets and bottles of water.

26           They wore masks because they did not want to be recognized by the many cameras that gazed at them from street lamps and the edges of buildings. People came furtively out of their houses or their cars to buy water and then ran back to anonymity again. Fisher bought a bottle of water, but one look showed that it was not fit to drink. The water was striated with wavy lines. Tiny globular dots could be seen with a magnifying glass.

27           Fisher and Venus drifted with the hordes of the homeless. Among them were some who had chosen to be homeless, who lived off the grid to escape the traps of modern life. They lived in tents in fields at night, or along the canals. The sanest of them drank no water, and their eyes shone with strange defiance; they spoke little and were suspicious of everyone. It was from them that Fisher learned that there were people who were making alternative water. They had their own mobile chemical operations and they distilled water from rainfall. Fisher sought out these distillers, searching through a warren of dim houses on the edge of the city. They were a cautious lot, for they had several times been infiltrated by the government and had lost many colleagues. They changed their accommodations nightly. Fisher and Venus came with recommendations and passed the lie-detector tests, but although the water they were processing appeared to be natural rainfall, it was nonetheless contaminated. This discovery was very upsetting to the secretive water distillers. They threw Fisher and Venus out, accusing them of being saboteurs.

28           “We’re not saboteurs,” Venus cried. “We’re just trying to find the truth, like you, that’s all. But even nature has been contaminated.”

29           The water distillers were no longer listening. They had spirited themselves away to another secret location. Fisher and Venus had no choice but to return to the city. On the way, Fisher noticed a small headline on a page of newspaper that had been discarded in the street. For a long time now, his generation had ceased reading the newspapers or trusting them, as they were almost all owned by corporations that had their own secret agendas. Even the papers that were independent were edited and run by people who had gone to élite schools and universities, where the education had long been corrupted by the prevailing orthodoxies. There was only so much truth those papers could tell, and, besides, they secretly took their instructions from the government, which insisted that the nation was in a state of siege. The news that Fisher and his friends relied on came from underground sources, whispers, urban legends, things passed on by people they could trust, who were not paid and had no personal or political agendas. Nonetheless, the headline—“the water wars”—caught Fisher’s eye.

30           “Look at this!” he said.

31           They read it together. There was only half of the article left. The other half had been torn off and blown away by the wind.

32           “Now fully half the world is engaged in water wars,” it read. “The other half has no water. Cities around the world are perishing of thirst. Where has all the water g—”

33           There was nothing else.

34           “So it’s global,” Venus said.

35           “Maybe. I wouldn’t trust that fragment.”

36           They sat by the roadside. They were weary. They hadn’t drunk water in four days. After a short rest, they continued walking.

37           Fisher and Venus sought out healers. But the healers they found had venal eyes. One of them made insinuations to Venus. Another claimed to have the best water in the world, but when she brought it out Venus nearly fainted at its color. It was pitch-black. It gleamed like mercury, and it tasted like water. It was the strangest thing they’d ever seen.

38           “I think I’m beginning to hallucinate,” Venus said. “What was that?”

39           They were back out in the street. Venus had lost her mobile phone. She was sure the last healer they’d gone to see had stolen it. They thought, after that, that they should maybe try scientists again. They had had enough of unreason. They hitched a ride to Venus’s old university and sought out her former chemistry lecturer. They found him in his office. He had only a few tufts of hair on his head but had copious hair in his nostrils and on the back of his neck. He looked old and a bit tired, and there was no animation in his eyes when he saw Venus.

40           “I remember you,” he said. “It’s Venus, isn’t it? You were the prettiest girl in the whole university, did you know that? We all considered it a special privilege to have you in our classes. What can I do for you?”

41           After the initial discomfiture produced by his remark, they told him why they were there. He listened to them with his eyes shut. When they finished, he sighed.

42           “It seems,” he said, “that I failed to convey to you the most fundamental tenet of science. And that is rationality. You must not deviate from the facts. Your emotions are not important in science. Nor are your political views. Now, why would anyone wish to tamper with the water? If it is, as you say, to create in the populace a certain uniformity of thought, how could this be achieved? I really don’t see how drinking water can alter your politics or temper your passions.”

43           “But there are drugs designed to tranquillize. We use them for schizophrenia, manic depression. . . .”

44           “Are you suggesting that the government . . . That is too absurd. It is unscientific.”

45           “What about the analysis of the water, the floating dots?”

46           “Water has never been pure. For thousands of years we have managed with impure water. It is only in the last hundred years that we have had the technology to refine it. Refining is not contaminating. Where did you get that idea?”

47 Venus and Fisher listened to him with controlled astonishment. It was as though he were addressing not them but their entire generation. He had some kind of grudge and they were bearing the brunt of it. As he spoke, he got up and fetched a large glass of water he kept near the tap. He drank it while watching them.

48 "I drink this water all the time and there has never been anything wrong with my mental processes," he said. "In fact, they get sharper every day. This year alone, I have made five new discoveries that prove that most of the assertions of the environmental movement are claptrap. There is no global warming. The forests of the Earth are doing just fine. There is absolutely no proof of a diminishment of any of the species. I keep being nominated for the Nobel Prize, so there." Then he drank what was left in the glass.

49 They thanked him for his time and hurried out. They were just leaving the campus when a police van arrived. They plunged back into the substrata of the city. In their wanderings, they met people who claimed never to have drunk tap water in their lives. Some pointed to the youthfulness of their skin as proof. One of them was a Rastafarian who said he was a hundred years old and had lived so long because he had avoided all the corruptions of the system.

50 "I see what dem do to the water," he said.

51 Upon further questioning, it turned out that he had not really witnessed anything. He was referring to some second sight. Also, he was fuzzy about his age. Their calculations put it at about eighty. But this was still impressive, given his evident vigor.

52 They met people who had heard rumors of pure water. They were sent to many places, to many people. They met a seer, a wise woman, a psychic, a doctor, a philosopher. But none of them had any notion of where the pure water could be found.

53 "To question the water you drink," the philosopher said, "is to question the very foundation of the society you live in. It is like questioning the air you breathe."

54 "But some do exactly that," Venus said.

55 "It is not wise to doubt your reality," the philosopher said. "Because there is no other."

56 "Is that true?" Fisher asked.

57 "I fear," the philosopher said, not hearing him, "that you have left yourselves out on a limb. You've cut the ground from beneath you. It is an unsustainable philosophical position. The water is pure and has always been pure. The next thing you'll doubt is life itself, which is a very sure way to exit it."

58 With that the philosopher dismissed them and took a sip from his tall, thin glass of water.

59 They had now gone seven days without drinking water, surviving on only the liquid from fruit. They felt as if their brains were shrinking. Even bottled water that supposedly came from pristine streams and mountain lakes had the same peculiar striations, the same barely visible whorls. This anomalous condition of water was universal. Fisher claimed that he was now officially hallucinating. He saw pools of

pristine water in the road. Venus saw fountains spouting out of concrete. They became so parched that they finally agreed that their course of action had been insane.

60 "You can't go against the world," Fisher said, hardly able to get his words out.

61 Almost fainting, they leaned against each other. They shut their eyes and succumbed to oblivion. As their minds faded, voices came to them from far away.

62 Whether the voices were real or not they could not be sure. Then a child approached them.

63 "What are you doing?" he asked.

64 "We were looking for good water we can drink," Fisher said.

65 "But now we have given up. Such water does not exist," Venus said.

66 "I know someone who has the best water in the world," the boy said brightly.

67 "Who?"

68 "My grandfather."

69 "Can you take us to him?"

70 "Yes, of course."

71 The boy led them to an opening in the earth and down stone steps into darkness. They went down for a long time. Sometimes the steps became winding and they descended in a spiral. It was very hot. The child had no light.

72 "Is it safe down here?" Venus asked.

73 "Very."

74 "Is it far to go?" Fisher asked.

75 "Very."

76 They could not see the steps now, but they felt them. The walls were rough.

77 They went down for what seemed like hours.

78 "Who is your grandfather?" Fisher asked.

79 "Few people know."

80 "How did he come by the water?" Venus asked.

81 "It was always there."

82 "But why didn't he share it?"

83 "He did, but people didn't want it. They wanted the one that's killing them."

84 Venus suddenly buckled. Fisher caught her. She was afraid and refused to go any farther.

85 "It wasn't an accident that I found you," the child said. "We heard that you were looking for this water. You are the only ones who have sought this water in a long time. You would never have found it by yourselves."

86 "Why not?"

87 "The water has to find you."

88 Then the child gave Venus something to drink in the dark and she felt stronger.

89 "That's the loveliest water I have tasted in my life," she said.

90           They resumed their descent. It became increasingly hard for Fisher to breathe. He began to topple over, but Venus caught him and helped him to sit on a stone step. He was gasping for air, like a beached fish.

91           “I can’t go on,” he said. “Just leave me to die here.”

92           Then the child gave Fisher something to drink in the darkness, and he, too, felt stronger. The air became cool and reviving. He could vaguely make out the steps in the catacomb blackness. He noticed that Venus’s eyes were shining.

93           They continued to go down. They could no longer hear their footfalls or the echo of their breathing. They became aware that the boy was not with them anymore. There was only a faint white light ahead. Then they reached it.

94           There was a clearing. An old man was seated on a stone chair. Behind him, something shone with an unnatural light. This was what had lit up the dark.

95           “What is that?” they asked the old man.

96           “That,” he said, “is the last real water left in the world.” ♦