

## ABSTRACT

Title: WHO WILL BURY THE DEAD?  
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Who Will Bury The Dead is a collection of interconnected short stories. The characters navigate rural and urban life in an African country. These characters also traverse the world beyond their shores, all the way to a new living in America. Though the landscapes keep shifting, the village of Uwessan keeps re-occurring in memory and reality.

WHO WILL BURY THE DEAD?

By

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Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts  
2008

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2008

## Dedication

In memory of my father, Mr. Ayegbeni Benjamin Ehikhamenor.

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## THE ANTHROPOLOGIST'S NEW DISCOVERY

In the summer of 1930, Mr. Douglas Hurst, an anthropologist studying the lives of delta people that inhabit the shores of Ozigono River, made an unusual discovery in one of the fishing creeks. Mr. Hurst was a short and fully rounded middle-aged man who wore an explorer's metal hat that looked like a reversed aluminum cooking pot. He prowled Ozigono River bank in search of strange things, humans or sometimes plants to fill his anthropological spiral-bound notebooks. He arrived the shore of Ozigono village, which informers had told him had people who wore nothing. His canoe slowly glided to the southern bank of the river where he later pitched a tent with his assistance, Ahwinahwi. Mr. Hurst could not stop his perspiration though the river had some level of coolness. He kept taking swig after swig from his clothed water bottle. As soon as Ahwinahwi pulled the canoe close enough to the wet banks, he clambered out like a water buffalo onto the grassy savannah and plucked some greens that had not been trampled by fishermen. He held the greens close to his aquiline nose, inhaled deeply and looked up at the sky with a smirk on his large red-tanned face. He pulled out a note pad from his knapsack and scrawled in his sleepy calligraphy:

*Anubias nana, strange spicy smelling special ~~speey~~ specie.*

He smiled and tucked away the note pad. Since he was not looking for flowery plants but peculiar Homosapiens, he did not notice the tropical lily day blooming on his right side, begging for recognition as it was narrowly missed by his heavy rain-boots.

From a distance Ozigono fishermen, returning from their late afternoon expedition, saw the stranger sniffing leaves and looking at the sky, as if searching for signs of rain. They retreated, drew their fishing spears, and watched him and his assistant to see what their intent was. Satisfied that he was not a dangerous animal, since they saw Ahwinahwi that looked like them with him, they let him be and chattered about the strangeness of their riverbank lately. Some early morning fishermen had spotted a woman with silver salamanders two days earlier, which was why they were making preparations for an elaborate sacrifice to the river. It was not good for the river goddess to surface and beseech her people for food.

Mr. Hurst had seen them from the corner of his eyes, and trailed them carefully to their homestead. At sun down, he asked his assistant to move their tent closer to the villagers and they set out to eat some of their non-perishable canned meats, fruits, dry vegetable and sardines. As the evening birds sang in nearby trees and bullfrogs kept asking croaky questions, Mr. Hurst swallowed some malaria pills along with multi-vitamins. Mr. Hurst ignored a kingfisher that swooped down on an errant fish though the bleeding fish dangled in the bird's parasitic beak. But his eyes

did not miss a bit as he closely observed the ways of the villagers. The village children also watched him as he ate from shiny metals with spoons and drank from aluminum cups. They wondered what was wrong with his fingers, why couldn't he use his fingers instead of the weird looking utensils.

Since Mr. Hurst did not speak to anybody, the villagers did not bother talking to him either. He finished eating and cleaned his plates with a napkin like a priest after the Eucharist. The anthropologist belched satisfactorily, pulled out his notebook and started writing furiously, while Ahwinahwi packed leftovers in a small plastic sachet:

*Weird ~~loeat~~ natives. They eat with bare fingers from large leaves. They wear absolutely no clothes, and at a close proximity nature presents itself in all its wholeness. The children all look alike, black like polished military boots, and it is extremely difficult to tell a boy from a girl by merely looking at their faces. One has to look down, in between their legs to determine ~~specie~~ sex. I wonder if that is why they go about naked!*

By the second day, the villagers had taken Mr. Hurst and Ahwinahwi as they were; a strange white man and a black man who covered their bodies with funny things and used metal implements to eat instead of fingers. And Mr. Hurst had almost filled one of his three notebooks too, with colorful descriptions of the lifestyle of his watchers, the villagers:

*Nursing mothers breast-feed their infants while on the move. Interestingly they carry the babies on their backs and thread the nipple through the armpit for suckling.*

*Although the adults wear leaves round their waists and baring their chests, the young ones go about their daily chores, stark naked.*

As time went by the children and young adults became more comfortable with the strangers. They were particularly interested in Mr. Hurst, as they had never seen a man with such a skin. A bold boy even touched his short thick leg and rubbed his fingers together, expecting discoloration in his hands. Mr. Hurst laughed as the boy's fingers tickled his leg.

Sensing that the villagers were now relaxed, Mr. Hurst brought out his Spartus Foldex V camera and set it on a tripod. Taking a camera for the trip was a last minute decision; his boss back in America had hoped he could get good and interesting photographs to be sold to *National Geographic* magazine. In no time, the villagers started peering into the sparkling lens. This pleased Mr. Hurst immensely, he believed he had something that interested the villagers. In between swatting of sand flies and *akhunkhun* insects he kept clicking away at the nude villagers, especially the young women that made him turgid. The assistant, Ahwinahwi, helped him shoo away some heady youths who came too close to the camera. Ahwinahwi did not mind rough handling several giddy kids.

It was not until a week later, after Mr. Hurst had returned from swimming in the cool Ozigono River and made some notes on his almost exhausted notebooks that he saw a procession of the villagers. All their faces were painted in off-white and ochre hues, symmetrical lines form zebra crossing on their broad black faces. The parade progressed towards the farthest side of the riverbank; a sturdy man was beating on a large drum. The drumming was intense that it frightened afternoon birds

to flight. Some of the young girls he had previously photographed jumped and floated in the air like butterflies. Slender black hands flailed here and there, wide waists wiggled unstoppably. Breathing furiously, Mr. Hurst toweled his face quickly, grabbed his camera bag and ran after them. Almost tripping on a broken stick, he yelled at Ahwinahwi to hurry and bring with him the camera's tripod. A few yards from the procession, he slowed down and watched them closely with intensity. His eyes monitored every movement in their ritual dance and his ears cocked for chanting. He wiped his sweltering face with a small towel. As the villagers fanned out, he retrieved his camera and unfolded the ring-neck lens. A boy whose head was shaven to the skull with a large green iguana on his shoulder was the lead singer. His voice was high-pitched, yet scratchy like a radio adjusting to a distant reception. The boy started throwing eggs into the clean blue river and at the same time levitating off the ground to about five feet high, with legs wide apart. Each egg thrown elicited a loud and thunderous chorus from his followers, who were much older. Seven times the boy with the green iguana threw eggs into the river before he led the march back towards a well-decorated shrine.

Mr. Hurst, who did not want to miss anything because this could be the highlight of his exploration, adjusted his viewfinder. While tampering with the aperture to capture the iguana boy's face, his lens tilted and landed on the boy's uncovered loins as he was levitating again. Initially Mr. Hurst did not believe what he saw. He nervously wiped his aging right eye and refocused. A small fear crept into his mind because he'd heard previous explorers complained that one sign of an impending malaria in the tropics is delirium. But as he concentrated some more, his views were as clear as a cloudless day, the iguana boy that led the procession to and fro the river had three testicles. Mr. Hurst breathed in fast successions and did a sign of the cross, though he had not attended mass in years. He took out his pill bottle and emptied two mustard-colored tablets into his pink tongue, and swallowed it without getting his water bottle. He gestured Ahwinahwi to come look what his camera's viewfinder had discovered. When his assistant saw it too, which was the first time he was allowed to look into the camera, he exclaimed in a language Mr. Hurst had never heard him speak – *Oghene siomen!*

Mr. Hurst did not waste time in scribbling a telegraph the following morning.

*"I have seen a strange iguana boy with three testicles, who also levitates effortlessly. Any interest?"*

He gave the note to Arhwinahwi to go and send from Warri, the nearest port town, which was two days of canoe rowing. The message was to his boss at the American Anthropological Museum, telling him of his discovery. Throughout the four days his assistant was gone, he did not sleep. Many things ran through his head as he came out everyday to seek the boy among playing children.

Three months later his boss wrote back, ordering him to do everything humanly possible to bring the boy with three testicles to America. Without any doubt in Mr. Hurst's mind, he knew there were many obstacles to accomplishing the daunting task. He should have kept his enthusiasm to himself and just show photographs to his boss upon getting to America. He had never spoken to the villagers since he came to their harbor three and half months ago. How would he now

communicate to them that he wanted to take their son to America? Not even Ahwinahwi, who was from another village, spoke the language properly. Every quarter of a mile here was another culture and another language, as the anthropologist had found out.

Mr. Hurst resolved to use sign language and if that failed he would use force. He had some British friends who could send him some resident soldiers, he concluded. Taking Ahwinahwi with him, the anthropologist left his tarpaulin tent and walked towards the homes of the villagers one late afternoon. As he approached a family of five, he stopped and laughed warmly but nervously. His neck burnt in trepidation, insects mounted and dismounted his bare and hairy arms. He pointed to himself and the iguana boy, whom he had seen standing among bystanders, and made a motion towards the mouth of the river. Upon several attempts and Ahwinahwi's broken interpretations, the villagers understood what the anthropologist was alluding to. But they could not communicate to Mr. Hurst that the boy must not leave the village, no matter the circumstance. They tried explaining to Ahwinahwi to interpret to Mr. Hurst that their son was the Ozigono River high priest, chosen by the river goddess, Olokun, through the oracles. Without the boy to perform the annual ritual of feeding the river eggs, they would starve to death. The river would refuse to give them fresh water and fish for their sustenance. The river could even revolt and overflow its banks, completely bury them alive. They would perish. But Ahwinahwi kept forcing the anthropologist's wish and desire on them, ignoring their stories. Ahwinahwi even threatened that there could be worse and dire consequences if they refused to yield the boy to the white man. All the villagers could do was shake their heads vigorously in disagreement and refusal. After a negotiation that seemed forever and the sun started going down in a ball of orange fire, Mr. Hurst left for his tent in frustration, swearing under his breath at the early lazy missionaries that did not get to this side of the delta to break these natives before his arrival. If only they had some form of Christianity he could persuade them that there was no nonsense river goddess, he thought. He walked slowly to his tent with his porter behind him.

This was his own discovery and he cannot let things slip through his fingers. But first he must make notes in his notebook. He looked for one that still had good clean pages and noted:

*My latest discovery is a boy priest, I would say about 12 years of age – it's hard to tell. I will call him Iguana Boy because he carries with him a large iridescence iguana that looks like a giant chameleon. Like magician, he can levitate effortlessly, up to five feet high as if is about to fly. Though a youth, he seem important to this people, maybe some form of high heathen priest. Also, the iguana probably means something else, since nobody else carries pets around. No dogs. This afternoon he led a ritual performance, though not as barbaric as I had expected things to be, yet it is strange. I may not have discovered Siamese twins, but I am certainly the first to have seen a boy with ~~three~~ triple-testicles, who can also fly without wings.*

As he covered the notes because he could not write any further, a certain anger overwhelmed him again. How many times in my life time will I find a levitating boy with extra..., his thoughts trailed off. Thinking himself a failure, Mr. Hurst got up abruptly and walked straight to where he believed was the boy's hut.

The mud walls of the hut were decorated with chalk markings, animal drawings, symbols and motifs. That some natives refused his request would not be a good enough excuse for his boss back home, he thought as he got to the threshold. When he entered the hut, a stocky man and his wife and the iguana boy were eating burnt fish and what looked like mashed potatoes to him. The iguana was sleeping in a far corner. Without wasting time, he went through the same motion of communication like he did with the other villagers. Mr. Hurst, through the decimated interpretation of Ahwinahwi, offered to give them some form of exchange for their son. He brought a tiny mirror and asked the woman to look in it. The woman looked and squeezed her face in fear and handed him the mirror quickly. He probably thinks she is seeing a ghost, thought Mr. Hurst. Again he dipped his hand in his inner pocket and brought out red beads. The woman did not touch them. The man looked at his wife with inquisitive eyes, and the woman's scowl told him all he needed to know. The two villagers shook their heads vigorously in refusal. The boy was not just their child but belonged to Ozigono village, they kept explaining to Arhwinahwi. When the man and his wife retreated to the inner room, Mr. Hurst left the house with intense anger, followed by his assistant.

The anthropologist turned brownish red as he returned crestfallen to his tent. Throughout that evening the villagers did not see him come out of his tent nor did they see Ahwinahwi warming their canned meals. When night came and the villagers withdrew to the interiors of their huts while some young girls were singing to the full moon close by, Mr. Hurst came out to watch them in full nakedness. Hoping to find something strange in the girls, he got drawn to their moon dance and songs and got aroused to their moon dance. Something that surprised him. He made a mental note of the lead singer again. Ahwinahwi saw the hungry look on Mr. Hurst's face and smiled to himself. When the girls dispersed he told Ahwinahwi to collapse the tent, fold and pack everything in readiness to leave Ozigono.

Mr Hurst went to the anchored canoe, rocking back and forth in the gentle river wave, he observed the dark river and the tiny lights like fireflies of fishermen with disdainful aloofness. He lost interest in smelling grasses or leaves. He battled with the thought of asking Ahwinahwi to go coax one of the village girls to sleep. Sleeping with the natives can be dangerous, he remembered been told back home.

Mr. Hurst and Arhwinahwi watched the starless night in silence. Except for the seasonal bullfrogs' mating calls, the night was eerily silent. A purple darkness wrapped Ozigono village, the moon that the girls danced and sang for had gone to sleep too, behind a thick cloud. A caterpillar became a butterfly. A chick hatched itself from a broken egg. Mr. Hurst blinked and looked towards the clustered huts of the village, the dark silhouettes reminded him of nothing. In that instance he knew what to do, and he unfolded his plan to Arhwinahwi. They carefully exited the canoe and walked on some water to dry land.

The two men, both black shadows in the dark, tiptoed to the boy's house. Ahwinahwi eased open the bamboo door and found the boy lying on a straw mat with the large iguana's eyes rolling back and forth. His parents had gone for night fishing. There was no light except the faint illumination of the moon that had re-merged from behind the cloud as if the witness their act. Ahwinahwi with his strong muscular arms scooped the boy and scampered out with Mr. Hurst stumping behind. The iguana

walked out the door too, not following the two kidnappers, it slowly moved towards the mouth of the river.

Mr. Hurst and Ahwinahwi got in the canoe, panting. Furiously they rowed away towards the port city of Warri where Mr. Hurst would board the first available ship. With the first ray of dawn light, Mr. Hurst fed the boy canned sardine and dry raisins. Ahwinahwi kept paddling away urgently, never tiring and never complaining, but sweating profusely. Mr. Hurst's odd food made the boy's stomach rumble and he retched all over the canoe. The iguana boy was not used to the white man's canned or raw food in his life. Had Mr. Hurst thought about this he would have made a note of it in his anthropological notepad, under the title Strange Behavioral Feeding of My Discovery.

As the day yielded more light to the canoe, Mr. Hurst thought of checking what made the iguana boy unique, but decided against it. I have all the time in the world to examine him once I get to Washington, he told himself. He covered the boy with a brown blanket, as the river got colder with the early morning wind. The anthropologist wondered what could be going on in the mind of the boy's mind. All along he had stayed mute and fixed a gaze on his receding village, which had become a pool of liquid darkness. The canoe wobbled up and down the river, and Mr. Hurst fell into a gentle sleep.

When they got to the port city two days later, where they would board a big ship, Mr. Hurst released a loud satisfied yawn. He rubbed his two-day-old stubbles and stretched out his cramped back and legs. The iguana boy showed no sign of distress or interest in the things around him. The colorful clothes people wore, the fish traders chattering away with customers, little children his age running up and down the shoreline or the some men and women that had Mr. Hurst's skin color. Mr. Hurst couldn't really tell if the iguana boy was sad or not, as his eyes were riveted on far away invisible objects without any betraying emotions. He thought the boy was like a wax version of the boy he had seen singing, levitating and leading the procession.

As they were about to board the bigger ship to America, Mr Hurst hugged Ahwinahwi, gave him his metal hat and paid him handsomely with beads and mirror for all his assistance, especially his role in securing the iguana boy to the ship. Ahwinahwi cherished all Mr. Hurst bequeathed him with a large smile, especially the metal hat that made him look like a colonial explorer. The thick black man considered the metal helmet a symbol of authority; he would soon be the new petty jefe. He'd wear it and write things on a notebook like he saw Mr. Hurst did. And speak some of the high sounding English he had learnt from the anthropologist's books to bamboozle his fellow villagers, he thought. The whole idea got his chest swollen with pride, and Arhwinahwi whose face was perpetually stern exploded in a guttural laughter. The ship blasted its last departing horn, and he waved Mr. Hurst a generous goodbye, avoiding the staring eyes of the iguana boy.

While the ship releases its anchor to sail away, Arhwinahwi untied his canoe that would take him back to his village. He thought he saw an iguana on top of a woman's head in the water, but the water was calm. So he set out to paddle. Ahwinahwi as his paddle touched the water never made it beyond a kilometer, with his gift of metal hat, beads or the mirror, to his village before a giant iguana, the size of a whale, torpedoed his canoe, splitting it into two pieces of coffin.

Mr. Hurst was seasick throughout the journey to America, many times he had fainting spells. Whenever he slept he dreamt about Ozigono, about the procession. Once he dreamt of making love to tall beautiful native girl, during orgasmic screams the girl became a black mamba, he woke up screaming “Ahwinahwi! Ahwinahwi!” Other times he found himself at the bottom of the Ozigono River making love to a faceless, slippery woman with head full of silvery salamanders, these woke him up soaked with embarrassment. The journey that took almost three months was like a day for the iguana boy, he had become one with the sea. Not until they entered the big vessel, he did not realize that the river goddess Olokun was traveling with him. So he had companion, whom he chatted with all through. The chatting and chanting that sounded like disconcerted mumbling to Mr. Hurst, were as disturbing as his long silences.

Though the journey was tumultuous for the anthropologist, each time he thought of the iguana boy’s three testicles, he would nod his head in satisfaction, as if saying every gain comes with pain. Sometimes he’d fall into deep thoughts of earlier anthropologists who had found ancient masks in other parts of Africa. He would scratch his brow and considered himself lucky; he found a “living mask” not a dead wooden or leather one. He was never interested in any inanimate object from Africa, which was while he concentrated mainly on humans. Humans were more interesting, dynamic and adaptable to ones desired need. A mask is a mask, a pot is a pot, and he’d laugh.

Whenever he went to drink with other travelers, he would lock his cabin fearing the boy might run away or levitate to another distant part of the vessel, though there was no where to run in the big ship called Queen Victoria.

During drinking binges, Mr. Hurst would tell all kinds of tale while he was traveling with the boy, carefully avoiding the real reason. Other explorers told tales of their adventure in Africa. One distraught widow was taking the dead body of her husband back home. She told Mr. Hurst of how her husband who was a good swimmer wanted to get close to a hut built in the middle of a river to photograph it, only to disappear in the water and resurfaced bloated two days later. Mr. Hurst thought that was why the vessel’s odor was become unbearable these last days of the journey. He drank more whisky to suppress the thought that came to his mind.

From Baltimore Harbor, Mr. Hurst took a taxi to Washington, D.C. in the night. The warm August air devoid of humidity was a fresh breath for him. The anthropologist could not wait to show off his “find” or “discovery” as they called it in the anthropological circle. This would kick the discovery of the Great Pyramid of Giza to the back pages of anthropological books and journals. His new discovery will put him, Mr. Douglas Hurst, in the forefront with great explorers like Mongo Park and Christopher Columbus of this world, he thought. The continent some explorers thought had been exhausted of alien “finds” still had many things to be discovered.

Seasoned anthropologists, archeologists, curators and journalists were invited to view the latest discovery from the continent of Africa as soon as Mr. Hurst reported to the office a week after he arrived. Mr. Hurst’s boss had already calculated how much the museum would realize from the exhibition, not counting the funding he

would receive from the government. He had thought of putting the boy in a specially constructed big box full of formaldehyde, but Mr. Hurst, who still had some strands of humanity left in him, rejected the morbid proposal. After all the people of Ozigono did him no harm. Although Mr. Hurst had his own grand plans and screaming headlines running riot in his bald head, he kept them from his boss. He would definitely publish embellished papers written in his spiral-bound notebooks in the American Anthropological Review. He dreamt of National Geographic magazine accepting the photographs he took of the shrine and the procession, so he could retire early. He may even go back to Africa and try his hands on coffee farming like Mr. Wilberforce, his British friend in Kenya.

When everybody was settled in the brightly lit conference room of the museum, which seated about fifty people, Mr. Hurst mounted the iguana boy on a rotating wooden pedestal. Covering him around the waist with nothing but the small towel, which he had used for wiping sweat in Africa during extremely hot days.

Mr. Hurst started his windy narrative, of how he was the first to discover the iguana boy's village of "naked natives" and how his keen anthropological eyes found the "strange things an ordinary eye couldn't see."

He did not credit his camera's viewfinder for his most important discovery nor did he mention the name of Ahwinahwi without whose help, he would not have been able to bring his discovery to America.

"These ancient eyes have seen many wonders in my journey through the coastlines of that continent. Trees, animals with three eyes, plant that can kill instantly – you name it, carnivorous carnivals of cannibals," he boasted on and on.

Mr. Hurst ignored the impatient giggles and murmurs from the audience. The iguana boy was absorbed on the pointer the mendacious anthropologist used in demonstrating his speech. The crowd started getting restless as the introduction was getting too long; let's get to the heart of the matter they seemed to be saying. At last it was time to unveil the purpose of the gathering. Mr. Hurst used the short end of his pointer to remove the towel from the boy's waist, to reveal the three testicles. As the towel dropped soundlessly to the wooden base of the pedestal, and all eyes converged on boy's loins. A single spot. A collective gasp from the audience reverberated round the room like a tunnel cough. The place where Mr. Hurst had seen the iguana boy's three testicles with his camera's viewfinder was as smooth as glass surface. The zone shone as frozen ice losing its pre-melting frost. For the first time since he arrived America, the iguana boy muttered words. Unfamiliar argot unknown to neither Mr. Hurst nor his bemused audience filled the room. Sounds of large dirge drums descended from the ceiling, as if it had hidden loudspeakers.

Who steals from a god? Only a mad man steals from a god, the iguana boy was singing in his language. He started gyrating as if caught in a whirlwind on the wooden pedestal.

"Who eats a fish without removing the bones, only a foolish man eats fish with the bones."

He levitated, higher than Mr. Hurst had imagined.

"You can use water to rinse your mouth but can you use fire to scratch your itching crotches?"

Mr. Hurst opened his mouth like a post office box left ajar, as he listened to the suddenly matured voice of the iguana boy and the English that was pouring out of his mouth. He watched as the boy's eyes became piecing blinding lights. The anthropologist's senses started departing his mind. Did he ever see three testicles or was it an apparition? He wiped a trailing sweat from his folded brows, as he started to back away from the chanting discovery. He had heard what happened to colleagues thought to have lost it; they were bundled in straight jackets and sent to St. Elizabeth Asylum in South East.

In blurry view, he watched as his audience filed out from the conference room. Some concluded that Mr. Hurst had probably gone crazy, due to the merciless tropical Africa sun. Another one gone down the hill, his boss muttered as he started walking towards the inner part of the museum, apologizing to top dignitaries, "It is a well known proven fact, those that did not die of malaria came back psychotic," Mr. Hurst's boss was saying as he stumbled and fell through a door, down the flight of steps. As everybody left in a hurry, dispirited, Mr. Hurst observed the iguana boy melting into a puddle of water. Within seconds the entire room became Ozigono River. Mr. Hurst saw the salamander-haired woman who came to his dream in the ship. She was laughing in the middle of the puddle.

Mr. Hurst heard voices that he couldn't distinguish. Many of the voices sounded like those of the iguana boy's parents, the villagers of Ozigono, Ahwinahwi, his boss or the invited observers. The great anthropologist with a new discovery from the distant continent of Africa fell headlong on the hard concrete floor of the museum.

## RIDING MONKEY WITH PAKO

It was not uncommon in my village for a schoolmate to die of high fever, measles, malaria or polio. We would march in a single file from our primary school compound to the dead pupil's house to pray in the open yard and sympathize with the family. Our school catechist, Mr. Michael, would make us say the rosary uncountable times under the burning sun. Our knees would dig into the hot sand, while we chanted *Tue Maria, gracia von, Hail Mary Full of Grace, and Our Father Who Art In Heaven* until we got lost in the chant and fell into a drone. The parents of the dead child would come out and watch us with red eyes full of tears as we prayed to unknown saints.

I said this prayer for the dead with lots of energy, because I knew Mr. Michael was listening to all our voices even at such a time of mourning. If he did not hear your voice, when we returned to school he would lash you with cane or report you to the headmaster, who would call you an "idol worshipper."

The day we went to Pako's compound and knelt with rosaries in our dusty fingers, I did not say *Tue Maria, gracia von* or any prayers. I did not see the use of the prayers anymore and did not care if Mr. Michael heard my voice or not. I buried my face in the hot red ground where I used to play with Pako, packed burning sand in my mouth and swallowed my cry. I couldn't look Pako's mother in the eyes; I felt them drowning me with tears.

I met Pako in Primary Four. We did not start Infant One together, but because the new headmaster, Mr. P. E. Iyoha had canceled automatic promotion, Pako got stuck in Primary Four.

Uwessan Primary School was neither big in structure nor in population of pupils; it was easy to know everybody and what they did inside and outside the fenced school compound. The teachers sometimes had to go around the village, chasing children to come register for school. Some parents would cooperate; others would hide their children because they needed them for farm work..

Pako, a rabbit hunter and a lover of the meat of the giant rat, was one of those chased from the bush to come start school. In Infant one, he was older than everybody in his class. Rumor had it that he was ten years old and already smoking SM and Gold Leaf cigarettes behind the school latrine. Nobody could ascertain the truth of this; it was difficult to differentiate between his near pungent smell and the acrid smell of SM cigarettes.

We all hunted rabbit or ate giant rats though not as often as Pako. He had all the materials to go hunt rabbits - a small hoe, short cutlass and *ubata* for smoking out

rabbits from their holes. Pako also had a catapult for shooting down birds from high trees.

Pako did not tolerate any nonsense from fellow pupils, but he never fought within the school compound. He waylaid and set traps for his unsuspecting prey under the kolanut trees outside the school premises so the headmaster and teachers would not witness his exploits. For four years, I did not fall into his trap. But nobody went through life in Uwessan village that easy. Trouble was always waiting for both old men and small boys. Now that I was in the same class as Pako, I knew it was just a matter of time before I crossed his path.

My luck came to an abrupt end in Primary four when I refused to let him copy my answers during our first test. I'd ignored his "*Pss pss...*Deboy, let me see what you wrote for number two." I wanted to remain at the top of my class as usual, because any other position would earn my mother's wrath and a walloping with her slippers. Though my mother was illiterate, she had an uncanny way of sniffing out the truth, so I never shared my answers during exams. But that resolve disappeared as salt sprinkled on water. I thought Pako had forgotten about how I treated him in the exam hall, I didn't know he was not a boy who forgot such things. He may have memory problems with multiplication, but when it came to dealing with brats his memory was sharper than the small knife that he carried in his pocket. He treated those who disrespected him the same as rabbits, rats or birds – he beat them to submission.

I was in the midst of Thomas, Fidelis and Godday, my classmates when the headmaster said, "School dismissed!" and we shouted "Hurray!" and rushed out of the school compound. Suddenly I was alone. I did not smell the danger lurking under a kola nut tree outside the school gate, whereas the other boys had seen Pako far away and changed their course. He had a poisonous anger on his dark face, and he was bristling like a scorpion. The tribal-marks which formed the number 11 carved both side of his cheeks seemed longer than usual, and his eyes were red. He pounced on me before I could run to a safe place, where the elders would've shouted *zorlobor*-leave him alone. Not that I could outrun Pako anyway. He was the fastest runner in my school; he represented Uwessan Primary School during sports competitions. Without any further provocation he approached and blocked my path with his dust coated right foot and pushed my school box from my head. The aluminum box, with Yeti lock flew from my head as if it had wings, and clattered to the hot red earth under the kola nut tree. The contents of my box - My Reader, two Big Exercise books, one ruler, a HB pencil, carver, fountain pen and Quink ink bottle decorated the tree's base as if I were some road side trader at the village market. I did not say a word or dare look at Pako in the eyes; instead I fixed my gaze on the sand-coated nib of my fountain pen which I feared would never write again.

Pako stood right in front of me; his long shadow was as overbearing as the smell that came from his tattered *patch patch* uniform. I lowered myself and started gathering my belongings. The more I tried to remove the dust from my books the more they looked like I'd excavated them from a muddy pond. Fear of further humiliation displaced the anger that was rising in me. I waited for the final assault from the enemy. Apparently Pako was not in a hurry; he knew how to disable his prey and allowed them to ferment in fear. When I thought the worst was over, I felt a stone-like knock at the center of my head, which I'd shaved the previous day so that

my mother could rub medicine on the ringworm forming on my scalp. Pako had delivered his legendary *koah*. His knuckle rap on my bare head sounded like a gourd dashed on a rock. A million stars rushed out from my eyes and everything around me became blurry and dark .

From the faraway land that Pako's knuckles sent me to, I heard him say, "That should clear your ears next time so you can hear me call you, stupid goat!" His voice trailed off; in my half blindness I saw his shadow move. When I looked up, all I could see was the labyrinth of threads that formed the patches of his blue khaki knickers and his raffia school bag hanging loosely on his left shoulder. Though Pako looked short and underfed, every bone in his body was strong like iron.

As I nursed my pain, I wondered where had the elders gone? Usually they'd stay in verandahs gossiping while they fanned their wrinkled brows with folded shirts. I later found out that they had gone to see the new Peugeot 504 car acquired by Mr. Clifford, the court clerk.

During subsequent exams, I did not need any knuckle raps on my head to remind me to adjust my seating position in class to enable Pako copy my answers. But I was not foolish either. To maintain the top position in our class, I'd write some answers wrong. When I was sure Pako had copied them, I'd erase them and re-write the right answers. While I got 100 percent, Pako ended up with 90 or there about. Though he was not fooled by my slickness, he was content.

The only time he had problems was during mental exercises. I could not help him with that. *Mental* (as we called it) was introduced by our headmaster. He would come to our class first thing on Monday mornings carrying his "Gear Thomas", a cane made from *ukan* twine, ready to administer his on-the spot test, five questions for each pupil designed to test one's ability to think on his feet. We weren't allowed to look at our notes or use pencils to draw lines and count. Only brain, fingers and one's mouth were allowed. *Mental* questions were always multiplication.

"Pako Okoduwa!" Our headmaster, smelling of kola nut and tobacco, would yell at Pako.

Pako would walk to the front of the class like an unwilling goat being led to a shrine for sacrifice.

"Two times two?" headmaster would ask.

"Four sah!"

"Four times two!"

Silence. Confusion.

"Are you deaf - I say four times two?" The short man who tolerated no idiocy would bark.

"Ten sah!" Pako's low voice would signify uncertainty.

Pako's answers beyond "two times two" were always wrong. He had crammed "two times one ah two, two times two ah four" that we shouted everyday from Infant One to Primary Three. Multiplications beyond what we'd memorized were lost to him.

Pako knew the drill; he would stand aside until the headmaster was through with the entire mental test. Then he would ask Pako to stretch his hands forward and stick out his buttocks. The whistling sound of the headmaster's whip would travel the

entire corridor to other classes, signaling terror to other dullards. Each lash that descended on his patched buttocks made me flinch, but Pako would maintain a masked face, like a clay effigy in *Amese* shrine. The only way Pako showed pain was an insignificant contortion on his face as the cane landed. Pako's defiance and nonchalant attitude enraged our headmaster and he would continue to lash the boy.

"You goat...you don't want to learn...you dirty pig...all you know how to do is fight and kill rabbit...you cow!" He would call Pako the names of all the domestic animals in the village. Pako would fix his eyes beyond the broken windows of our classroom straight into the garden, his mind focused on the tropical afternoon breeze moving plantain leaves, the hot sun baking papaya fruits and birds sucking at sunflowers.

After a hectic lashing one Monday, I decided to do something for Pako. I couldn't stand the beating anymore, because my headmaster seemed to be enjoy the routine.

"I can teach you the trick of multiplication," I ventured on our way home.

"Since when did you become a magician?" He barked at me.

"That is not what I mean, I mean..." I stammered.

I could not explain myself to Pako; his anger fuse was shorter than the distance between a matchstick and the side of a matchbox. So I let the matter rest. A few days later, I noticed a change. Instead of the lion and antelope look we gave each other, he relaxed, and he started treating me differently, almost like a friend. Not that he apologized for the knock on the head he had given me. By the third week in school, after I'd taught him the trick of *Mental*, he allowed me to follow him around to some of the places he went.

On Fridays we were required to bring *handwork* to school; this could be a woven basket, brooms made from palm fronds, or bags made out of raffia. To get brooms, we would go looking for short palm trees to harvest the fronds. The only place we could find wild short palm trees was the forest near the burial ground for children and village outcast. I could never have gone near such a bush by myself; I would rather take the beating of my headmaster. But Pako knew no fear and he did not mind taking me with him whenever he went.

Though Pako was slow in school, finding things in the bush was second nature to him. He knew where different trees and vines grew. He started teaching me how to set traps for different animals. The diameter of rope that caught a grass cutter was different from that which caught a squirrel. As for rabbits, he did not waste his patience with them. Pako knew what holes housed rabbits and he would dig the hole with a small hoe and smoke out the rabbit within few minutes. No rabbit ever out ran him, but you had to stay out of his way, or he could trample you as he tried to catch the fleeing rabbit.

One day Pako chased a rabbit right into *Amese's* shrine, which housed the most revered god in my village. It was considered an abomination to kill anything that ran inside the shrine, because *Amese* was said to have saved our ancestors from getting slaughtered by enemies during a tribal war. Pako and I waited outside the mud shrine for the rabbit to come out. As soon as the rodent ventured out, Pako's cutlass decapitated it right away. Once I got home, I told my father about the events by the

shrine. My father quickly sprinkled chalk all over my body, grabbed one my mother's day old chick and spun it round my head before throwing it away as a sacrifice to Amese. This was to ward off the inevitable dire repercussions of such sacrilegious act.

Since Pako feared nothing, I knew he never told his mother. The only time I remembered Pako ran from anything was when we found a snake in a rabbit hole. He dreaded snakes because his father died from snakebite. Though, many villagers believed it was more than just a snakebite that killed Okoduwa, Pako's father. Okoduwa's death was traced to a land dispute between him and Uduebor, a well known witchdoctor. Any sensible man would not have troubled witchdoctor, because of his *juju* power. But not the goat-stubborn Okoduwa. He dragged Uduebor to the elders' council over a small piece of farmland. The elders awarded the disputed land to Okoduwa because he was great talker. After the verdict Pako's father was so happy that he shared kola nut and alligator pepper amongst the elders. Meanwhile, villagers heard Uduebor saying, "No one steals a lion's cub and live to tell the tale, no, no, not in this village while my eyes are still open!" He spat large soot-like phlegm to his left side, rested his bicycle against a clay wall, and disappeared into his dreaded dark hut. The December day that was sunny, got cloudy and a heavy thunderstorm drove people to their homes.

The following farming season when Okoduwa went to clear the disputed land to plant yam, a snake bit him. He started rushing home to take an antidote, but only made it to the last stretch of the farm road before he collapsed. Farm women met him foaming in the mouth and vomiting white stuff. His legs jerked as if an evil spirit held his throat. He died by the bank of a little river and villagers carried him *adedukenedu*, like a bush pig killed by a hunter.

That was the only time I ever saw Pako expressed pain openly. He cried and rolled his body on the hot sand in their compound while elders laid his father to rest. While his mother mourned in the kitchen, Pako tied a black thread in his hand to ward away his father's ghost in case he was roaming the world looking for a co-traveler to the spirit world.

Since Pako was only a Primary school pupil, there was no money to give his father a proper seven day celebratory burial ceremony. But my father gave him a black goat to perform a basic *itolimin* rite. Why my father did this I could not tell.

When Pako resumed school after the mourning period of seven days, I noticed a change of attitude in him. . On the second day of his resumption, during recess he looked at me, his eyes red and rheumy and said "Deboy, as long as I live in this village nobody will touch you, I swear to God!" He touched the earth with his index finger, touched his tongue with the sand coated finger and pointed it at the sky. I guessed that was a covenant and his way of showing appreciation for my father's good gesture towards him.

Every pupil in my school knew how my father had given Pako a goat for his father's final rites, and they were not surprised to see him bringing me a paper bag full of roasted termites. Prior to that time I knew that roasted termites were a delicacy, but I never knew how to catch them for food. Pako had said the best time to catch them was in the morning, at the first cockcrow when the termites came out in swarm for their final mating dance.

I did not eat Pako's roasted termites. My mother had warned me never to eat food that was not given to me by her. "The quickest way to get poisoned with witchcraft is through stranger's food" she'd say. On numerous occasions she told me that her eyes followed me everywhere I went, even when she was in her faraway farm. I knew she was not lying. You could never fool my mother, no matter how clever you were. One day, I helped myself to her piece of fish in her absence. When my mother asked me about the missing fish, I blamed it on our goat.

"No goat can reach that high to eat my fish; this must be a human-goat!"

She took me to one side of the kitchen, gave me a cup of water and asked me to rinse my mouth and spit out the contents inside a bowl. When I spat out the water, the bowl of water was full of fish particles from my mouth. She slapped the appetite for fish and lying out of my mouth forever. So even when the scent of Pako's gift of roasted termites in my pocket filled my nose, my mother's slap was more in my head.

Our second term in Primary Six came with many changes. The headmaster transferred his albino son, Ajebi from another school, to complete his sixth form school with us, we did not know why. The boy's skin was the color of a festival pig skinned with hot water. He squinted at the slightest ray of sun light. He couldn't keep his eyes open for long and neither could he keep his mouth shut. Ajebi behaved like one who had no bones in his body and his laziness was obvious from day one. He didn't look like he could eat pepper fruit or make toys from cocoa yam stems like the rest of us.

Ajebi was the only one who wore sandals and socks to school, the rest of us went to school on our bare feet. We were used to the dust and hot sand burning our feet in the afternoon when the sun was at its fiercest.

Every morning Ajebi rode on his father's Vespa motorcycle to school, something we were not even allowed to touch except when given the honor of washing it. Many tales followed him to Uwessan Primary School from the township of Ubiaja. He told us how he ate eggs, toasted bread, butter and drank Lipton tea for breakfast. We could not argue with this albino about any thing because half of the time we had never seen the things he talked about. We did not even have to ask him before he would start confessing and we wanted to hear more.

"We have television and a big radiogram covered with my mother's antimacassar," Ajebi boasted.

The talk that interested me most was when he said, "When I finish from this your village primary school," as if it were not his school too, "I will go to a Federal Government College, where tea, Cabin Biscuit and eggs are served for breakfast!"

Who in his right sense would give a child egg to eat? We swallowed his boasts with more than a pinch of salt. But any place where children drank tea before going to school was not something that could be ignored for long in my village.

"Deboy, that our headmaster's son is a big liar! There is no way anybody will give children eggs and tea. I wonder what adults feed on, elephants?" Pako asked with sarcasm as we left for home that day.

Since the boy would not stop talking about going to Federal Government College, two weeks later Pako nicknamed him *Fedra Gorment*. The alias caught on like fire on dry grass, we soon forgot he was called Ajebi. Pako was notorious for

nicknaming pupils, even teachers. I remember when he first called our headmaster, *King Pharaoh*. This was after the headmaster taught us a marching song when he first arrived; telling us it was in the tradition of British education. The headmaster ordered us not to walk silently to class anymore, we had to sing and swing our arms swiftly. He started singing at the top of his old voice in front of us.

*“O king Pharaoh leet my people go, leet my people go  
O king Pharaoh leet my people go  
To deh promised land”*

He marched up and down like a goat attacked by soldier ants: all the while telling us to march smartly like British pupils. We chuckled and covered our mouths with our tiny hands. Whenever our headmaster wanted to teach us new things he did not care if we laughed or listened. When it was time for us to repeat what he taught us, and we started stuttering like idiots, his cane would remind us of our laughter and inattention. So we laughed but learnt.

*Fedra Gorment* told us that the things his father was teaching us were already practiced in city primary schools. And Pako told him we had our ways of doing things that he too did not know and reminded him of his inability to cut grass with a cutlass or even sweep a path clean because he had grown up in the city. *Fedra Gorment* did not even know how to split the bamboo used in fencing out goats from our school garden. When he tied bamboo fences they fell apart as if they were sticks gathered by a small girl. Even ordinary *ikekonogbo*, the simplest acrobatic stunt we all executed by holding a branch of a low tree, looping our legs through our hands and landing on both feet without falling, seemed magical to *Fedra Gorment*.

“Ajebi, I am sure this is the only place you will have to tie fence and cut grass, because in Federal Government College laborers cut grass for you and the fences are made of cement-blocks and barbwire,” Pako had said one day and we all fell on the freshly cut grass, laughing. *Fedra Gorment* turned red with anger and embarrassment. He went to his father’s office until recess was over.

We became suspicious of *Fedra Gorment*’s city tales when one day he started telling us stories from his books without pictures. Every storybook we had came with explanatory. Primary Two Reader had David and Mr. Dauda driving a lorry from Ibadan to Lagos. Primary Three Reader had Mr. Giwa the trader standing in front of his store, and our own Primary Six Reader had the dubious Mr. Ali selling ashes instead of sugar to strangers. So where did *Fedra Gorment* get his two small books called *Eze Goes To School* and *Chike And The River*?

*Fedra Gorment* spun story after story from the books, claiming that his elder brother in St. John Bosco College, where white men and Indians were teachers, told him these stories. Though we did not believe him, the tales were interesting. That was until the day the albino stepped on a sore by narrating to us the story of a boy whose father was killed by a leopard in a thick forest. The story sounded similar to how a snake killed Pako’s father. From then on, Pako warned me to avoid the headmaster’s son for good.

“Very soon he will tell us he eats rice everyday and plays football with white children,” Pako grabbed my hand and dragged me away from *Fedra Gorment*’s court.

We left behind other gullible pupils whom *Fedra Gorment* had caught under his spell. I was not too enthusiastic to leave with Pako; I wanted to hear more. I

wanted to hear *Fedra Gorment's* unfolding strand of tales about “kindergarten and private teachers.” I could hear *Fedra Gorment's* whiny voice, “It is not like your cassava and yam school here, we wore uniforms when I attended kindergarten.” The wind took his voice, and I lost the heart of the matter.

Just as Pako predicted I began to yearn for *Fedra Gorment's* outside and unreachable world, beyond my village. I could not get his tales off my poor head. I started thinking of the places he had named, places where I didn't have to struggle to speak the English language. Some beautiful city names I had never heard of until he came to Uwessan Primary School, names like Kano city, Port Harcourt and Lagos. I began daydreaming of going to grammar school in a big city, where students did not have to cut the grass and have sores on their palms. I yearned to sleep on a Vono bed with a foam mattress instead of the hard mud bed in my mother's hut. *Fedra Gorment* said some beds had another bed on top. He called it “double bunker”, and I could not imagine a bed on top of another bed. When I started dreaming of school that had white men as teachers, I knew I had gone too far and I stopped dreaming. But I secretly prayed for the day Pako would not come to school, so I could ask *Fedra Gorment* more questions about city life. With Pako around, I couldn't risk associating myself with the headmaster's son..

Luckily, I did not have to wait long before I had the chance to ask *Fedra Government* more questions. Pako's mother took ill and he had to stay at home and run errands for her. I was elated when he said I should inform the teacher that he, Pako, was the one down with malaria. I couldn't wait for our first recess, which was around 10.30am. I was so carried away formulating questions to ask *Fedra Gorment* that when the teacher called my name from his big blue register, I did not hear him to respond “Present sah!”

As the recess bell went off from the headmaster's verandah, I cornered *Fedra Gorment* by the golden-bell flower. I wasted no time in asking him questions.

“Ajebi, how can I enter Federal Government College in the city?” I asked.

“You Deboy, enter Federal Government College? What has this world become? How can you go to school in the city when you still eat with your bare fingers?” He bared his pinkish gum and yellowish teeth in laughter and started to walk away.

I was not angry. I ran after him. He could laugh all he wanted: he who must shit in the night does not mind the darkness, I reminded myself.

“I know how to use fork and spoon - I just prefer to use my fingers,” I said.

“Na lie!” My lying was obvious to him, “Do you know how to eat *Rbelle* with fork and spoon? Have you ever tasted fried egg and beans since you were born?” He gave me a look that made me feel like a cockroach that had wandered into his plate of fried eggs.

“What is *Rbelle*?” I gave up my lie.

“You see what I mean...*Rbelle* means rice and beans. You are a proper villager Deboy, true *true*!”

I ignored his insult one more time as he squinted and black dots saturated his face. I knew he would never say such things in front of Pako. Pako would re-arrange his face with blows, damning the consequences.

“I will learn. My mother has forks and spoons we use every Christmas. I will take one egg from my grandmother’s chicken and cook it to learn,” I was almost pleading.

“Ok, first thing first. You need to fill an enrollment form for the West Africa *Common Entrance* exam and choose any Federal Government College you like. If you pass the common entrance, which I doubt you will, you will go through oral interview conducted in English. Finish!” He explained with an impatient flourish.

“But Annunciation Catholic College doesn’t take you through all that long process,” I told him about a college not too far from our village.

“That is why it is not called Federal Government College!” He looked at me, angry.

He was not happy at my stupid observation, which seemed to cast a doubt on his assertions.

He walked away from me as if I had a contagious disease. That night I did not have my recurrent dream of attending any Federal Government College or drinking a bottle of Coke all by myself. As my father would say, a poor man should tread with care where rich men dance.

After midterm I asked Pako what city college he would like to attend when we finished Primary Six. His look seemed to be saying, “I told you to stay away from that liar.”

“I am not going to any *yeye* city school; I want to be a soldier. I would whip people on the road and shoot that dirty man that killed my father,” Pako said and twisted his mouth.

We’d heard that Nigerian soldiers whip people at bus stops and the post office in towns and big cities. We heard they had lots of power, and nobody talked to soldiers anyhow. Our headmaster said they are the ones ruling the country.

“I don’t like soldiers,” I said, “and I want to go to a big city and see electricity instead of kerosene lanterns. I want to watch television, and I want to drink tea in the morning before I go to class. I want to see city girls that wear trousers like the ones *Fedra Gorment* talked about.” I reeled out my reasons as if Pako was a benefactor who would grant my wish.

“I told you to stay away from that stupid boy; you are not the same as *Fedra Gorment*. His father is a headmaster and your father is a village farmer. Do you see any resemblance in that?” The old Pako would have slapped me senseless, but instead he walked to a flowering shrub, plucked a yellow golden-bell flower and sucked the nectar dry.

That evening after supper a full moon emerged from behind tall trees and Pako came to collect me for moonlight play. It was my first time of venturing beyond the confines of my grandfather’s big compound in the night. I tied one of my mother’s old wrapper around my neck and knotted it at the nape of my neck. I tightened the rope of my knickers so it wouldn’t fall off my waist while running. My grandmother was adjusting herself in a chair when I ran past her.

When we got to the center of the village an unknown night life welcomed me. Different songs came from all angles – songs for everything - praising gods, the moon, thunder and the sun. Girls whom the English language tied their tongues

during school (we were not allowed to speak our native language in school) sang like birds. It was obvious that Pako was used to the night activities. He knew where to position us, amidst a group with more girls than boys. Before we submerged ourselves in the songs and games, Pako pulled me aside and whispered,

“Look, when it is time to run don’t be running like a foolish man chasing wild animals. This is a different kind of race with a purpose. When everybody is running. Keep your eyes open and follow me wherever I go or hide, you hear me?”

I was getting nervous from too much excitement. My nights were usually spent at my grandmother’s feet listening to old and scary folktales of two-headed spirits and the wily tortoise, of talking spiders and how the moon once lived on earth before a pregnant woman angered it and it receded into the sky.

We were divided into four groups, each for a game of hide and seek. Pako came close and touched me, since I could not see his eyes in the dim night; he whispered “Follow me when I run.” I nodded.

We waited for the leader’s signal for us to run, hide and seek.

*“Ogbeh tu tu be ne,  
onu ki kere ubha mu oooo!”*

The leader’s voice echoed into the vast night, sending feet running to every direction - to dark alleys and dilapidated buildings, gardens and caves.

Pako grabbed me and we took off after two girls. Like a shepherd and his flocks, he herded us towards the dark corner behind our school. We found ourselves shaded by the large guava tree behind Primary Six. All four of us stopped running and plastered ourselves to the tree, Pako’s arms holding us until the other boys flew past without noticing us. As soon as they were far away, Pako spoke in a hushed voice.

“Deboy are you not feeling cold - this place is cold.”

”No. I am not feeling cold,” I replied timidly.

The October night was hot and humid and I was sweating from running and anxiety. I couldn’t understand Pako’s sudden cold.

“You will soon be feeling cold,” he told me turning to one of the girls, “Josephine let Deboy cover you with his wrapper and I will cover your friend with my wrapper.”

Nobody ever argued with Pako, the two girls adjusted.

I eventually understood Pako’s plot and timidly allowed Josephine to wiggle herself into my wrapper. In the stillness of the night, apart from grasshoppers and crickets, I could hear the pounding of a heart as my mother’s wrapper enclosed Josephine and me. She was taller and bigger than me. Her breast had started to push through her blouse, and they looked like she had mangoes in her chest. I did not know if it was my heart or hers that was beating an ancient drum under my wrapper. A soft musky scent wafted from Josephine’s face. Was she already rubbing *Sensorobia* perfume or is it Nku Cream? I wondered in the dark. A lingering sweat snaked down the length of my spine, lodging at my tailbone. Josephine embraced me fully and encircled me in her softness. I struggled for balance as my body began to grow roots. I felt light headed when her fingers reached my neck, like the day Pako’s knuckles rapped painful music on my head, except this was strangely pleasant. The moon above wove in and out of clouds. The entire Uwessian village stood still. Josephine and I became a single shadow, two in one.

Pako had also disappeared further into the night with Josephine's friend to form their own shadow. I was wondering what Pako was doing with Josephine's friend when an unexpected rain separated Josephine and I and drove us to our sleeping abode. But after that night, I never bothered Pako about city girls. The trees that grew mangoes and pears in the city were also grown in the village; you just had to know where to look. My dream of attending the Federal Government College receded like a dying moon.

Towards the end of Primary Six many things started happening at too fast a pace. Our headmaster excitedly said that soldiers were no longer ruling the country. He also said, the Unity Party of Nigeria won the governorship election in our state. Free grammar schools and secondary schools started sprouting overnight like mushrooms on rotten wood. We even heard that there would be a university at a small town, not too far away from Uwessan. Pako had agreed to go to one of the new grammar schools. I was happy about these new developments.

I no longer participated in school labor or had to bring handwork because I was made the general monitor of the entire Uwessan Primary School by a new headmaster. King Pharaoh was transferred to another primary school and he left with his son, *Fedra Gorment*. My duties as the school monitor were to make sure the black boards were blackened with charcoals and handle the ringing of the school bell. I also supervised girls who washed the new headmaster's Honda Roadmaster motorcycle.

One Saturday my father went to Uromi market and came back with a white Raleigh bicycle with a strange golden animal painted on its side. He bought the shiniest and the most elegant bicycle I had ever seen. All the bicycles in my village were black, rusty and old. The news soon spread like palm oil on fingers. "Have you heard? Papa Deboy has bought a bicycle. I have never seen that kind of bicycle before o!" Women coming from the market and men going to the farm talked about it. I did not eat my meal of *eba* and egusi soup that day. Excitement filled me up. I walked round the bicycle, which was parked in the middle of my grandfather's parlor, in-between long benches. I made sure none of the dusty children that hovered around touched the bicycle with their dirty hands. The bicycle had a small headlight and a gear. The seat was a cushion, not like the hard worn leather on old bicycles. Even the stand of the bicycle was white; the tires were light yellow, the color of early morning sun.

When my father wheeled it out to show his friends, the *ken ken ken ken* sound coming from somewhere inside the bicycle was music to my ears. That was why villagers called the bicycle "*Kenken*". The spokes sparkled and reflected like new needles.

"I bought it at Obi's store, you know the Igbo man that sells cutlass and hoes along Mission Road at Uromi market," my father explained to Isumati and a man named Manager, our neighbors.

I could not wait to tell Pako, though I was sure he must have heard already. News like the buying of a white bicycle traveled very fast in Uwessan. He would have to teach me how to ride monkey style in the new bicycle. If any boy knew how to ride a bicycle it would be Pako.

Sure enough, he'd heard the news as I told him. Pako also knew all the stages involved in learning how to ride a bicycle.

"You will teach me how to ride *pole*!" .

"You don't start climbing a tree from the top, a beginner like you can not ride pole. Do you want to destroy your testicles?" he was pumping out his words.

"You start by learning how to ride *monkey*, when your legs are long enough you move to *pole*, when your legs are long enough again before you can ride *seat*."

The only thing Pako and I were waiting for was the opportunity to take the bicycle out without incurring the wrath of my father. A bicycle, especially a white one, was not a plaything for small boys. Once bicycles were only owned by white missionaries.

One Friday afternoon, we were let out of school early because our teachers and headmaster had a meeting at the headquarters. On my way home from school, I was praying that my father would forget to lock the bicycle. When I got home checked to see if my father locked the bicycle. I was able to hold the handle bar and turn it right and left and move it around. Ignoring the hunger that was in my stomach, I wheeled the bicycle away from where it was parked. I let it out gently, cursing the *ken ken ken ken* sound, and praying it wouldn't wake my grandfather who was sleeping in his red-cushion chair. I went straight to Pako's house. I called him and he came out munching a mouthful of roasted yam. He broke into a smile, revealing bits of black and white roasted yam in his mouth. He shoved the remaining piece of yam into his mouth, wiped his hands in his torn school uniform and ran towards me.

"Let's look for a smooth area. This place is not good, you will fall too much."

We went to a lonely path and Pako held the bicycle in the carrier behind and showed me how to loop myself around the bicycle, like a monkey. My feet were placed on the pedals, which were so slippery. I gripped the seat with my armpit, and used the same hand to grab the pole in the middle of the bicycle. My left hand was on the left handle bar, and Pako said it was also for holding the brake. He started pushing me little by little and we zigzagged, almost tumbling over.

"Please Pako, I can fall down, but make sure the bicycle doesn't fall...please," I pleaded.

I was more concerned with the bicycle's safety than mine. Sweat poured from my body. I was able to ride short distances before my feet slid out of the pedal, and Pako had a good grip. We soon found ourselves in the hill that led to the village river. Pako positioned me on the bicycle, so I could perfect the monkey style on my first day of trying. I was getting it, but I was now tired. I took off my blue checkered uniform shirt, wiped my face with it and threw it over my shoulder.

"Pako, you ride, too, I'll watch you," I offered.

"No, this is your father's bicycle. You should keep riding, I'll ride some other time," he refused.

"Pako, I mean it. I'm tired, and it's not everyday that my father will forget to lock it."

I uncoiled myself from the heavy metal, released the stand and waited for Pako to take over. He was still reluctant to take the bicycle. I saw flash of uncertainty in his eyes, and I understood that Pako knew the theory of bicycle riding, but had

never tried riding one. His father had never owned a bicycle, so where would he have found one to ride? But Pako was a smart boy on the street; he positioned himself to ride my father's bicycle.

He could pedal without slipping off like me, but he could not steady the handlebars at the same time. First he started peddling well, but he soon lost control of the bicycle. I was excited watching him ride monkeystyle down the hill, and I forgot to help steady the bicycle. As he sailed down the hill, he was screaming, "Deboooyyy hold the carrier ooooo!" Before I could catch him it was already too late.

Until that day, Pako had always avoided that path where the villagers had found his father foaming from the mouth. But when my father's bicycle took a life of its own and started going to the river, for the first time since I knew Pako, he lost control. He slid into the river, and I heard the splashing of water. He disappeared inside the rocky river.

I looked in the river below; the bicycle had fallen on top of Pako. Two yellow tires and spokes spun upside down. The river threw Pako up, once, twice. I was counting. The village river where the sacred python resided did not kill trespassers at once; it would wait to see if any villager would rescue its victim. Pako surfaced for the third time, and I started shouting for help and saying the rosary *Tue Maria gracia von*, because our catechist had told us to say this prayer whenever we were in danger.

Between saying the rosary and shouting for help, the river threw Pako up for the seventh time. Nobody came to his rescue, and I did not know how to swim. I watched as his hand slid off the bicycle's handle bar and he was swallowed by the red water.

I stopped saying the rosary.

Weighed down by sorrow after Pako's death, I refused my mother's food and could only mutter *It is my fault, it is my fault*, over and over again.

"Hush," my mother said, "you did not kill anyone, the curse that killed Pako's father never left that house. Don't ever let me hear you blame yourself again." My mother's stern warning only made me hurt inside.

I heard the catechist's voice reciting the last stanza of the novenas, which we had started nine days ago when the river took Pako. The catechist was supplicating to foreign saints for peace and comfort. I did not look up from where I had buried my face. I was listening to hear Pako's shrill voice calling me for moonlight plays, which we had perfected with Josephine and her friend. Or to plan what kind of adventure we would carry out when we got to grammar school.

The memorized prayers were finished, and I had said none of them. I looked up, at Pako's mother and our eyes met. Then louder than any prayer I'd ever said to avoid the catechist's punishment, a cry escaped from my mouth.

Even now, years later, when I remember Pako like this, I feel the fierce sun of my village and the bitter taste of the sand I packed in my mouth in his compound.

## WHO WILL BURY THE DEAD

I'd just lowered the yellowish wick of my kerosene lantern to go to bed when the sky opened. I knew it was going to be a long night of restlessness. My father was about settling to his mud bed too, when we heard the rain hitting our rooftop like stones. The zinc roof over our head was rusty with tiny holes. In no time I scurried into the only dry corner of the leaking bedroom in my grandfather's big compound. My father did not seem to mind; he only shifted a bit here and there, but still laying down.

Soot, the color of chewed tobacco, started dropping on the mud floor and on my body. I wiped some of the sogginess off my exposed leg, leaving dark smudges on my skin like feces. I could not wait for the day my father would finally finish his cement brick house behind my grandfather's mud house, so I could be saved from getting wet inside the old house I was born each time it rained.

The heavy downpour silenced the owl that had been hooting since early evening.

My grandfather's rubber trees were heard falling as if a lunatic was lumbering them with a new *usala* chainsaw. Thunderous wind howled and in quick violent succession lightening brightened our semi-darkroom through the cracks in the door and window. I knew in the morning some neighbor's weak and rusty corrugated roof would be hanging atop trees.

The entire village was beaten to a stilly quietness which I have never before experienced.

"A great man has departed. This is not an ordinary rain," my father declared into the grisly night, as he too could not sleep.

"Aba, how can you tell?" I asked.

My father was now sitting on the edge of the mud bed trying to resuscitate a dying fire that was supposed to warm the room.

"Can't you hear the thunder that is full of anger? It has come to escort someone great to the ancestors and people should beware," he replied.

I concurred. My father knew things like that. All the traditional signs and wonders were on his fingertips. Such myths, like the rain coming to escort the dead to the land of the spirit, were passed down from generation to generation by word of mouth. From father to son, mother to daughter.

As the rain was subsided a little bit, I heard my mother opened her door, taking out the big earthen pot we used for drinking water. Whenever it rained women quickly gather drinking water in the rain because the river was far away and hard to get to. Her sudden scream of *Uwesan o o* jolted me and my father up from our contemplations. My mother had a way of screaming the name of my village, *Uwesan*, in the face of danger, as if conjuring the name would save her life. I heard her

thanking the gods for not making her fall in the slippery terrace, while trying to place the water pot in *ukpeda*, a proper corner outside her hut.

“Get inside woman, this is no time to play around, have you taken leave of your senses?” My father screamed out to her, almost in terror.

My father’s stern voice made my mother knew it was no time for a woman to be messing around in this kind of night rain. I heard her cursing the local government for not installing public taps in my village or fixing the broken ones installed in the sixties. Quickly she shut the door and latched the hinges. We had enough drinking water, and she would go to the distant Afuda River to wash our clothes if need be. No need killing oneself in the precarious rain.

After my mother entered her room, I thought about my father’s explanation of the thunderous rain and wondered who the dead could be among the village old men I greeted on my way to and from St. Joseph Catholic College. My mind ran the entire village streets scouting for the dead. Could it be Tenga the old man with matted white beards, who dragged a swollen leg of elephantiasis? The old man always had snuff bottles and cans playing orchestra in his puffed-up pockets. Or was it Oyamedan who never failed to show up at dinnertime in my grandfather’s house? Tenga was the likely one; he was always coughing and spitting dark phlegmatic liquids like the residue of a piglet’s afterbirth. No, it couldn’t be either of the two - they were not great enough to cause a great rain to fall and uproot trees and houses. They were ordinary farmers with annual meager harvest, barely enough to feed their kwashiorkor children. They do not even command respect from their wives, not to talk of our village gods honoring their departure with earth-shaking thunderstorm. My search for whom to award the night of thunderous rain lulled me into a restless sleep. I dreamt of angry looking soldiers flooding villagers and making everyone frog jump. We were holding our ears, both young and old and we were not told our transgression.

It was the following morning that Ukordion, the official village messenger came to our house to tell my grandfather that Enogun, the blacksmith and priest of Ogun, had joined the ancestors. My grandfather had to be the first to know as the *odionwele*, the head of Uwesan village elders. It was my grandfather who appointed Ukordion as the village’s chief messenger. Ukordion was a man nature did not bless with size; he was the height of an eight year-old boy. His owl-like oval face made him look like a neckless gourd. He did not have enough lips to cover his teeth or maybe his teeth were too big to stay in his mouth. His front teeth protruded as if they were that of a bush rat. This made him look like he was perpetually laughing. Ukordion was a man who knew his job, and relished doing it. He was also the town crier; with ululating voice he announced new edicts and bylaws to the villagers after the elders had decided such matters.

That morning he had a smirk on his face as he delivered the news of Enogun’s passing to my grandfather. His morbid elation was because of his entitlement to the head of the goats and cows that would be killed during Enogun’s burial ceremony. Tradition required that every single head of any sacrificed animals belonged to him as the chief messenger. Except the head of a dog, this belonged to the next priest of Ogun.

As the news also circulated round the village, villagers were filled with excitement like the buzzing of a beehive set on fire. Though some of the villagers lost

their thatch and zinc roofs to the previous night's thunderstorm, they cared less. Everybody was in a festive mood. Enogun by my village standard was a wealthy man, not because he was the only blacksmith in the entire Uwesan village or because he was the revered priest of the fiercest god of the land but because his son was a "big man" in the city of Lagos. No one even mentioned the fact that he had five daughters married in other various cities and towns.

None of the villagers remarked that he was the blacksmith that made hoes and cutlasses for the entire farming village of Uwesan. Enogun's craft as a blacksmith was well known beyond my village, all the way to the Oba's palace in Benin City. When I was in primary school, I took an old rusty nail to him like every other kid on my street. As I entered his workshop, I met Isesele his apprentice, pumping huge bellows in the hot workshop. The orange coal fire was billowing with a smooth bluish flame. Inside the hot fire was an uncompleted hoe. I greeted him and watched as his old sinewy biceps danced flabbily. He replied my greeting without removing his eyes from the fire. Soon, Enogun retrieved the hot iron from the fire with his bare hand. With a huge mattock he beat the flat metal placed atop an anvil to a sharp farm tool. The sound of metal hitting metal could be heard miles away, as if calling the villagers to bring their hardware for Enogun to hammer. Sweating profusely, he inserted the hoe into its wooden handle. His old body glistened with ripples of black beads of sweat. He looked as if he oiled himself with Vaseline, and jumped into the murky Afuda River. His long limbs made village elders call him *Otanbhabor*, "the one with long hands". His legs were also very long; sitting in a low stool turned him into a giant bow in an archer's grip.

Enogun slotted the nail I gave him into the beautifully burning ember. I watched his face go cadmium red as the fire reflected on his sweating face, his eyes became biddy and brownish from the excessive heat. He had a face the length of a baby pumpkin, lined with folds of aging wrinkled skin. His eyelashes were gray; he was an old man who kept working because he loved his profession, not because he needed the money. Isesele the apprentice increased the pumping of the bellow with a rhythmic *fukufuku...du-omonanor...fukufuku...du-omonanor!* The air from the pump titivated the flame and turned the nail into a bright red metal, ready to be shaped into a functional tool.

He removed the bright red nail and pounded on it, until the nail flattened to a knife. He threw it into a bucket of dirty water; a cobra hissing sound of hot object cooling in water resonated. The ensuing smoke enveloped the tiny thatch workshop. It cooled in no time, and he dipped his long coal-stained right hand and retrieved my new knife. Handing it to me he said, "Greet your grandfather for me, and tell your father his hoe is ready."

I couldn't wait to get home that day to test my new penknife on a big avocado or orange. It was my first tool as a young boy.

Enogun became the high priest of the god of iron, Ogun because he worked with irons. Who else would understand the fierce god of iron if not Enogun? He was responsible for sacrificing dogs at the Ogun shrine. At the corner of his living hut was the mud shrine, which comprised of all kinds of metallic objects. These ranged from old hoe-heads, cutlasses without wooden handles, pinches, pliers, knives and double gongs full of dry dog blood. We were told that Ogun, the god of iron did not drink

ordinary blood, only the hot blood of dogs. When Ogun was angry worshippers sacrificed dogs to him, through Enogun the priest. The neck of the dog would be slaughtered in one fell swoop with a sharp machete. Blood gushing out from the severed throat of the dog would be directed towards the irons in the shrine, until the entire dog's blood is drained before the lifeless animal would be dropped on the ground by the shrine. The head of the dog and its perplexed eyes would also be left by the shrine overnight. By morning the headless dog and its head would disappear, Ogun had claimed its sacrifice.

None of these civil duties mattered when Enogun died. Villagers were only interested in the burial ceremony that would be made grand by his rich son from Lagos.

Okuta Enogun was among the few men that went to university in my village. He went to the big one at Ibadan, where we were told white men taught him all he knew. We were told he even went to London as a student to learn more things about the ways of the white men that ruled the country then. He was the richest son my village had in Lagos; the others were mere messengers or day laborers. You could hear village men saying that Okuta was our ears and eyes in the city. The gods smiled on the son of Enogun, they would say.

One Christmas, he brought two new Peugeot 505 cars. This was a new brand of Peugeot; we were used to the very old Peugeot 404 owned by Mr. Roman the cocoa trader in the next village. Some old men that rode in the car said it had harmattan inside, referring to the air-condition in the new car. My friends, Kisofa and Sunday, thought he was going to leave one for his father, but he went back to Lagos with both cars. We heard him saying the roads in my village were too bad for such new cars, that he would talk to some of his friends in government to fix the roads. But that was before General Muhammadu Buhari and Brigadier Tunde Idiagbon's coup that removed his politician friends from power and killed some of them.

Potholes continued to take over our roads, even good pickups and *bolekeja* lorries that transport garri and cocoa traders to and from Uromi market struggled when they got to muddy potholes. The military government had long abandoned the big cities, not to talk of villages like mine. Yet, the villagers kept saying that Okuta would talk to the big men in government in Lagos to fix the bad roads for us because they did not know that power had changed hands.

Okuta plastered and repainted his father's old mud house, making it look like a brick house. He replaced the rusty and brownish leaking zinc roof. During festivals Okuta's wife, Theresa, would buy new lace material and George wrappers for her mother-in-law from Liverpool England. So Enogun and Adiza his wife were rich above the average Uwesan villager, except my grandfather that had large cocoa farm and rubber plantations that stretched to the end of the world. Then again, cocoa buyers and rubber merchants no longer frequent my village because of poor access roads.

The biggest mouth-opening magic Okuta performed for his father was planting electricity in his father's house. He brought a blue Yamaha generator and long fluorescent bulbs, which he positioned in front and back of his father's house. These were the only lights at night in my village apart from moonlight and kerosene or hurricane lanterns. At night Enogun's house became the magnet that attracted the

villagers like bees to nectar. Men, women, children and insects flocked there to see the light. His black and white Grundig TV that the villagers referred to as *ekpeti omen*, box of noise was a major attraction. Though the transmitted images from the black and white TV were grainy, there was a multitude of village boys and girls, men and women watching whatever program Nigeria Television Authority had to offer. The old men and women could not really understand what was been broadcasted, if it was not traditional dance. When the 9pm news in English came on, they'd loose interest and grumble, saying "we don't understand the white man's language." The only adult that understood the news was Emos the owner of Property Provisions Store. Me, and my grammar school friends understood the news too, but small boys were not allowed to interpret the "white man's language" when Emos was around. Emos never failed to boast of attending colonial Government College. "I would have gone to London with Okuta if not for the farm work forced on me by my useless father," he would say with a screwed up sad face.

By mid morning when the news of Enogun's death had completely around the neighboring villages, villagers knew it was festival time. Free food for seven days and seven nights was expected. Instead of the locally brewed *ogogoro* gin, that made grown men pee on themselves, Okuta would bring Star and Guinness lager beer from Lagos. Instead of the smelly SM and Gold Leaf cigarettes manufactured by Nigerian Tobacco Company, he would bring the scented Rothmans of Pall Mall from London or Marlboro and Camel from America.

Tenga the-white-bearded man was particularly happy because he relished White Horse whisky. Emos was bubbling because partygoers would buy extra sweets and candies from his store and children would buy *Goodie-Goodie* candy and colorful balloons. If he was lucky and Okuta ran out of drinks, he could finally sell the Guinness stout bottles, which had gathered red dust over the years like unclaimed goods in the wharf. His store is about to become the commercial nerve center of the entire village. I was elated because I would get to see new cars with music inside. Most importantly, I would get to see Christiana, Okuta's daughter, a student of Queens College in Lagos. I would exchange address with her and hope she wrote from me Lagos. I did not tell Kisofa or Sunday because they would laugh and say that a city girl had no business with a village boy like me.

Uwessan women started bringing egusi, *ugu* leaves, *ogbonor* seeds, cray fish and dry bonga fish for Adiza the new widow. Some women had already started cooking and the aroma of cooked egusi soup and pounded yam wafted through the air and lodged in our noses. Men kept taking bundles of big yams to late Enogun's compound. In my village, death drove away stinginess and brought people together. The villagers fed themselves better when a man died than when he was alive. His son from Lagos will repay us, the donors kept saying. Amala the taxi-driver took a full gallon of scarce black-market petrol to Enogun's house for the generator to work. There had been scarcity of petrol all over the country as usual, and the generator in Enogun's house had not worked since the last time Okuta brought jerry cans of petrol from Lagos. Amala concluded that Okuta would bring even more this time and replenish his emptied stock.

All Uwessan elders were completed in Enogun's house at about 11am. By then the sun had emerged from the cocoon of a clouded sky as if it was a newly

hatched chick. The fourteen elders that made up the highest council in the village welcomed the relief of the upholstered chairs in Enogun's parlor. Okuta brought the big "full cover" chairs from Lagos one Christmas ago.

The meeting was to decide whom to send to Lagos to break the news of Enogun death to his son. While the meeting was going on inside the house, young adults sat on long benches under the kola nut tree in front of Enogun's house. Some sat on old cement blocks, which Okuta had bought to build a new kitchen extension for his mother. Others sat in the bamboo bench in Enogun's workshop, while another set of villagers sat under the big pear tree on the side of the house, close to the dry and sad shrine of Ogun. I sat close to loud mouthed villagers, where I could gossip about the upcoming festivity.

"Which kind work Okuta dey do sef?" Awilo the carpenter asked.

"Na government contractor for Lagos," answered Emos the storeowner.

"He is a big politician," declared Amala the taxi driver.

Emos shot Amala a bad look, as if telling him to shut up because he did not know what he was talking about.

Only Emos could answer most questions, he had been Okuta's friend from childhood. Moreover Emos read newspapers like Daily Times and Observer, and knew what was going on in far cities. Though Emos was older than Okuta, he ran errands for Okuta like a small boy whenever he visited the village. He paid Emos with long sleeved, *terelin* trousers and oversized shoes. Rumor had it that Okuta helped Emos in opening his Property Provisions Store, to enable him feed his two wives and numerous children. But business is always slow in the village; the only provisions villagers bought were cigarettes and OMO detergent soap, and sometimes bread when there is flour in the country to produce bread. And the rest stuff like Queen of the Coast sardine, Blue Band margarine, Bournvita and Tate or St. Louis sugar gathered dust for months, way past their expiration date before villagers bought and ate them.

"Emos, you think say brother Okuta go come with many big men from Lagos, like last Christmas?" Queried Takwa the imbecile, an ashy man with a hawk-like face.

"So you can get drunk and shit on your trousers like you did last Christmas?" Emos asked him with a voice full of sarcasm.

Last Christmas when Okuta came to the village with many of his rich friends and numerous cartons of beer, Takwa got so drunk that he urinated allover himself and started playing with his penis in front of married women. The elders fined him one goat and twenty naira and a plate of white kolanut.

"Who do you think they will send to Lagos to tell Okuta?" Amala the taxi-driver wanted to know.

Everyone knew the answer to that, even Amala knew. But there was always a little rivalry between him and Emos because he too was half educated, read old newspaper sometimes and knew Okuta when they were kids. No one answered him, because we all knew it was only Emos that knew how to get to Okuta's house in Lagos. Amala could not go beyond Benin City with his coughing old Datsun Laurel taxi. I knew Amala secretly wished he were the one that would be sent to Lagos. But

Emos' friendship with Okuta had already skyrocketed when Enogun died. All questions were directed at him.

The elders' meeting was finally over, and Emos hovered around like a vulture waiting for disemboweled cow entrails. Okedion, a chiseled face of a mask carved out of unoko wood, approached Emos. He adjusted his half-torn dashiki to cover the straying sweat-stained singlet. He brought out a snuffbox, tapped it with his right thumb and pried open the lid with stained crooked fingernails. With the precision of a scientist in a lab, he tilted the snuffbox and did a mental measurement before dispensing some snuff on his palm. He pinched half of it and piled the fine brown tobacco into a flared nostril, the left one first and then the right one. His eyes went teary red as he pulled out a white-turned-brown handkerchief from his pocket and dusted his nose. All these while, Emos was a waxed object, transfixed and waiting patiently for Okedion's theatrics of snuff-taking to be over with.

"*Vae Emosi*, come here, the elders want you to go to Lagos, to tell Okuta his father don't go to join our ancestors," Okedion was weaving back and forth, dancing to the whirlwind of intoxication.

He was mixing broken English with Uwessan vernacular. Obviously, *ogogoro* gin was controlling Okedion's balance, and he had little or no say over his body movement.

"Tell him the elders want him to come immediately *immediately*. You *yaself* know he is the first son", he rested his hand on a nearby wall to steady his stand, "He must come at once without delay, you hear me? Tell him if he no come quickly *quickly* elders will bury his father. You *yaself* know say we can not let Enogun be late because our ancestors are waiting for him."

Emos was nodding his head profusely as if it had a spring inside his neck.

"You hear wetin I talk so?" Okedion queried Emos for the tenth time.

"*Mehonmin* - I hear you sir."

Okedion dipped his right hand in the side pocket that was half-torn and brought out crumpled naira notes and handed them to Emos.

"*Ekakhornin* - how much is that?"

Emos spat on his index finger, rubbed it against his thumb to get a good grip and counted the money quickly.

"Three hundred naira *sah*," Emos confirmed.

Three hundred naira would take him to Lagos but will not be enough for the return trip. He needed no return fare because he would ride back with Okuta or one of his drivers in an air-conditioned Peugeot 505. Emos was greatly envied by other villagers, especially Amala the taxi driver.

"Very good. Safe journey and go well," Okedion concluded and walked to a private corner like a masquerade on stilts. While whistling a familiar festival tune, he passed water on the dry wall behind Enogun's house.

Emos knew the urgency of this message. He ran to his house which was across Enogun's, as fast as he could. He changed from one tattered trouser to a fairly better one. He held the trouser with a rope in place of belt and folded the bottom. He had on an oversized checkered long-sleeve shirt, whose hands he rolled to his elbow. He did not pack any bag; what he wore were enough for the overnight journey. Okuta might even give him new clothes; after all it was Okuta who gave him the ones he

was wearing to Lagos now, I thought. He had to walk to the next village to catch a taxi or motorcycle to Uromi where he would find a taxi to Lagos. Amala the taxi driver would rather die than give him a ride.

When Emos disappeared through a narrow path, Okedion who had been weaving back and forth outside in the verandah, climbed the final stairs to join the rest of the elders. They were starting on the third jerry can of ogogoro. The hot local brew would keep their body warm till the cold beverages from Lagos arrived. As the alcohol began to spread in old bloods, aging mouths began to thaw into old rhythms. Songs were heard from Enogun's parlor. Someone had gotten a big gong and samba from Abella's house. Abella was the chairman of the local *Asono* dance group. He too would benefit from Enogun's death; his group would certainly perform on wake keeping night, along side with musicians from Lagos.

Some villagers believed because Okuta lived in Lagos, the musician would be King Sunny Ade; others argued that it would be the new juju music sensation Shina Peters. While another section assumed it would be Ohehen Osakpawan, the best musician in the entire Benin kingdom. These musicians cost plenty of money. But money to Okuta was like water to fish, abundant. We even heard his regard for the Nigerian naira was very minimal, which is why he would pay and spray the musicians with the almighty American dollar as was the norm in Lagos parties. Big men in Lagos no longer spend the local currency; it was either the American dollar or the British Pound Sterling. Emos once said one dollar was equivalent to one hundred and thirty naira. The villagers were amazed and completely lost in calculating how many years of farming and saving would afford them ten dollars.

"Where does he get dollars from? Has Okuta been to America before?" Kisofa wondered out loud.

"Haba! He can always buy dollars in the streets of Lagos!" Someone answered.

Enogun could not have chosen a better day to go meet the ancestors. He died on a Friday night and there was no school the following day, which was a Saturday. There was no farm either; this gave me the opportunity to keep vigil with Kisofa, Sunday and other village youths in waiting for the feast to kick off fully. Though we ate rice cooked by the village women, it was not satisfactory enough until the first born of Enogun arrived. Night met us at his compound.

The *tutu tutu tutu* sound of the generator and the smoke coming from it did not bother any of us.

The fluorescent lamps outside had started attracting insects never before seen. Moths, pale colored butterflies, fire flies, green-and-yellow grasshoppers, crickets, termites and children gathered to enjoy the bright light. Children caught and released harmless insects. Boys chatted with potential girlfriends, and shy ones recoiled from boys with lurid overture. Women started pounding on large mortars with very long pestles, while others broke melons and fermented cassava for *fufu* in big aluminum buckets and earthen pots. Some of the women were tipsy from the small tumbler of ogogoro gin they'd mixed with Coke or Fanta.

Some women washed Adiza's dirty clothes, while others helped move plates around and re-arranged cluttered earthen pots and buckets. Adiza would not wear

ordinary black cotton shirt as mourning clothes; she would wear black lace, some women coming down from the street gossiped. The nobles don't mourn like the peasants, another woman said.

Weaker insects started dying from too much excitement and the night turned deep dark purple beyond the lighting of the fluorescent bulbs. I decided to go home and save some energy for the next day's activities. I bade Kisofa and Sunday goodnight.

I took a narrower and shorter path towards my house and left behind the grayness of a distant light. Walking further into the unlighted path, my shadow submerged into the night and became one huge darkness. The faraway sound of songs and gong developed into one voice. I could only hear the *goen...goen...goen* of the big gong, without making sense out of the words in the accompanying songs.

Fear started creeping into my heart in the lonely, dark path. I hurried home, the flip-flop sound of my plastic slippers frightened large bats out of Obadan tree. The sudden flutter scared me and broke me into a small run. In my front ghostly images began to play kaleidoscopic games with my senses. Fireflies flickered momentarily like twinkling stars and meteorically disappear. My grandfather's house was the last on the northern side of Uwessan village, there were no houses after ours; the only dark silhouette behind our house at night were shadows of grandfather's rubber trees, cocoa plantation and one obeche tree which had become the home of weaver birds in day time and hooting owls at night.

I heard two owls calling each other and I quickened my footsteps. The hooting of owl was a bad omen in the village. And two together while there was a celebration in the air, gave me eerie feeling as if a wet snail was crawling on back.

When I was about six years old, the hooting of the owls was so overbearing, that my grandfather had to come out with his dane gun and shot one down, which silenced them for a while. Later that month our entire cocoa plantation was infested by black-pod disease. He never shot any owl thereafter. No matter how strong a man's *juju* is, he could never defeat the things of the night, he concluded.

By the time I was at our front door, the distant sound of the gong was wavy in a hypnotic lull. The traveling of it's sound relied on the strength of the light night wind. The sound eventually blended with a million voices of twilight insects, broken every now and then by the pair of owls' hooting. I rushed into the house and shut the door. The deep throated snore of my grandfather filled the corridor that led to my sleeping quarters. He was too old to buy into the fanfare of Okuta's wealth or Enogun's death. He had sent my father to represent him and my mother was among the women commiserating with Adiza

Emos was supposed to arrive from Lagos on Sunday. And that night was when Enogun would be laid to rest. And there was going to be celebratory gunshots. The fourteen gun salute would mark the final farewell to Enogun, a great man, a great blacksmith and the chief priest of Ogun. Nobody had said anything about who would be the next Ogun priest, because we did not think Okuta would dirty himself with such a village affair. Deep down in me, I knew Fr. Kelly, our parish's Irish priest would be elated to see the final end of Ogun worshipping in my village.

On Sunday morning after I came back from mass, the festive ambiance that enveloped my village could only be compared to that of *Ihulan*, new yam festival. There was a gentle hazy smoke, which came from nowhere in particular. Men became more tolerant with their wives and children. Tales and folktales were told and retold with new embellishment. Men dug deeper into their pocket not for snuffbox or kola nuts, but for extra money to buy drinks.

Everybody was waiting for Okuta's arrival. Abella had contacted members of his dance group and told them to cancel all traveling plans for the next seven days. It was going to be their biggest outing for the big men coming from Lagos, naira would rain and dollars would flow. Even the sons and daughters of the village who lived in not so far away cities like Benin City, Ibadan, Sapele and Warri were already arriving dressed in long colorful adire. As the saying went, news of death travel faster than news of birth. Visitors came to show compassion and celebrate with Okuta the successful son of Enogun. Other men from neighboring villages started pouring in like mini-tributaries floating into a sea. Takwa was already drunk with giddiness. Awilo the carpenter and village comedian had people doubled up with laughter under the kolanut trees. Children played and got dusty in red sand, turning them to clay effigy.

Farmers only went briefly to the farm to check traps and see if they caught bush meat to be used in cooking at Enogun's burial ceremony. More women from neighboring villages brought soup ingredients to Adiza. Young girls added multicolored beads to their long braided hair; all in preparation for the arrival of Okuta and his Lagos friends. Enogun's dead body was covered with his *igbulu-ododo* in his inner room where he would eventually be buried.

Takwa was the first to sight Emos when he went to urinate near the bush path. He ran inside to break the news to the elders. Many thought he was getting over-intoxicated again. If Emos was back from Lagos, how come there were no cars blaring horns and revving engines? How come there were no ululating voices of women yodeling *Abaleh-na-abaleh o! Omaen teneghe! Onobhadaghe elo bale!*

"Takwa is it madness that is worrying you?" Okedion shouted and shooed Takwa away.

Emos came into everybody's full view. He was walking with one knee hitting the other, kicking dust in the process. He had a folded newspaper tucked under his armpit. His face had lost the pageantry and luster it went to Lagos with. The big trousers he was wearing seemed bigger as he held it in place with one hand. His shirt hung loose on his left shoulder making him look like a scarecrow. He looked pale and tired and very unkempt. His disheveled beard was not a sign of someone who had been to a rich man's house in Lagos. As he got closer, it was obvious he was holding *The Guardian* newspaper. This meant he actually got to Lagos, because only Lagosians bought *The Guardian* newspaper.

He trudged with steps full of reluctance as if he did not want to get to Enogun's compound. Did he walk the ten miles from the nearest town to Uwessian village? We wondered. Why did he look so tired and worn out? What was wrong? Did he not meet Okuta? Or has he changed his address? That couldn't be, Okuta

owned his house, and moreover people hardly moved in Lagos once they found a place to rest their head. My aunty once told my father that accommodation in Lagos was not a bone to be cracked with milk teeth. She had been using the same Ebute Meta address since I was born.

Emos went past the puzzled faces of Amala the taxi-driver, Awilo the carpenter, Takwa the drunk, and other waiting faces, straight to the elders who were still talking loudly amidst songs and drinking.

Speculations and rumors quickly filled the air like the smell of rotten egg, broken. Our excitement kicked into slow motion. We stretched our ears as we craved for the latest news from Lagos. As Emos entered Enogun's parlor, the songs and noise subsided. Praises and encomium took over. We knew you would come safely and peacefully, some of the elders chanted. They were too drunk to note that he did not come with Okuta or they thought Okuta greeting people. Through slightly opened windows we waited for his report. We could not hear Emos' voice which was so low. He was speaking with the voice of a farmer whose entire barn had been raided by thieves.

Suddenly there was a loud scream. It was the voice of Adiza, wailing. She ran out barely clothed and flung herself on the ground outside the compound, in full view of the waiting crowd. Women and men ran after her, trying to scoop her from where she was laying face down, weeping. We were shocked, but more puzzled about what had transpired inside Enogun's parlor. She could not be mourning her husband who had been dead for two days now. She did not cry the first day, why all of a sudden now? We wondered.

“ My Okuta o! My Okuta o!” Was all she kept saying, uncontrollably.

People wondered why she was calling Okuta's name instead of her dead husband's. More friends and elders that were not drunk gathered around her, begging her to enter the house back.

Emos came out and opened the newspaper he had folded under his armpit. In the front page was the picture of Okuta Enogun, the wealthy businessman who had been arrested and in military jail for sponsoring a failed coup in Dodan Barracks, Lagos. The foiled coup took place on Friday night, the same night Enogun died. No one heard about any coup in the village, singing elders had replaced the TV in Enogun's house. Was Friday night's thunderstorm for Enogun or Okuta his son, I thought bitterly.

Many other soldiers and Okuta were detained in an undisclosed location in Lagos; only the senior members of the junta were allowed to see them. Been the only civilian among the coup plotters, his wife and two children were also under house arrest. Emos kept reading the newspaper to no one in particular. The thought of stern soldiers in close proximity with young Christiana, Okuta's daughter that I was looking forward to exchanging address with made my body weak. All the villagers put their hands on their heads as if they were about to start frog jumping.

It began to drizzle and the sun receded higher into the cloud. Slowly, we started filing away from Enogun's compound with long faces and deep thoughts buried inside our mouths.

## OCTOBER RUSH

At the beginning of a new school year, old loves die prematurely. Like getting a new toothbrush, while the bristles of the old one are still firm, boys abandon old girlfriends for new matriculating students. We call it October rush, an old national campus tradition.

In October the rains recede to create perfect atmosphere for this juvenile philandering. The weather is lukewarm, butterflies perch on fallen mangos so briefly before fluttering off. Jaundice-colored guava leaves hold on temporarily to branches before falling. Immobile school buses and wrecked louvers gather dusty films while wild roosters mount and dismount helpless hens. Lazily, old boys roam roads in search of newness, for peacock-mannered female students. Like landmarks around libraries and bus stops and hostel gates, couples become statues in twos. October rush has begun.

Day two of the new school year, I arrive Emaudo campus of Midwest University for my final year. Old school buses are in endlessly run, breaking down many times before the day is over. The peeling green-white-green school bus creaks along the jagged main road that leads from town to campus. Through the broken windscreen of the bus, I look around to see if anything has changed during the long break. The campus remains the same, fresh grasses have grown in front of the Admin Building. Nothing else has changed in this campus in the midst of thick woods, deep in Emaudo forest. The hilly woodland is perfect for nurturing vicious secret cults known as “Confra”.

As the bus come to a jerky stop at the noisy bus stop, I heave my huge bag on my head, its wheels are too small to roll on the sandy path to my room. There are new and old students walking towards the hostel. The chatty ones are mostly young girls, probably their first year at Emaudo. The trees that border the path to the hostel have some green leaves left in them. The Old Ominous trees, whose hollows we hide our *luga* (pistols) watch over uncompleted departmental buildings and students, like protective gods. Behind the boys’ hostels, there is a cocoa farm called “open university” because boys use the arid land for toileting when hostel commodes are clogged due to non-academic staff strikes. In the mornings, the mountain that surrounds this cocoa farm rise in foggy smoke.

I locate my new room in Mariere Hall within a few minutes, there is already a double-bunk bed, a battered reading table and a chair with three legs left in the tiny room. I quickly set my bag on the bare bed and dash out to Mafeg, one of the two decent drinking spot for students.

Mafeg is full and loud with drunken students. Half of the people in the dingy bar are smoking one type of cigarette or the other. Old students scam new students for

money to buy beer at times like this. It happened to me four years ago when I first resumed. A boy named Nosa sold a used copy of Ruth Finnegan's *Oral Literature In Africa* to me, having cleverly removed some important chapters from the text.

My friends, Aloma and Nicholas, both "hard men" and high ranking officers of the *Red Axe* secret cult, are there. We shake hands and I order a large bottle of Guinness stout. We discuss campus issues, nothing academic.

"Do you have any new babe yet?" Aloma asks me.

"Did you not hear when I told you I was just coming?" I reply.

"Was the bus that brought to campus filled with boys only?"

"There is enough time, it is not good to rush the first batch, the beautiful ones have not yet arrived." I tell Aloma and take a swig from my second or third bottle of beer.

"Why do you two always banter like market women selling fish?" Nicholas asks while laughing drunkenly.

An agitated voice starts to rise from the corner of Mafeg, threatening to make life miserable for whoever he is quarrelling with. We know it will soon turn to a fight and broken bottles will start flying. Since we are the only three members of our cult in Mafeg, Nicholas suggests we leave, before the fight spreads to our table.

Day three at 9am my room is bright and burning hot. Emaudo sun rises early. I wake up with a nasty hangover. New students are still arriving with confused voices; Felix my roommate is yet to resume. Unfamiliar voices fill the air. I struggle out of bed and change the clothes I slept in. My bag that has not been open lies on the floor and I open it and arrange the contents in the locker behind the door. I carefully place my new home made pistol at the bottom of the locker and dump the empty bag on top of it.

Since most cafeteria are not operational yet, I chew on some Cabin biscuit and drink cold chocolate with Peak milk. Dusting crumbs of biscuit from my hand, I go in search of Aloma and Nicholas whose rooms are in Martins Hall. I see them already chatting by the Student Union Building. From a distance they look like part of the graffiti that grace the walls of the building. Caricatures of Mandela, Sankara, Fela and Bob Marley are rendered in fading colors. The graffiti are exactly four years old, because I was in year one when a student union leader was gunned down by policemen during a peaceful demonstration. The boy's portrait was also drawn, but on the door that leads inside the building.

"You guys are early?" I say as I get close to them.

"The animal that rises early eats the best fruits," Nicholas responds.

"There is a book fair going on at the Pavilion" Aloma announces.

"Who needs books when there are fresh girls in need of directions?" Nicholas says.

Nicholas who is a top commander in the *Red Axe* confraternity does not waste time to speak his mind. He is a lanky boy who has a straight face with a pointed chin that ends with wiry goatee. He laughs a lot, but as ruthless as a brute during intra-cult crisis.

"I never said we were going to the book fair for books, is it only fish a fisherman catches in the river?" Aloma replies.

“I see”, says Nicholas with a smirk.

We walk towards the Pavilion leisurely as if owned the entire campus. Nicholas shirt is buttoned to midribs revealing his worn red rosary. Mine is tucked under my BON JOVI T-shirt. We wear red rosaries not for religious purpose but as a way to identify with our Confra, every initiate of the *Red Axe* wears one, day and night. Sometimes I wonder what I have really gained in the three years of being a member of the cult, apart from close shaves with police and members of other secret cults. If not for the juju against gunshot my grandfather sprinkled on my head in the village, I would have been dead by now. I did not have to tell my grandfather, an old native doctor, that I was involved with any dangerous group in school. The first time I visited home after initiation, as I entered our huge compound in Uwessan village, he grabbed me and took me inside his dark inner room. He chanted and chanted until fire rose from a pot of water in the room. He dipped his sinew fingers in the water and that had fire and scoop water and sprinkled it on my face. My clothes were wet as he said, “May Ogun ride with you everywhere you go and no fire shall have dominance over you.” From the back of his door, he brought out an old rusty gun, aimed it at me and fired. The gun did not go off. He shook his head and opened the window to the dark room, pointed the barrel of the gun towards the bush behind our house and pulled the trigger. The deafening shot of the gun made my heart skip and made birds scattered from nearby trees. He looked at me with bloodshot eyes and nodded his head. People came from far and wide to consult my grandfather, especially during elections when gunshots become the order of the day. I never told Nicholas or Aloma about the juju, I knew they too must have had some form of native protection, or else they would have been dead too.

We arrive at the school Pavilion where we do everything, like a Roman amphitheatre, except our Pavilion is prison-like. The walls’ have rough bricks that end with barbwire to prevent student activists from scaling the walls during graduation ceremonies, the only time the governor came to our school. The book fair is already in full swing. Emaudo campus has no bookstores, which is why booksellers from Benin City bring books for sale at the beginning of a new semester at exorbitant rate. New and old students scan books on tables as if checking tomatoes for ripeness. Aloma and Nicholas scan faces for fresh female students. I pick a small green book, *How to Be a Nigerian* and thumb a few pages of the hilarious book by Peter Enahoro. Aloma’s sharp whistle signals he has seen girl of interest. I turn to see what elicits such construction worker kind of behavior.

I also want to whistle, except the girl’s beauty deflates every air in me. Standing straight at Evans Publishers’ booth, she checks out a large green text book. She has a rosary-ring on her middle finger, the one usually worn by Catholic girls on campus. Her natural black hair rests on her slender shoulder. Her deep brown skin shines under the mid morning sun. She wears a polka-dotted blouse and a pair of jean that hugs her long legs tightly as if she was born with it. She is the *Akwobisi* that outshines all twines in the forest, I think.

“I will go for her,” Aloma whispers.

“No.” I say, my voice a bit too loud.

Something inside me skips and my breathing quickens, like the night I walked into the dark Emaudo forest for my initiation, a mixture of fear and excitement.

“Aloma this is beyond you, she is too sophisticated for you,” Nicholas, who has been silently watching the scene says.

“Yes, you are right, this is way beyond your league Aloma,” I say, “I will go for her.”

“What about Augustina?” Aloma asks about my ex-girlfriend, whom I had broken up before we went on holiday.

“What kind of nonsense question is that, this is October rush and you are asking Fabian about an old history?” Nicholas asks, faking seriousness, “If anyone can match this sophisticated *jambito*, it has to be Fabian, our Americana friend.”

Nicholas continues to root for me. Most of the clothes and shoes I wear are sent to me by my brother who lives in Washington, D.C. And our campus girls love everything that comes from America or anybody that has a relative in America. The girl is done checking the text book, *Nigeria Justice System: 1960 -1980*. She pays for it and gracefully walks through the crowded book fair towards the northern exit.

“What are you waiting for American boy?” Aloma asks me sarcastically.

“No hurry in life my friend; a cat that hurries too much never catches the mouse.” I reply.

“Well, there are many cats that are looking at this beautiful mouse, lets go.” Nicholas says.

We follow her out discreetly. I watch as she disappears behind bougainvillea bushes by Biology department. My mind begins to riot and scheming on different ways to confront her. Should I follow her or wait for another opportunity to meet her. Nicholas is right; there are many hungry cats in the campus. Boys that are faster than lightening roam the crevices of the campus for a girl like her.

We move around aimlessly in deep thoughts. Nothing interests me anymore as Aloma and Nicholas recover and starts talking again. They make fun of girls that are either over dressed or had too much make up just to impress boys. I close up like a fly in a caught in a spider web.

“I should have said at least hello,” I say.

“You should have, but this is a small place, she can’t hide for long and we will find her sooner than later”, Nicholas says, using the exact same words as if she were a cult member we are trying to track down and deal with.

“What if someone gets to her first,” I ask, almost wimpy.

“Then we will show that someone who owns Emaudo campus”, Nicholas threatens.

It is a fast flowing river, this October rush business. But something tells me the girl’s beauty is more intimidating and repelling than inviting. I stick a cigarette in my mouth and battle the late afternoon breeze to light it. The girl floats in my mind and nicotine hits my brains. I soon start to loathe my thoughts about her. I am supposed to be a “hard man”. Three years of ruthless activity in the feistiest cult on campus are supposed to steel my heart.

Nicholas notices I am not talking as we stop to buy cooked corn on our way to the hostel.

“You are serious about that babe, there are many other *jambitos* around – wake up *yor*, you are a soldier, you have no time to brood,” he says.

I smile absently and a hail of smoke escapes from my nostrils. I have seen pretty girls in the past, many times, but this one is different, I want to tell Nicholas.

“Relax, we will find her, I am sure she is at St. Mary’s Hall”, Nicholas reassures me when sees the look on my face.

“Wetin una go do, knock on every door till she opens?” Aloma asks.

“We will see.” Nicholas replies.

“Let’s go for a drink”, I say as we get closer to the hostel.

Aloma agrees. Nicholas says he has a date to check on, he leaves and promise to join if things don’t work out.

We go to Mafeg, the only place to hang out these early days of resumption. As usual it is filled to the brim, with cigarette and beer smell hovering in the air. I look for a comfortable table at the back of the bar. I order two small bottle of Guinness and I drink quietly while Aloma talk to some of his classmates. Bruce Lee’s *Enter The Dragon* that was showing is over. The bar man slot in another tape on the VCR. Moaning sounds announces adult movie. Shouts and claps of approval resonate from students, too drunk to control their excitement. Porn movies with white girls excite Emaudo students like cannabis, since the only white girls we see on campus are cassock-wearing Sisters from a nearby convent. The Sisters are ugly, but I never say this in front of anybody because I am supposed to be a catholic. But I don’t remember the last time I stepped in a church.

I walk out of Mafeg, leaving behind a full bottle of beer and cheering students. I don’t feel like arousing myself to nothing.

My roommate, Felix, is back. I am glad to see him; at least I have company. Gerald Levert is playing *Casanova* on his radio, which was probably the first thing Felix plugged in to electricity when he came in. Felix has being my roommate since year one, though he is not a member of *Red Axe*.

“Where is my beer, I know you have been to Mafeg already”, Felix says and stretch out his right hand for a shake.

“I did not know you were back- you never resume early” I say.

“This is our final year, we need to be serious because I don’t intend to spend any day more in this hell hole” he replies.

I agree with him. This is probably while I am anxious, I reason.

“Oboy if you see one girl wey I see this afternoon, she go make you faint – she be *helele!*” I say excitedly to Felix who knows a lot about girls, because he changes girlfriends almost every month.

“Did you take her room number?” He stands up straight and asks.

“No” I reply.

“Which kain *muumuu* thing is that – so why are you telling me?”

That is Felix; he has no time to waste.

“She is definitely a *jambito* I am sure, what is her name?” Felix continues.

I don’t know how to tell him I don’t even know the name of the girl that has made me miserable all day. If Felix were with us when I saw her, it would have been a different case. Felix would have gone straight to her, clear his throat and ignite his deceptive pickup smile and start talking. In no time she would be in his net. But I am glad he wasn’t with us.

“I did not ask for her name but I will see her again”, I say.

“Well good luck my friend - I am going out now to see what the evening has to offer”, Felix say and amble out of the room into the night.

It is going to be a long night, thinking about her, this nameless girl. I am wondering if the lamb is in a dance with a lion. I am wondering if a moon is lighting her song.

Not knowing what to do, I decide to nail Whitney Houston’s 1990 poster-calendar on the wall above Felix boom box. The hostel room needs some fix up. The wall paints are fading and peeling off, leaving an eczema effect on the old walls. Our room that we paid exorbitant rate for is small; one can barely turn around in the room. Midwest University hostels are built like shanty box houses, an architectural disgrace that gives the hostel its nickname, Soweto. Students cook in the hall way which makes it smell like village kitchens. Not until one goes out of campus, you don’t realize you are almost living in a somewhat concentration camp. All the money we pay for accommodation is never used to repair anything. Students make lockers from old woods. We buy locks from home because the doors are all broken which makes it easy for campus thieves to enter rooms. I nail the last crumbled edge of the poster my brother brought for me from America when he visited two years ago.

I go to bed early when the hooting of owls becomes ceaseless. I look at a broken ceiling board. I am shoving the girl’s lotus into my mouth again and I fall asleep uneasily. I am in a wedding. It is our wedding, the girl and I. She wears a long white dress; her veil is a shimmering lacy material. In a large cathedral in the middle of nowhere, unknown faces pour from long pews. Paschal candles form Liturgy of Lights, as if it is an Easter Vigil instead of a wedding. The sanctuary is filled with smoky incense, the scent of burning lotus. She is waiting for me to show up, I am her groom. A man in three-piece suit, I suppose her father, holds her pearly-gloved left hand. As I walk in, she turns. I am wearing my father’s ceremonial *Owegbe* fraternity attire, sitting on my head is a traditional hat fitted with cowries and ivories and bronze statuettes. The hat has goat bloodstain, like the ones worn by priests. Or native doctors of the old. I don’t have any shoes covering my white-chalked feet, but I have mini maracas dangling on my ankles. She lifts her veil, cringes and shrieks. Everybody gasps. I am supposed to wear a black suit and nice choking tie to a church wedding. It is a Catholic wedding. But four years of Soyinka and Okigbo as a literature student would not let me buy into this flatulent feast, this foreign monotonous humming ritual that is so soulless. It is enough for me to allow an Irish priest, who speaks Latin in my country, to officiate my wedding instead of elders pouring libations on my future. From a corner a mournful organ scrapes my ears, but distant thumping talking drums soon swallow the alien dirge. I will wear what I like, is what I scream when she asks, what is this nonsense? She turns and run out of the church, through a side door, trailing behind is the fragile helms of her gorgeous gown. Her bridesmaid hisses, calls me a “village goat” and leaves through the door beneath the stained glass that showers rainbow colors on the surprised faces of invited guests. I am laughing all the way to tears. I am laughing and wondering what is repugnant about mixing my African ways with her European ways.

I keep laughing and I don't hear Felix come in, but I hear him say, "This girl that is making you laugh in your dreams must be really something else!" I don't answer him.

I can't go back to sleep anymore. My eyes adjust to the dark room and I follow a broken line in the ceiling and trace its snaky stain to the far right where I could faintly see an abandoned spider web. I imagine the girl's face, but I can't capture the features. I didn't memorize her face enough to last a long time; all I have is her shape.

It is morning and Emaudo mountains are misty as I hurry my morning ablutions. Empty beer bottles, cooking stoves and battered shoes and slippers are scattered along verandah. On the opposite side of the hostel, *ARMY MUST GO* and *SOLDIERS ARE ZOMBIES* scream portentously in maroon colored defacement, a reminder of students' discontent with the current military regime. Students register their discontent in these hostel walls. Recent histories are recorded in the walls, almost like hall of fame for students that have been killed. Some of the names that are peeling off were killed by opposing cult members, not policemen or soldiers.

Nicholas walks into view, twisting his goatee as I brush my teeth in the back corridor of the hostel.

"Where you were last night, your lights were off when I came here", he says.

Before I reply Nicholas says, "That girl we saw yesterday at the book fair, she is the roommate of a girl I know. I was in their room last night. Her name is Zoë"

I stare at Nicholas blankly, foaming toothbrush in one hand and a cup of water on the other hand. The coincidence is too much, too soon.

"I have invited both of them to tonight's concert, but you will buy drinks and tickets", Nicholas reels out his plan like tissue paper in an infant's hand.

Zoë.

What a name. Never really heard of such name before, neither have I felt like this about a girl all my life, I am thinking. Nicholas is not lying; he is waiting for my reply.

"*Oboy*, what do you say? I told you we will find her, you are lucky", Nicholas says.

I spit out some toothpaste from my mouth and reply, "Ok, we will go, what time?" I ask.

"I told them to be ready by 7pm. We will take them to Caesar's Palace café; have drinks before the concert", Nicholas has everything map out already.

Course registration takes a flash. I am back to the hostel to plan the night's accessories. I will change to my new Wrangler jeans, a T-shirt that glitters BIG APPLE in the dark, and a white Michael Jackson multiple-button jacket, all from America.

All day I think of how I will introduce myself to Zoë. None seems suitable enough for the evening.

Its 5pm, I am already ready. I ask Felix, how I look.

"You look like an American ghetto gangster", he says, laughing.

“You have never been to America, so you don’t know what a ghetto gangster look like over there. See you later.” I say.

I leave to get Nicholas. Nicholas never pays attention to fashion, so he wears a short-sleeved checkered shirt which is fading in the neck.

“You look good boy – you are ready to meet your princess”, he hails as we trudge towards girls’ hostel.

We cut through a back gate, across from a Mallam Akilu’s shed, the seller of *suya* meat and grade one marijuana. I walk gingerly to keep my sneakers white, an impossible task in the red Emaudo soil.

Like a he goat, I sniff myself one more time as Nicholas knocks on the door number A7.

“Who is it?” a female asks from inside.

I don’t know whose voice; I have never heard Zoë speak.

“It’s Nicholas”

A round-faced girl opens the door with a grin.

“Hello Nena, meet Fabian, the friend I told you about last night” Nicholas introduces me as we enter the room.

“Hi Fabian”, she says to me. My eyes rest on her briefly and I scan for Zoë. Zoë is not in sight. My heart is not beating right; I am thinking it is too good to be true, for Nicholas to have found Zoë so quickly.

“Zoë is in the next room, she is with some friends from Benin; let me go get her”, Nena says.

She goes out and Nicholas gives me a knowing wink. I smile and my heart is threatening to break through my ribcages. My mouth dries. We wait by standing; there are no chairs in the room except two gracefully made beds. Beds neater than private hospital’s. There is a table at the corner that holds a small altar. A figurine of the Virgin Mother. A brown scapular of infant Jesus and Virgin Mary rests at the base of an unlighted candle. Jesus is wearing a crown, Mary a halo. An iridescence rosary glow in the semi-darkness. There are law books, a Sunday Missal, Daily Prayer book and a HOLY WATER bottle at the other side of the table. The only thing missing from this Catholic assemblage is a chalice and silver plates for Holy Communion. I am wondering whose altar it is, because whoever brings a Catholic altar to a university room is not going to be a piece of cake for the things of this world.

Nena and Zoë come in. It is her, the same girl I saw at the Pavilion - she wears a flowing beige skirt and a T-shirt. Her face still holds the celestial beauty of seraphim.

“Hello again Zoë, meet my friend Fabian”, Nicholas says.

“Hey, Hi”, Zoë says in a polite voice, as if she is afraid to speak.

“Hello - how is the going?” I say.

My voice is husky, almost shaky. Dryness takes my vocal cords. Too hoarse. I clear my throat, not too loud to be mistaken for a contagious cough.

“Could you please excuse us,” Nena wants Nicholas and I to leave the small room so they can change clothes.

We wait outside, observing other scavengers knocking on locked doors. St. Mary’s Hall is become a beehive because of October rush.

Nena opens the door and says they are ready. I look through the door and see Zoë by the altar; she opens the bottle of holy water, dabs a bit on her slender palms

and does a sign of the cross in one swift motion. Her piety is two degrees remove from a nun wearing a white scarf and long blue gown.

Zoë's jean trouser has zippers at the base of both ankles. She wears a pink silky blouse and throws a red and green paisley scarf on her shoulder.

"Let's go get something to drink, the concert wont start till about nine", says Nicholas who is very much at ease.

We arrive Caesar's Palace; it is the first night of opening in the new semester. But it is more decent than Mafeg. This is a place to impress girls; the price of drinks is twice expensive than Mafeg. Caesar's Palace boasts of a generator to cool drinks when electricity on campus goes, which is dreadfully frequent. A new color television flickers in a corner; a drunken student threw a bottle on the old black and white last semester. The chairs are plastic, white. Fela music is loud the way students like it to be. I don't know if Zoë can handle Fela's music with her godliness, but we sit down. She sits across from me, crossing her legs neatly. Nena pop bubble gum noisily. Nicholas apologizes for the rowdiness of the place. I am tongue-tied, hamstrung by the proximity of Zoë's beauty. By love. I want to laugh at myself for my newly acquired timidity. I have read of greater men who have been disabled by love.

"So what are you girls up to, did you know each other before now?" Nicholas asks as we wait for our drinks.

"No, we just happen to be allocated to the same room – and we like each other", Nena answers.

"That is good, girls usually don't get along in the same hostel room", Nicholas says.

"Is your friend always this quiet?" Nena asks about me.

"Is yours always this quiet?" Nicholas shoots back.

We all laugh and Zoë smiles.

Our drinks arrive. Zoë does a sign of the cross, before inserting a straw in the orange bottle. Nena doesn't need a straw or glass, she drinks directly from the bottle. The café is getting crowded as more students troop in. Multiple orders turn waiters into scampering roaches.

"Where are you from?" I ask looking at Zoë, as the beer thaw my nerves.

"What did you say?"

The place is too loud for her to hear my low voice. I repeat my question and she says, Benin. Nothing more nothing less, she sips her Fanta.

We finish our drinks, I pay and we leave. Bob Marley music replaces Fela in the speaker. Nena and Nicholas chatter like secondary school kids while Zoë and I walk quietly as if we are communicants going for communion.

We arrive at the Pavilion and I purchase the four tickets at the gate. Forty naira for the four of us. I hope Zoe is taking note of the notes I have been peeling from my wallet. Such things probably don't faze her, she looks and smells richness.

We are inside the Pavilion; the musicians are testing equipments in twanged succession. We find a seat in the middle aisle. My old self would have gone to the back of the Pavilion as heckler and reveler, throwing empty beer bottles at musicians if they dare perform poorly.

Nena and Nicholas disappear amidst the milieu.

“Are you comfortable?” I ask Zoe.

She nods a yes. I look around to scan the environment, something one has to learn as a cult member. The night is charged with newness. Friends and foes cross each other. Old students keep packing into the already overcrowded Pavilion with their overdressed girlfriends. The MC apologizes for the lateness in commencement.

Zoë. What a beautiful name. I want to ask her the meaning of the peculiarly beautiful name, but a hand comes from our back and touches her. She turns. I turn. A boy with Mandela hairstyle, face darker than a rainy night, calls her attention. I have been looking for you, I was in your room – but you were not there, the boy says. Trouble. A warning vial breaks inside me. Zoe does not return the boy’s overture and the boy does not go away. He seats behind us, becoming a bodyguard. I turn and in a voice that is supposed to be calm but came out menacingly say, “Can’t you see she is with somebody?”

“And so? If she is seating with someone, does that mean I cant say hello to her?”

Where is Nicholas? I am thinking and begging God not to let me react in way that will jeopardize my stand with Zoë.

“Do you know him?” I ask Zoe.

She shrugs. Not a yes, not a no. Like a traffic light stuck in amber. She doesn’t speak or move to acknowledge the boy. I need to break the boy’s rudder and compass fast before he sails beyond his limit. I check his neck and he is not wearing a red rosary. He is not a made man, he is a skunking *bushe*.

I close my eyes and wish the intruder away, without turning I know he still there.

“Will you be all right, I need to ease myself”, I say to Zoe.

“I will be fine,” she says calmly.

I walk to the dark side of the Pavilion to see if I could find a junior fellow of *Red Axe*. I see Cobra, one of our craziest enforcer, who has single handedly brought down other cults in the past. He is drinking beer with Junior, Solowizo and Kizito amidst a heated argument that I couldn’t figure out. His trademark two padlocks droop from the frontal belt holes of his brown jeans.

“Fabian my main man, we were wondering what happened to you”, Cobra greets me.

He sways back and forth, his slate-flat head that earned him the name Cobra wobbles.

“Man Cobra, how is the going my guy?” I hail him.

“I just dey maintain for back of the this place – wetin dey happen now?”

“*Kasala* dey ground o. One boy dey *popo* my life. The boy nor want make I enjoy this Pavilion with my *jambito*,” I tell Cobra about the problem I am having.

He drops his almost finished cigarette on the ground and stamps it out with his worn boots.

“For this Emaudo campus, dem never born the boy- im nor know who you be?”

Cobra asks if the boy belongs to *Red Axe*, because we do not fight ourselves. I tell him no, because I know all the members as I am the one that keep a list of all the members and their addresses.

“Lets go hammer the boy’s life, devil punish am and his father and his mother wherever they may be” Cobra rain curse at the boy he has not seen.

“You have to be careful, I don’t want my new girl to code my actions”, I caution Cobra.

“No sweat my man, I nor be small boy.”

Cobra swings his bottle of Gulder beer, a potent weapon. I describe the boy to him and he follows discreetly to my aisle.

Back to my seat the boy is still whispering to Zoe who completely ignores him.

“Excuse me my guy,” I hear Cobra’s voice behind us.

The boy hesitate before saying, “Do you I know you?”

“That is exactly what we are about to find out now my man” Cobra says in a voice filled with venom.

I stay still and concentrate on the stage where Majek Fashek is already singing, *I come from the ghetto, me I say, I say, I say I come from the ghetto, no one knows tomorrow!*

“Are you enjoying the show?” I ask her, just to shut out Cobra’s intensifying voice.

She nods and looks at me, her glance full of questions. Not harsh, not soft. She holds her gaze as Cobra commotion unfolds behind us. I hear the unmistakable sound of a broken bottle on a head.

“Oh Jesus!” Zoë’s voice shoots up.

Instinctively I reach for her and held her down in the chair, “Its Ok”, I say. Cobra’s beer, like rain shower, drop on our necks, I wipe my face and Zoe wipe her bare hand with her scarf.

“Lets go,” Zoë says.

I rise, not questioning her decision; my mind is not even in the concert. Like we came, we walk back in silence, in darkness. The path to the hostel is not lighted. Trees form tall shadows around us; nocturnal sounds mix with reggae beats. The music recedes behind us.

We are at the gate of the girls’ hostel. Through the iron gate I see the old porter falling asleep, saliva dribble to his jaw.

“I know you are in your final year and you are looking for someone to run over before you graduate by all means. You did not have to do that to that boy back there,” She says sternly, shocking me with the strength of her voice.

I scramble for a suitable reply. The air thickens, bats flutter past. Fireflies open and close their lights. Many responses come to mind, none is good enough. She is not moving.

“Zoë, no, it is not like that – I am not like that – I will not do such a thing.” I babble.

This is your chance don’t blow it, I tell myself.

“I want you to be my special friend Zoë, even when I graduate I still will come for you,” I say, short of proposing marriage on the first night.

She remains quiet as if deciding what to say. I get closer to her and hold her hand. She doesn’t snap my hand away. Her palms are soft, clammy. We start walking back towards the concert again, but stop by the library. Zoë is no longer interested in

the concert. I remove my jacket and lay it on a damp bench. She sits and stares at the clear sky. I sit close to her, on dew wetness. We don't say anything; the sky is decorated with stars. Stars my grandmother used to tell me were the wives of the moon when I was innocently young. I tell Zoe the same story, but she says polygamy is wrong, against catholic belief. A shining star blinks and winks and shatter into a million bits in a distant orbit.

"Yes, polygamy is bad. My father married only my mother and I intend to do the same," I say.

Zoë laughs briefly and stops abruptly.

"I love you Zoë and I mean it," I hear myself saying, almost like another voice.

"Do you love people you meet the first night?"

"You are not 'people' Zoë; you are special – beyond what I can explain in one night."

"Are you not in final year?" She asks.

"Yes, why?"

"I am told you guys use girls and dump them," she withdraws her hand from mine, as if I suddenly became a contagious disease.

"I can't deny that happen, but look in the sky and tell me if all the stars you see are the same."

She doesn't say anything and we both contemplate our thoughts in the darkness that envelope us.

I want to remain there with her there forever but an owl hoots above us. Growing up in the village, my grandfather taught me to depart from the vicinity of a hooting owl. It is a sign that the night is sharpening its teeth.

"Let's leave," I tell her.

Love or no love – my grandfather's warning voice echoes in my ear.

I dust my jacket and hung it on her shoulder because it is getting cold. At the gate she says goodnight, not goodbye and give me back the jacket.

"Will I see you tomorrow?" I ask.

"Maybe," she replies.

After four weeks of seeing each other at every opportunity we have, not listening to Nicholas complain of my missing *Red Axe* midnight meetings, Zoë kisses me. In front of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences building, she holds me after a poetry reading and kisses me. When invited her to the reading the previous day, she said she couldn't make it because of prayer meeting. I was not happy but I still read the poem I had written for her. I am close to tears at the last stanza and I tear the piece of paper like I heard American poets do. A deafening applause follows my act. As I walk out of the hall, Zoë appear from the crowd and hold my hand.

"That was really good but why were you so angry while reading such a beautiful poem?" She asks, smiling.

Before I regain my composure to answer her, she wraps her hands round my shoulders, tiptoe to equalize our heights and kisses me. I am not expecting it, I do a sloppy job. She tastes like lotus.

“Would you like to go to Caesar’s for a drink?” I ask her.

“No, I want us to stay indoors,” she says.

Felix has gone away for the weekend, thank God, I can have the room to myself.

The bed is small, barely enough for both of us. We are both slender, she will soon be seventeen and I am twenty one already. We lay on our backs with our shoulders touching.

“You smell good” I say to her.

“I am wearing Elizabeth Arden’s Red Door; my aunty in New York sent it to me for Christmas.”

That is one thing we have in common, relatives in America.

“I love you so much Zoë – I don’t know what to do without you. And I will miss you a lot when I graduate,” I say.

“I love you too,” she says.

I kiss her supple lips. I pull out my *Red Axe* rosary and fiddle with it for a few minutes. The thought of Nicholas becoming the head of the cult without my full commitment bothers me.

“How come you wear this rosary all the time, yet you never attend mass regularly?” Zoë asks.

“But I attended mass last Sunday,” I say.

“But there are daily mass. Monday through Friday,” she continues.

“I think Sunday is enough, this is a university campus not a Seminary.”

“Is that so?” Zoë sits up on the edge of the bed.

Church as I have come to realize is not something she plays with.

“I don’t mean it like that – don’t get upset.”

I knelt on the bed and start massaging her back. She does not say a word. Gently I guide her back to lying with me.

“Zoë, swear by this rosary you will never leave me, even when I graduate,” I say jokingly.

She laughs, “An ordained priest did not sanctify that rosary. It is about time you get it blessed, moreover Catholics don’t swear,” she says.

I don’t insist but I kiss her over and over again till my lips hurt. I gradually insert my hand under her blouse and raise fight a firm bra. She grabs my hand and holds it away. A mild wrestle ensues. I am careful not to be too rough, but we are both laughing at our silliness. The quiet pious girl of four weeks ago opens up like a butterfly escaping its caterpillar state. And nothing else matter to me in the world. I hold her hand and I pry open the stubborn bra and touch her stiffen left nipple. She stiffens.

“Don’t please, please don’t do that.”

“I won’t hurt you Zoë.”

“I know but please don’t go any further, please Fabian” he voice is close to tears.

I withdraw my hand and turn away from her.

“Are you angry at me?” She asks.

I don’t reply. My mind is debates on what to do – to leave her or pressurize her some more. Most girls don’t yield to the first trial.

Without thinking more, I turn and started to kiss her. I lift up her shirt and kiss her flat belly. My tongue circles her deep navel. She cries and shivers all over. I don't stop. My hand is back to her breast, and she does not resist. I remove the who bra after fumbling with the hooks forever. I sit up to observe her breasts for a minute. They were perfect and I started kissing one after the other. And Zoë's fingers finally found their ways to beneath my shirt.

I remove the blood stain sheet from my bed as Zoë sits on my reading chair crying, not wearing anything. In the frenzy of things Zoë's virginity shocked and intrigued me, but I could not stop nor wait for an unknown tomorrow.

I help her stand up and hold her tight. Her body is warm, like she has fever. Her face is wet from unstoppable tears. She does not say a word.

"I love you so much and I will never leave you. Never." I tell Zoë.

She starts to shiver silently. I retrieve the wrapper my mother gave me from my locker and wrap her with it. She refuses to sit on my bed but stares at the bed vacantly from where she stands. I hold her and stand with her. She runs a finger along the scar of my back; my rusty past uncoils in her palms. It was the knife scar, courtesy of my initiation into the *Red Axe* confraternity – which reminds me, very soon we will find out if Nicholas is our new leader. Unfortunately, the once united *Red Axe* is divided into faction now because of power struggle. And funny enough Aloma joins the group that is against Nicholas. Though I am on Nicholas side, I am too distracted to be of much help.

Before Zoë leaves for her room, she opens her purse and gives me a rosary. "This is blessed and sanctified," she says and hands me the glowing beads.

"Thank you. I like it."

In her presence I removed my *Red Axe* issued rosary and replaced it with the translucent one she gives me.

Easter break is near. Zoe doesn't drink Fanta anymore. That is her Lent's penitence. Nicholas expired on Ash Wednesday, the day he was to become the leader of *Red Axe*. I did not go for the coronation the night he died, I went to the village to get some money from my father. The hazing to become a *Capone* went too far as I was told, someone was out to kill Nicholas and secretly put poison in the covenant concoction that was given him to drink.

I am still miserable and blame myself for not standing by Nicholas when needed me most. The campus becomes ominous. I don't see eye to eye with Aloma and the new leader. I am a renegade that has gone lose. I wear my gun wherever I go, but careful not to reveal it to Zoë. I ask some of my friends to watch out for Zoë all the time, especially when I am not on campus. And I tell Zoë I am working on my final year thesis in Benin Central Library whenever I needed to go underground. Zoë never questioned me about Nicholas' demise, which was big news on campus and beyond, though she wept at the news. She has never asked me about my erratic disappearances from campus at times even before I came up with the library excuse. She is not a fool; she knew the day met her that I was a cult member. Sometimes I wonder if that is why she loves me, out of fear of been hit.

During our Easter break, I go to the village. My second night in the village, I dream I was back in school standing in front of Zoë's dorm door, like the first day I went there with Nicholas. The campus is deserted. A handwritten note is posted on her door:

*For your hands are defiled with blood, and your fingers with iniquity;  
Your lips have spoken lies; your tongue has muttered perversity. Isaiah 59v3*

I wake up in fear, sweating and wondering whose blood am I being accused of.

Nicholas blood? I was not there. Zoë's virginity? I was there.

I write love letters to Zoë everyday. For two weeks now, I am promising everything my mind can think of. I'd promised her I would write letters to her to keep her close to me, since there is no telephone in my village.

Today is my graduation ceremony and my father and mother are around. We all came together from the village this morning. They will meet Zoë today before they go back to the village. The military governor will give the valedictory speech, but Midwest University students will do everything to protest a military ruler's speech. Peaceful demonstration is planned but armored tanks roll through the university main gate before dawn. Sirens fill the morning air.

My graduation gown is blue, deep blue, and the sky is dark and cloudy. Students are chanting anti-government slogans; fresh leaves are raised sky-high in solidarity. I see Nena and Zoë in a nearby crowd. I wave to her frantically and she sees me. She smiles and starts to separate herself from the crowd. The crowd thickens and I fear how Zoë will spend her remaining four years in this perilous environment.

I wait by the Pavilion with fellow graduates, to be ushered into the Pavilion. But I want to hug Zoë before I enter the packed Pavilion. She is as beautiful as that first day I saw her. That October day with Nicholas and Aloma, she was walking away from me. But now she walks towards me, away from students with fresh leaves and placards of protest. Away from anti-riot police wear gas-masks hanging around in every corner.

The crowd is getting restless and a boy throws a cocktail Molotov made with Guinness bottle and petrol. Canister of tear gas busts and guns go off from the side of the police. Zoë breaks into a run towards me but falls. Students scatter, like fumigated insects. I touch the pistol under my graduation gown, but who should I aim at?

Zoë is bleeding, her hands flay out like a man greeting a king as I kneel beside her. My eyes are peppery, hers are surprised. Tear gas is making me delirious and sweat is blinding me.

Zoë makes me cry and more gunshots raid the air in deafening succession.

## EVENTS AT THE MARKET PLACE

After living with my friend Tailor and his pregnant wife for a year, I moved on to uncertainty. My life settled into a pattern in a dark windowless room among the strangers of Ira slum, a neighborhood that was dilapidating every minute. Tailor had helped me secure the one room from an old customer, a thick lumber-like woman, with tribal marks assaulting her elaborate face. Tenants secretly called her Commando – because she wrestled down her obdurate tenants for rent money. In this tiny archipelago of Nigeria, life was war.

The first day I moved into my room in the *Face-me-I-face-I face-you* tenement, it smelt like soured soup. The room was bare except for a broom that rested in a lonely corner and a rat with three eyes piecing the darkness of the room. Later that evening, Tailor came to visit and brought me a small springy Vono bed and a wafer-thin mattress, relics of his early bachelor life. His wife, Josephina, sent me some oversized bed sheets, used burnt pans, pots, three aluminum plates and a metal cup to begin my own life. The following morning I bought a small cupboard from a one-eye carpenter at the tip of my street. After sprinkling a bag of camphor on the floor to chase away the sour-soup smell, I arranged the room in a prison-fashion and prayed for a miracle. That first night I dreamt of my dead father sitting in the room as a Griot, playing his musical *Atanafan*, the one he played before telling us foible tales of this world when we were children. It was not exactly the miracle I'd prayed for.

Despite moving to this dingy room, I still visited Tailor and Josephina regularly, purposely for free meals; after which I'd profusely thank and pray for Josephina's health and safe delivery. She'd beam with smile and thank me as she cleared the plates from the white plastic dining table. Josephina was due any moment as her sittings and movements were becoming labored tasks. Apart from the food she gave me, she'd encourage me about my "business" respectfully. You may ask what business I was into - I sold used clothes, popularly called *Okrika* among the down trodden. Tailor helped me mend some of the shirts to render them sellable and I hawked them around in a big bag known as *Ghana-must-go*, named after the expulsion of Ghanaians from Nigeria by one of our nutty Excellency.

My friend, Tailor, was a dreamer. Despite the debilitating regime of General Sani Abacha, he still dreamt that one day he would become a big politician in Nigeria in a democratically elected government. Jesus walked on water, was his reply whenever I doubted him.

"Ah...when your husband win election you will become first lady and cash madam," I'd often joked with Josephina.

"Which election?" She'd would follow her question with a loud sucking of teeth, hissing like a cobra, "Anybody that think the army will leave power better think

twice and wake up from their snoring slumber,” She’d steal a glance at her husband. Tailor would look at her with loving yet beady eyes and laugh.

“*Agbaya!* A wife never believes in her husband’s beginning struggle, she only wants to see the end and sit behind big official Mercedes limousine directing drivers and aides to shopping complexes.”

Why I found it hard to believe Tailor, I believed Josephina readily. The reigning junta was in no hurry to yield power to “bloody civilians”, but masculine camaraderie would not let me take side with a house wife. I’d switch the subject matter.

“Today, I had to go to Seme border to get the best clothes from America and England as it was being offloaded by smugglers. Can you believe that we now have to also pay the customs for these used and useless clothes?” I would diffuse the brewing marital conflict.

In my little room the vermin multiplied to two quickly. The first rat had gone to invite a second one, probably a female. The new rat’s whiskers were shorter, as my eyes accustomed the darkness of my abode and accosted this new visitor, it had only two eyes. I named the first one Minister and the second one Mistress. The room was big enough for us all, no need to poison them.

The day I noticed the second rat was the same day my big break came. It was my miracle, which I had been praying for. At least this was what I believed. I had gone to sell clothes to the gatemen at Zuma Bank in Victoria Island on the rich side of Lagos, when a man popped out his well nourished face from the back seat of a Mercedes Benz and asked me what I had on my head.

“Clothes sir, I sell used clothes sir. Special one hundred percent cotton shirts from New York and London and Paris. Not *Igbo-made* sir, I sell originals only,” I reeled out my salesman’s speech, though in a non-convincing shaky voice.

All the gatemen suddenly became muted and dead electric poles and a large black vulture perched on the roof of the man’s car, shitting.

“Do you sell shoes too?” His voice boomed with the tinge of a cultivated British accent, common with upper class Nigerians that went to London for weekends. His moustache must have been shaved with a razor and a ruler - it had the linearity of a mechanized flower hedge.

“No sir, but I can get you any shoes if you like sir. I will bring them tomorrow,” I knew where to get shoes in the Balogun market, though I never traded in them –they were too heavy to carry in the killing sun of Lagos.

“Ok my friend, I need python skin shoes, size 12. Ask Dongoyaro to bring you to my office when you have them available,” he flashed a smile and the iridescence of his gold-plated incisors radiated, blinding me briefly in the sun.

His deeply tinted window wound up and buried his image in a different world, definitely cooler than mine and the gatemen’s. The big black shiny car slithered out of the bank premises like a pregnant snake.

The gatemen came back to life as if an “On” switch had been flicked in their heads.

“Eziza, you be lucky boy o! That na big order, I hope say you go fit deliver? Na our chairman be that, he will pay you big money. Your life don better, God don

butter your bread today. You know say the man fit give you job sef, since you get certificate from university. Make you remember us o, I know say when your money come you go do like say we be dogs,” Dongoyaro, the chief gateman’s went into a frenzy of excitement baring his tobacco and kola nut stained teeth and gum.

I wanted to remind Dongoyaro that it was just a pair of shoes his chairman requested not a trailer load supply. Then again, maybe he knew what I did not know, I thought. The rest gatemen grinned from ear to ear for me.

“Well Dongoyaro, every man has his day of redemption, maybe today is mine. See you tomorrow - God willing.”

I heaved the remaining bag of unsold clothes on my head and walked to Obalende bus stop. It was too late to go back to Balogun market to search for the python shoe, tomorrow never fails. As weird as the request was, I knew gold does not grow on the surface of the earth. My success or break-through - call it what you may - in Lagos had to come in some quaint way, I thought.

In search of my miracle, the python skin shoes; I went deep inside the belly of the market the very next day. I went past shops made from rusty zinc and decomposing woods. Heaps of burning plastics and smelling garbage rose in unison, higher than the tallest buildings at the periphery of Balogun market. I walked past odoriferous public toilets. Long line of traders waited in turn to empty their contaminated bowels. Some traders sat on bucket commodes in store fronts, spraying air freshener to drive away the smell of open toileting. Large bosom women haggled price and space with kite-size bluebottles blasting sirens.

A section of the market was a column of brightly colored plastic wares of buckets, plates, spoons, toys, shinny aluminum kerosene lamps and cooking pots. In another section were traders that sold sacrificial ornaments for shrines. On the other side were juju and voodoo menagerie - monkey skulls, live turtles, elephant tusks, white snail shells, dead and dried mice, dogs with four eyes, lizards with double tails, chimpanzee skulls and unidentifiable carcasses. I wasn’t sure this was the place where human parts were sold, I had heard about that in the past. But sitting like pregnant women behind a thick-lipped man smoking raw tobacco were robust gourds, covered with swam of flies, emitting odor as thick as the entrails of a rotten cow.

Witch doctors and herbalists openly hawked their brands of new “man power” or *gbogbonishe*- a multi functional native drug. This *Gbogbonishe* “the original medicine from Ijebu-Ode village” was claimed to cure malaria, impotency, poverty, AIDS and any other human disease that had befallen Nigerians during General Sani Abacha’s regime, known and unknown.

A dwarf walking faster than wind with only one leg blocked my path suddenly. I broke into cold sweat. A black scorpion perched on his bony-bare shoulder, where he had rolled up his dashiki. The smell that originated from his opened mouth stopped my breath. He pointed a small black gourd towards me, and I could no longer move my feet. “*Ranka dede sir!*” he greeted me with a mouthful of bright pink gum, with no teeth.

“For this your long journey, you need a body guard like me. As I see you, you be antelope for lion jungle. For only one hundred naira, you can get cover for this

market and nobody will touch you,” he laughed or cried; a skeletal wren escaped from his mouth and perched on the tail of the scorpion.

“*Oga* thank you sir, I am only in this section of the market briefly,” I said, mustering my last strength to repel him.

The ground under his feet opened; a whirlwind swallowed him along with empty cartons and dirty plastic bags. My feet started moving again. Another hawker told me his medicine was from India and it would keep my penis standing all night. I asked him what if I had other things to do, he said: “just use small portion *tenewen* like this,” he lifted his pinky to show me the required quantity. I passed and he became a vulture and flew to the top of a heap of debris, with his pitiable eyes looking down on me.

Walking the length and breadth of Balogun market was dizzying and revealing like an ancient scroll. The human traffic was thicker but less organized than a colony of ants. I was beginning to suspect that not all the market dwellers were human beings; some people were from far and beyond. It was rumored that Balogun and other Lagos markets were populated with ghosts and spirits, with dead and half dead, with living and not quite living. Tailor had told me one day that ghosts from neighboring countries, especially war torn regions around the coasts of the Atlantic came to trade in Lagos. This was why the market was always so dense and full of death smell. He told me he once saw Major Olka, whom we knew was publicly executed after a failed coup. I had had reservations in my eyes because Tailor could be very eloquent in grandiloquent stories sometimes.

“I swear to God who made me – I saw the man drinking palm wine with other military officers that were also executed, they were laughing so loud and raucously that they did not care if anyone saw them. My eyes met his and he just continued talking and drinking his palm wine.”

Despite the fact that I had seen so many things in Balogun market, it was still hard to actually believe that a man we both knew was dead was still living among us. Yet, when I remembered Tailor’s story, I started scanning faces for the dead. It would be nice to see my father again, I thought.

In my looking, I saw a woman who wrapped her baby with a big towel on her back. Upon a close examination the baby suddenly became a wooden black doll – dead, yet blinking tears. I quickly diverted my eyes. In a hurry to nowhere men were walking with their heels not touching the earth. They floated in their dirty *agbada* caftan as low flying ducks. Aluminum zinc moved and spun as if tied to the propellers of Tailor’s dusty ceiling fan. The market was full of bizarre people. I could not ascertain if my eyes were playing tricks on me or not. I was intensely hungry and my stomach started rumbling like a thousand thunder.

Each store I entered, the owner looked at me with suspicion and shoo me away with “I don’t sell such things.” Sweat blinded me in salty assault. The deeper I went into the market, the more it became an uncoiling snake. Many times I decided to go back, but the plump and robust face of the banker came with a whiff of scented promise and Dongoyaro’s words that I would be well paid or could even get a bank job fueled my search. If you had been jobless in Lagos as long me, getting by with the selling of used clothes and eating of stony bread almost three times a day, you too would go to the end of the world to change your life style.

I walked past thousands of people in search of the python skin shoes. The heat was becoming unbearable. I took off my shirt except for my dirty white-turned-brown singlet. I did not care if I saw my old school mates or even my last girlfriend that disappeared into thin air after calling me *Efulufu*. My mother had said when a woman is looking for life, she forgets to cover her breast.

I thought finding the shoes would be an easy mission based on the numerous shoe shops I had seen in the past. I soon found out it was the same as looking for rain in the desert. When I asked the last trader I'd really banked on, he had none, but said "*Oboy* be careful what you trade in...a small boy never knows when sleep is taking food from his hand!"

Since python skin shoes were such a rarity, it became clear that traders were suspicious of anyone asking for them. Upon my frustration, I stood in one spot confused. Then the dwarf I had seen earlier on resurfaced.

"Go deep into the sacrificial goods for spiritual matters section of the market and you will find what you are looking for. You need me - you need me - you need me," he sang into the thicker part of the market after giving me a detailed direction. Something about the dwarf had become familiar, and I no longer feared his appearances and disappearances.

This was the journey of my life, I concluded. The faint hope that it might change my life and reverse my fortune from being a university graduate selling used clothes to a banker balancing fat accounts of stolen money was worth the toil.

And turmoil.

I went past an abattoir where fresh blood drizzled underneath lacerated tables. Cow heads lay with tongues sticking out like pink breast-pocket handkerchief; their eyeballs were stagnant and purplish as freshly peeled onions. I saw two butchers fencing with their sharp knives, stabbing each other without blood coming from the cuts. I stood for a while and watched the macabre pastime. Could it be that the butchers in Balogun market had no blood or they had charms against knife cuts or were the knives made from Eleganza plastic? I was still wondering when a lady came to buy meat and one of the butchers used his knife to cut through a cow hide as if it were butter. The younger butcher of the two looked up and turned into a hyena in his hysterical laughter. His red eyes popped out like a compressed frog and emitted a million bloody tears. He jeered at my shock and hastily I moved on. I rushed off and continued my digging inside the market, ignoring the hunger gnawing at my intestines.

The farther I went the more the language of traders turned abnormal. I couldn't understand their talk because they neither spoke Yoruba, Hausa nor Igbo. Not even the good old English. Conversations became a buzz of trapped bluebottles. Their rising smells urgently turned pungent and cats roamed in-between their legs freely, with large mice on their mouths.

Children with emaciated and eczema infested skins carried hefty loads on their heads. They were drowned in their black perspiration and the load compressed them closer to the ground, stunting their imminent growth. Youths with broom-stick ribcages kicked red dust while giant mosquitoes escorted them in biting buzz. Some really dirty and malnourished *alaru* men pushed wooden wheelbarrows. These men like oxen tilled rocky soil with no harvest in sight. Their wheelbarrows were loaded

twenty feet high into the sky with empty oil drums; with inscriptions like SHELL, TOTAL, AGIP and BP. Some of these crude decals were fading, but obvious to a looking eye. The men with no feet, but stumps pushed their overloaded carts to unknown destinations. The toil of transporting void oil drums from one end of the market to the other formed their daily subsistence.

To my right, mayhem unfolded. A red-eye woman with a basket full of hard and stone-like loaves of bread shouted the deadly word “*Oleh!*” Before I could examine the situation properly a chorus of “Thief O- Thief O- Thief O” took over the section of the market. In a twinkle of an eye, a scraggly man was wrestled down like a goat by monster looking traders.

“Tie him down!” a trader shouted in fierce anger.

“Today is your last day in this market!” echoed another who was rolling up his belt-less trousers.

Different accusations and condemnations ripped the man to pieces as he screamed.

“Nor be me...I nor be thief. Oga have mercy on me,” the accused man begged no one in particular.

A police man surfaced and studied the situation. Seeing that there was no way to extract bribe from the condemned man, he turned into a chameleon and blended with the market.

“Who get petrol?!” A man whose shirt’s buttons had gone AWOL screamed loudly into the crowd.

The young butcher I had seen earlier jumped into the middle of the milieu. The accused man looking for mercy from anybody that showed up begged the butcher profusely.

“You are my friend, Jacob my good friend - I buy meat from you everyday, please tell them I am not a thief, please tell...,” a blow from nowhere cut his sentence in half.

Blood and saliva sputtered out from his swollen mouth. The butcher went close to him, examined him intensely and carefully clipped the accused man’s left ear and tucked the severed piece in his breast pocket. Immediately an old SHELL motor-oil plastic container surfaced from a stretched hand. As he was baptized by the precious and scarce black-market petrol, a shimmer of precious rainbow formed a beautiful translucent halo around his head. Though the accused man was jet black, a white ghost escaped from his soaked body and floated into the sky. After that, he stopped pleading for mercy. He became still and waited for the kiss of fire. The left side of his face offered blood, sweat and sorrow to the watching crowd. An old and used Michelin tire was thrown round his neck, giving him the popular Lagos “necklace treatment.” The mob dispersed as the man wriggled in a ball of bonfire in the middle of the market. I did a sign of the cross for him as organs began to pop and splattered carelessly. The smell of burning flesh finally forced my bowels to my mouth; I emptied the very little morsel I had in me. The woman that shouted “*Oleh!*” was laughing at a corner from the scene, when I looked at her with angry eyes; she collapsed into a small dog and cycled round her basket of bread and ran away. I continued my search without wasting any more time, because my mother said a man with an elephant on his head does not fool around searching for cricket with his toe.

The tiny stall described by the dwarf came upon me suddenly. It was tucked away behind another stall that sold snakes and parakeets. There was no one in front, except for a flea ridden donkey. I rattled the zinc door, with my eyes fixed on a baby cobra in the next stall. When the storeowner appeared I jumped out of my sweat-soaked skin. He was the dead man from my village, believed to have been executed by the military government. It was Major Olka all right; the man Tailor had seen drinking palm wine. It was too late for me to back away; he was right in my face like a rush of latrine air. To start running would be suicidal; traders would mistake me for a thief and give me the “necklace treatment” with no questions asked, like the one I just witnessed. I swallowed lumps of saliva and I stilled my hammock rocking nerves.

Major Olka remained as effervescent as I had seen him on television and newspapers during his Kangaroo court-martial trial. He did not age a bit. A round face stood on his broad neck. His head was still full of black hair and he was clean shaven, revealing a skin that was so fair one could mistake him for a mullato. He had a smirk on his face as he greeted me in our native dialect.

“*Bodiaye!* I have been expecting you. I know you were watching a man getting roasted; he was innocent but someone had already sacrificed him in the night. What you saw was the manifestation of a twilight decision. The gods couldn’t save him; men have even bought over the gods in this town. Welcome my son.”

So he knew about the lynching? And how did he know I was coming? Telephones barely worked in Lagos. Nothing functioned in the city. Electricity was worse - fireflies had more lights. Water taps, when turned on produced shrill sounds as if hissing at the notion of trying. Major Olka asked about our village people, probably his old friends. I hesitated before answering. I told him some had died while some were still alive, though I had not visited the village since I graduated from University of Benin City.

“I know the dead; I am just curious about the living son. Water?” He offered me drinking water from an earthen pot with lizard markings. I refused despite my thirst.

My throat tightened in heightened trepidation. I had walked too far into the market this time, I thought. My mother always told me when a priest stays too long in the shrine; the gods mistake him for a sacrifice. I feared I would die soon, the livings were not supposed to mingle with the dead. Seeing my jumpiness, he calmed my nerves with a smile. His teeth had the whiteness of talcum powder. A black kitten woke from its nap and started purring on my sandaled feet, its ticklish whiskers made my spine run cold. The kitten was haggard looking; in the village it would be considered a witch.

The uncomfortable pleasantries lasted a few minutes while the market raged on.

“I know why you are here son, but a careful mother never gives her child hot soup that would scald his tongue,” He left and disappeared into the dim ramshackle stall.

I had started to quiver with terrible fear, yet wondered if he had the shoes or not? My bowel was unearthing with uprising shivers. Excessive saliva gathered in my mouth and dried out instantly. The sky behind Major Olka’s stall was full of floating heads without bodies. Men were playing soccer in mid-air while women balanced

baskets on plaited heads and babies on broken backs. Beyond the floating bodies, it started raining – thick pellets of rain hammered the distance. It was a secluded rain; it did not get to where I was standing.

Major Olka came out with an old dusty Bata shoebox. He retrieved a pair of black python skin shoes from it and held it for me to see. It was the most intriguing shoes I had seen. There were no lace holes, just a mouth where a foot would disappear. The tip of the shoes was rounded out in pure gold. The heels were made from cedar wood, and the scented smell of fresh leather crushed the other market smell.

Major Olka did not part with the box or shoes.

“Look I have what you are looking for son. Tell me, does the spider fall from its web? No matter how hungry the lion gets, does it feed on his own cub?” I did not know where his parable-questions were leading.

“You are like my son from my village. You came to this city to look for life, and you will not lose it under my watch. I am a senior owner of this market. Everything that goes on here passes through my office. Your world is crazy; your country is even crazier. Ordinary people like you mean nothing to the desperate few rich men and women in high places. The bank chairman who sent you want these shoes for rituals, I don’t know if you are aware of that?” I don’t think he was waiting for an answer from me.

“But today is your lucky day son. Everyday I watch you toil in this market and I knew they would soon want to use you for rituals, but you are a special child. You the only surviving one of your mother’s triplet at birth. You already have conquered death in the beginning. I could have revealed myself to you earlier, but I wanted you to see the suffering of mankind as embodied in this market. And you didn’t even scratch the surface.”

He rested the box on a bench and placed his soft hands on my shaky shoulder.

“Let it be that the pot that has soup gets it bottom placed on fire.”

I wanted to run away as quickly as possible at this juncture, but his hand was a vice as gentle as it was.

“If I give you these python skin shoes, it will become your nightmare. You will be haunted to death. While the bank chairman enjoys the city with your blood, you will rotten in unmarked grave - would you want that to happen to you?” He went dead silence and looked me deep in my eyes. His eye balls turned mirror and I could see the ghoulish horror my twenty-five year old face had become. I had emaciated and deep furrows twined my dusty face, deep enough to gather rain water.

“No sir,” I replied quickly.

“Ok then...go back and tell the stupid chairman and his agent, Dongoyaro, that the last python shoes were lost in the boat that capsized in the river of darkness. He will not fail to understand, they understand the language of the underworld. Do you hear me?” His eyeballs returned in crimson red.

Goose pimples as bout of measles erupted from my entire body.

“Thank you sir,” I swallowed hard and hurried away.

“Be careful out there son, you live among dangerous people and a merciless city - only a careful antelope attains old age in the forest of lions,” A hacking cough like thunder rumbled.

When I looked back, a whirlwind of dust had replaced Major Olka. A cyclone erupted where his store stood. In the eye of that storm, my late father strumming his *Atanafan* stood like the rock of Gibraltar and waved me on with a hand that protruded from his heart.

## WAITING FOR THE BULLDOZERS

We were expectant.

Any moment now the bulldozer would come to us; the order had been given by His Excellency. We, the inhabitant of Ira, a slum in the south end of Lagos would be thrown in the air like rice chaffs. If lucky we would land in another place and time to tell our tales of escape. Otherwise, we'd be part of the dug up earth that would form the foundation of new mansions. No cement would be stronger than our bones. No sand would be as red as our blood. Many had gone like that before; we would not even make history.

There was nothing else to do than to wait for the soldiers with earth-moving equipments and AK-47s to remove us from our shanties. We waited in trance. Our world was one drunken masquerade on stilts, swaying wherever our circling brains took us. But before the soldier-driven bulldozers arrived, this was how we the slum dwellers of Ira passed our remaining days.

Across from a distant smoke filled sky, the evening's orange sun peered through my window. The six O'clock ball of fire would soon implode into darkness, and we would all be groping for candles and lanterns. We had electricity that never worked. The weaverbird-voices of my neighbors chattered incessantly. Everybody in my compound was outside, taking in the evening breeze before retiring to a sweltering night. The day was not close to over yet for us, we were all worried but went about our business. I wanted to catch a glimpse of Lola. Lola whose beauty had giving me the reason to linger around in Ira, knowing fully well the neighborhood would soon turn to dust.

I lit a joint and I leaned over the greasy lintel of my window to observe familiar kids sculpting abstract objects in the dusty playground. In this little backend slum called Ira, along Badagry Expressway; towards the Cameroon border where most illegal drugs entered the country, we were orphans of squandered promises. Jimoh, a boy with a watermelon head and limping gait poured sand on Sefirat's newly plaited hair. The boy enjoyed the sand bath he was giving the beautiful little girl. Jimoh, our landlady's adopted son from the village, had a knack for not leaving anything beautiful untainted. Once he set out on an evil mission, only accomplishment stopped him. Even when we were all in tenterhooks about our homes being bulldozed, he did not care. This Sunday evening I was too tired and perturbed with the thoughts of sleeping with Lola before the bulldozer came to waste my breath on stopping him. Hopefully, Sefirat's mom, Ginger, would stumble on him and hell would break lose and start a riot even before the bulldozer came. Ginger was a prostitute and peaceful co-existence was a boring pastime to her. We had seen her many times catch fire without matches or petrol. She was the only woman my landlady did not fuck around with. If caught, Jimoh's hideous loading of sand on

Sefirat's cornrows would start a civil war when Ginger returned from her roadside prostitution. That was where she got her toughness from, at Salamander Hotel, fighting men who refused to pay the negotiated amount for her body.

Aside from other neighborhood children waiting for darkness to come, there was a sycamore tree. This tree would also go; it would not resist the bulldozer. This ancient tree that had river flowing underneath it would be forgotten. But right now the sycamore tree's roots rose above the earth, stretching all over our compound and beyond. Under the coolness of this primordial tree, was Rastaman smoking a joint nonchalantly. He was the neighborhood musician who also sold marijuana to make ends meet. We all bought our joint from him, most time on credit. His long dreads snaked out under a big green-yellow-red knitted hat. Rastaman rested his head on one of the swollen roots of the tree, his legs splayed out as if surrendering to it. He became one with the tree. Rastaman was the lead singer in a raggedy local reggae band, which boasted of Perry Nkomo (an ex-break dance champion), Ganjaman, Shagasha, Popo and some other street urchins. Most members of Rastaman's reggae band, *Jah Reign*, smoked marijuana and mimicked Peter Tosh, Bob Marley or Jimmy Cliff whenever they performed for expatriates at Victoria Island. They were young men like me, scratching a living from anything. Rastaman was my friend; sometimes he would come to me with lyrics and asked for my opinion. Though I was not a musician, I could tell if he was off key. When he was not too stoned we would sort things out. The expatriates of Lagos, working for company like British Council or Shell Petroleum, were always looking for the exotic in us, which was why sometimes Rastaman twisted his tongue in attempt to speak patois or Creole. Listening to his fake Jamaican accent was like listening to a madman's chant.

"Rastaman, how are you doing?" I greeted him, spitting out a particle of match stick I was chewing.

He rolled his deep brown eyes towards me, stuck his almost finished marijuana back into his burnt lips and a hail of smoke poured from every pore of his body.

"*Ire!* Whata guan man...do you know when dem army boys are coming?" Rastaman was already dazed and I was just starting my smoke.

He held the hemp delicately and it had thinned beyond the usual crackling of seeds to an iota of brown paper in his blackened fingernails. All he had left was the unusual tiny bit he'd named *clarole*.

"Who knows – all we can do is to live our lives and be prepared," I said as I exhaled smoke into the evening.

Rastaman flung the burnt-out piece of marijuana towards sticks of half-burnt incense.

"Jah be praised for his mercy. I and I must hope for a-better day *man*. I see it a-coming man," he said as he adjusted his head on the root.

The pungency of marijuana smoke mixed with the piquant smell of burning incense invaded the air, giving it the smell of a clairvoyant's parlor.

"There is no better day coming anywhere. Where did you see the better day? Show me. Show me. No better day for poor man in this country, you hear me. Stop. Stop I say," Old Samson's voice cut into the evening, "I hear the bulldozers are

already near, they are hiding in Festac Town. I hear the tanks are coming too. They are near, they are shooting – take cover, take cover!”

Old Samson, a survivor of many wars, now losing the battle of life, hobbled around. He lived in one of the uncompleted buildings right beside the sycamore tree. You could see what he was doing inside his house if you peer hard enough. The only cover he had on his door was a tattered curtain, which was full of grease and oily stains. Back in the day, I used to have meaningful discussions with him, mostly about the civil war, but his facts were getting jumbled these days. In walking, Old Samson shuffled his left leg housed in prosthesis. Ever since he got wind of the impending destruction of our neighborhood by the military government, he'd been delirious.

“Good evening O' soldier!” I greeted him by his nickname.

He ignored me, his eyes darting here and there looking for half smoked cigarette or marijuana. He was a scavenger of our slum's garbage. Unfortunately, there was nothing worth eating in any of the neighborhood's garbage dumps. Old Samson walked towards Rastaman's resting place threateningly. He stopped and observed a distant horizon, his torn shirt fluttering in the evening wind. He was not a violent man, just really agitated at the thought of losing his uncompleted building. The government had stopped paying his pension a long time ago, and the building was all he had.

Rastaman sat up, retrieved a crumpled packet of Benson & Hedges cigarette from his trousers and shook out one for him. Old Samson's face brightened with joy, he forgot his sorrows for a minute. He gave a mock salute to Rastaman and released a raucous laughter. Rastaman cupped a flame of match for the cigarette, building a hedge against the wind with his left palm. The brown filter of the cigarette dangled in Old Samson's lips as he inhaled deeply, leaving depressed dimples on both side of his unshaven chin. A hail of smoke from his flared nostrils added another smell to Ira air. He danced round and round the base of the large tree, picked up another piece of paper bag, examined it and threw it up like a kite.

“Let the bulldozer come, Samson will teach them a lesson they will never forget. I will teach them I still have a soldier's blood in my body, I am ready now,” he laughed maniacally and disappeared behind the tree.

“See you later *maan*,” Rastaman said to him.

I watched as the shadows of everything disappeared into a secret world and darkness gradually took over the color of the evening. We were thrown into an expected gloom, except for Old Samson's cigarette that glowed as he entered his house. I coaxed fire out of my dying joint and closed my window. I did not see Lola come out to the compound.

As I fumbled around for matches to light the lantern I heard her immutable vibrant voice, “Useless people, na ogun go kill all of una for that NEPA office,” Lola was cursing out the National Electric Power Authority for not providing electricity. The pretty, yet rebellious university student next door, once told me she would tie herself to one of the bulldozers in protest. Since that day, I felt connected to her more than before. When I was an undergraduate I had harbored such rebellious spirit, thinking I could change the minds of dictators by taking part in numerous demonstrations, painting and writing signs on placards from morning till night. Many of my friends were shot in cold blood in open daylight; their young bodies dragged

into waiting Black Maria military vans to unidentifiable mass graves. Yet, not even one single thing changed in the country. I only hoped Lola would graduate alive. She had no business living in Ira; Lola was from a well-known wealthy family from Abeokuta. Ira was for the poor and downtrodden.

On numerous occasions we had to walk to the Volks Bus Stop together all Lola talked about was revolution this, revolution that. In her third year, along with some students, they took an empty coffin to government house at Dodan Barracks and set it on fire. Before guard soldiers could stop them, they had made their point. Most nights I would hear her reciting inciting poetry, dishing it out to past and present governments, *“The mongoose hunt for her snake – the snake pray for her hen – feeble minds become pallbearer for heroes – wisdom has become the rags of the homeless – pain has tears – rain has eyes”*. But I preferred her lighter and sensuous poems, they drove me bananas. I heard one that I could have sworn was directed to me – I heard our old discussion woven inside the poem. I was the only person she spoke to in the compound, because we always I talked to her about my days in the university. Lola said Rastaman was not a true freedom fighter, just “a hungry imitator of an unknown movement,” and Rastaman thought we were already “fucking”, so, “let jah be praised.”

Her love poems set me on fire. One night after I smoked a long joint with Rastaman I imagined Lola and me together: The softness of her bed welcomed me. My hands were all over her nakedness like cow tongue on a newborn calf. We were bathing in the River Niger and she filled the entire river with lavender smell. Petals of roses like waterfall dropped from the sky forming a bed of floating redness. From Zanzibar to Zambezi we swam in eternity. Her moaning dragged the moon to the window and our sweat and breath became a symbiotic existence. That night I woke with a soaked pajamas. When I asked her about the poem the next day, she laughed coyly and said, “Nigeria is my lover, my dying muse.” I felt deflated, but smiled too and nodded.

I thought about the bulldozers and wondered if Lola would actually commit suicide by tying herself to the big destructive machine. What would I do when the day eventually arrived? Would I be man enough to protest, knowing that the top brass of General Ibrahim Babangida’s regime wanted to drive us away so they could steal the land and build mansions? Ira was only a few kilometers to the most beautiful beach in Africa. Would I ever be able to tell Lola that she was enveloping me into a world that was more uncertain than that of Ira? Or does she already know? Lola. Lola. If I decided to form a human fence with her and the soldiers kill both of us, who would come to look for our mashed bodies? Would BBC or CNN report the incident to the entire world? What was our bodies, one jobless graduate and one beautiful rebellious student – worth to the world? I discarded the grisly thoughts and lit my lantern. *“Flap your wings in my night o blind bat – embrace the hunting season and pray for your innocent prey”*.

I dragged the jute bag of used clothes and started emptying the contents on my bed. The used clothes I sold to make a living needed sorting and repackaging. As I flung rumpled clothes to the side of the bed, I was overcome with anger and frustration. Where was the damn electricity? I asked nobody in particular. As I stewed in my anger, the kerosene in my lantern ran out and a thick soot of darkness fell upon

me. Lola's room was quiet too; she had probably gone out for some fresh air after her last recital. I decided to go to Sweet Mama's bar and eat rice and drink a bottle of beer on credit. Lola came there sometimes to relax too. On my way, I lit the left over wrap of marijuana I had in my breast pocket.

The streets were darker, except for some few hurricane lanterns of women selling cigarettes and other minor provisions. The shadow of Old Samson could be seen shuffling around inside his house. The threadbare Nigerian flag tied to a dry bamboo stake in front of his house trembled noisily. I took the narrow but shorter path to Sweet Mama's bar. This was the seedier part of the slum, frothy with low life criminals and prostitutes who behaved as if they did not hear about the bulldozers. A nocturnal smell swelled in the air around me. I walked past Good Health Chemist store, our only source of healthcare in this part of the city. The owner, a pot-bellied man named Calistus was sitting on a verandah bench. He was bare-chested, giving him the look of a pregnant bush pig. A candle sputtered behind him as he fanned himself with a shirt that was supposed to cover his beer barrel stomach. Women in labor went to him, children with jaundiced eyes ran to him, boys with broken bones also went to Mr. Calistus. He too would have to move soon, but I doubt if he would find another store for his chemist. Cheap accommodation had been one of the reasons he set up his store in Ira, despite rampant robberies in the area. Just a few weeks ago he was robbed to the very last cotton wool in the chemist. The armed robbers took all his money - all the gains from dealing on fake drugs disappeared. He was found tied to the leg of a table in the morning, whimpering. He was lucky to be alive.

I swapped away a whining mosquito as I walked past some men drinking loudly in another dingy bar; Ira was full of small bars, meeting places for armed robbers and hoodlums before embarking on their nightly terrors. A youth ran by me in the dark, smelling of fermented fufu. I thought it was Jimoh, but he disappeared behind a building without a word, and a waft of smoke trailed behind him.

Along this road was Salamander Hotel where young prostitutes with painted faces and long wigs called on passersby to come for a quick one. One called out to me, "Customer come, I am young and fresh." Another familiar voice came from the semi-dark verandah of the hotel; it was that of Ginger, my co-tenant. Not knowing it was me, she hollered "Come - come and taste the goodness of life that is between my legs - I go do you wetin your girlfriend no gree do for you." I laughed and inhaled my joint deeply. I would rather die than enter Salamander, which stank all the way to the roadside of cheap drink, cheap perfume and unwashed bodies. Where Lola is a fresh flower, Ginger is a decaying mushroom, I thought.

I kicked stones and avoided deep gutters as I wandered in the dark, towards Sweet Mama's bar, the only place where I could eat for credit. Before getting to my destination, the sky opened without warning. Lagos rains were always sudden. I made a sharp bend at a four-junction road and ran to the wide verandah of an old temple, recently converted to a church with a large signpost - THE SALVATION MINISTRY OF GOD'S CHILDREN. There were many like it in Lagos, with eclectic and creative names. As I watched the rain hammering the dark night, I wondered if this temple would also go. It was a landmark, built a long time ago. Rumor had it that it was built by some enslaved bricklayers and craftsmen. Ira was very close to Badagry Port, where the last batches of slaves were sorted before taken to the New World. Waiting

for the rain to subside, I started studying the double-doors that led to the inner sanctuary. The craftsmanship was obviously from another time. Whoever the artisan was took his time and put his heart and soul in crafting the temple doors. He brought to life an ordinary blank plank. The large-scale sculpting had numerous elongated and angular forms. The high relief and heavily textured images came to life. Each contour, corner and lines bore the keenness of a careful carver's eyes and chisel. The labyrinth of these doors had neither beginning nor end. I traced every centimeter of the lateral images with my fingers and went as high as my height allowed. There were two discernable figures that energized the center of the doors, a man and a woman in noble regalia riding a horse. Birds with iron beaks surrounded the two figures. Perching on the first horse rider's shoulder was another outlandish huge bird. The humongous bird's profile signified an eagle with sickle-curved talons. The motifs of carefully rendered feathers formed a sea of tiny incisions like the beakmarks of a persistent but undecided woodpecker. The bird's wings were spread to its fullness, forming an umbrella above the heads of the two royal horse riders. In between the marching hooves of the horse was a large animal whose immediate identity was not known to me. The head of the animal started out as a yawn or maybe a growl but petered out to a large fin of a sea monster. The geometric compositions of the tail fin formed the base of the door like small streams.

To the far right of the doors, horses pressed their hooves on groaning men, women and children. These people struggled to stand up from the heavy weight that rested on their chests and backs but they could not. Their rib cages that protruded from damaged tendons formed a gathering of brokenness.

In another place or life this double-door would have become a prized antique, the interest of seasoned and renowned ethnographers. It would have been an object sought by museum owners, world-class art collectors. In a country that had value for its cultural assets. An eccentric British tycoon would have paid handsomely for it or even have it stolen like they did back in the days at the Oba's palace in Benin City.

I stood by the temple transfixed until I saw myself merging into the door. As if it were a mirror. I traced the new angles that had become me. My face laughed at me jeeringly as if it was ashamed of its existence in my bony body. The door revealed me as a mask, broken but held together by sinews of suffering. My elongated head danced in my eyes. In my view an eagle adjusted its talons and flapped its large wings a couple of times, awakening the horses. As if crazed, the horses started kicking me with their hooves of iron. Old owl hooted and animals with human faces growled hungrily. The lion with fish tail swam back and forth impatiently, and other numerous polychromatic motifs started singing inside my head.

I did not know how long I was transfixed before a loud thunder broke the sky with sharp, jagged lightening. I ran inside the temple as wind started hurling rain water at me. The interior was illuminated by so many gas lights. On a Thursday evening, I was surprised to see men and women with flowing gowns dancing wildly and praying against the impending bulldozers. The tumultuous rain outside was silent inside the temple. Talking drums and maracas and gongs and long shiny trumpets formed a vibrating chorus of intoxicating music, the worshippers gyrated and became a whirlwind of dust and granulated pebbles. To think that praying would stop the maniacal military from destroying Ira made me laugh. Lola truly said that prayer had

replaced protest in Nigeria. We were going to the bus stop one day when we saw a group of Aladura church members ringing bell along Ira main road and Lola shook her head and asked, “If the Mau–Mau of Kenya were praying instead of waging jungle warfare, do you think the British would have given them independence?”

Like a cobra in mid strike, I saw the leader of the temple positioned his fin-like feet on the dusty uncarpeted floor and started to rise. His eyes lost its black pupils and irises, giving way to egg white sclera. A convulsion started as the congregation wove titillating songs of how David defeated Goliath in the bible. Ira people were David and the military government was the frightening Goliath. The drummers, made up of three robust boys in their early youth, gave their large drums the beating of their lives with sticks that looked like human femurs and hip bones. Women fell in trance, weaving back and forth almost naked from shouting and twirling.

While this riotous dance took over the entire building, my stomach rumbled with hunger. A pool of burning incense smelled strongly. The more I inhaled it the more it took on the odor of viaticum, as if I was attending a requiem mass for a departed soul.

The worshippers levitated beyond the deck that formed the roof of the temple. I fixed my gaze on their ascendance and watched as their eyes emitted fire in blue and yellow flames. One more look and three women were out of my site, forming a cloud towards the moon that was struggling to unclothe itself from a deep dark cloud. The other worshippers were sweating and crying as if unaware of what was going on. They rolled on the dusty bare floor screaming, “We bind the bulldozers, we bind the soldiers - whatever is bound on earth is bound in heaven”. Some were praying for the temple to be spared. When the drumming was ebbing, I eased myself out gently. The rain had subsided to a drizzle and I changed my mind of going to Sweet Mama’s bar.

Stars, cicadas, crickets and croaking frogs led me back to my dark room.

I changed to a dry pair of pajamas and I pried open the battery cage of my small Sony transistor radio and put some dry cell battery in it. Since no radio station in the country would carry any news about the impending destruction of Ira, I searched for BBC Africa, hoping to catch some news. The radio stations in the country had long been censored. Media houses that published or broadcast unfavorable news about the junta were raided, demolished. On daily basis, journalists disappeared without a trace.

BBC was not too clear, there was too much static either because of the rain or the battery was too weak to make the radio work. Since I couldn’t get to Sweet Mama’s bar or have battery to listen to the radio, I became conscious of my hunger again. I dumped dumb radio on the floor and walked across the room to get some Cabin biscuit from my cupboard. I took three pieces and closed the box back to prevent roaches from invading it. I bit into the dry biscuit and crumbs fell on the bare floor for ants and roaches that would come to feast later.

Lola was back and I heard her reciting line after line, as if committing it to memory – “*But the clenched fist of yesterday has withered with leprosy of betrayal – Now we box the shadow of a hollow ghost\ with arms that refused to swing*”, she repeated over and over again, moving the words around as she continued.

Coming to my room and listening to Lola made me dwell more on the end of our time here and I reflected on the poor people praying at the temple. I thought it funny that government never found bulldozers to fix the bad roads, yet there were many available to destroy Ira. My mind started swinging all over the place. I thought of what to take if I were to evacuate in a hurry and realized I had nothing of importance worth taking, except Lola, who I didn't believe would follow me anywhere. She had a home in a rich neighborhood to go, if she decided against her revolutionary plans. I came to Lagos because I did not want to return to the poverty of my village, to look for a better life in this mad city, but chaos had its open arms waiting for me. I drank a mouthful of water and lay down on my springy bed. Lola had gone silent, like the rest of the neighborhood and I fell asleep.

Staff sergeant Samson was standing erect. His eyes, like a possessed man, fixated on his fluttering flag. The green-white-green was a tattered rag of a national shame, at the mercy of rain and sun. It had been ten years since Old Samson said he moved to Ira, retired forcefully from the army. An unknown mission bullet had cut down his right leg and cut short his military career. The bitterness he felt in his mouth every morning while saluting this old flag could be seen in his ashen face. Bitterness towards his commandant that under-manned his post where his leg was shot by coup plotters. Bitterness towards the ineffective military orthopedic doctor who could have saved his leg, and career but decided on amputation instead. Bitterness towards his current Ira neighbors who thought him mad and were not ready to fight the bulldozers with him. Bitterness towards the false leg that never quite fitted his leftover stump. And bitterness towards the phantom itches of the absent leg. This daily petulance was incurable and it was driving him insane.

As he bellowed the last stanza of the national anthem, he instinctively caressed his old service pistol. The berretta was never taken from him and he went everywhere with it. An administrative mistake, like many others that had made him disappointed at the entire country he once lived and hoped to die for.

Staff sergeant Samson couldn't remember the last time he was truly happy. The joy of his first daughter's birth was cancelled out by the loss of his leg. The joy of his second daughter's birth was cancelled out by the death of his beloved wife. Every other joy of life was cancelled out by the near immobility and eternal prison in which his painful leg had abandoned him. Life to him was one dark bottle of ink. The memory of the letter bomb he delivered to a well-known newsmagazine editor haunted him. That assignment brought him bad luck instead of the promotion he had hoped for or was promised by commandant. He was used and spewed out.

The sharp morning sun penetrated his pupils, yet he did not squint. The orderly that served him morning tea while in the service walked past him. His youthful and loving wife swam past him. A column of junior officers marched past him like black ants. He stood alone in a parched and arid parade field. Standing at stiff attention he touched the head of his gun on the holster that rested at the hip of his shorter leg, the dead leg. He shifted his good left leg uncomfortably, the one that carried the burden of his sixty year old crumbling body. A body that was once robust from drinking good beer and fresh fish pepper soup at the Officer's Bar. A bar where young girls whose puberty and buttocks made commissioned officers go stiff in their groins. A bar that congregated every Friday night to boast about how many diamonds

each had from the war loots and how much money the new government had embezzled sending them to foreign wars. Poor people and stupid civilians chattering on their way to nowhere woke him from his lurid reverie.

“Good morning sir,” a woman greeted him and black butterflies escaped from her mouth.

He positioned the dark hollow end muzzle of the cold metal on his pulsating temple and ignored his throbbing kneecap, where wood met flesh. Where the living met the dead.

The single shot rang through the entire Ira neighborhood. Birds from the sycamore tree fluttered in fright and flight. A dog began to bark in the distance and the morning sun glided towards noon. Staff sergeant Samson fell on the ground; the smoking pistol flew out of his hand. Blood from his temple started flowing, forming a red river on the black Ira sand. I started screaming. As I examined Old Samson’s wound, I looked everywhere and the usually boisterous Ira was empty. The vicinity was void like the day before Creation. The birds and bats of the sycamore tree were gone. Jimoh, Ginger, Rastaman and landlady were all gone. Nobody was around, especially Lola. It seemed like the bulldozers had already come and leveled everything, both living and dead. “I need some help!” I screamed some more. Old Samson rolled his eyes and started laughing as a ghoulish image started leaving his body. I grabbed the ghost and wrestle him down, forcing it back into Old Samson’s limp body. If I’d let the ghost escape, Old Samson would be dead. The ghost raised his head again and I angrily slammed him back into the old man’s chest. As I looked closely at his face, he turned a large root of a sycamore tree. I kept hollering and it was the shouting and screaming that woke me up. And I found my head on Lola’s lap.

“Are you having a bad dream? I heard your screams, tossing around the whole place and I came in. Luckily your door was unlocked,” she explained her presence in my room.

I was flushed with embarrassment. I did not know what to say. I couldn’t tell her about the strange dream I had of Old Samson. Lola kept rocking me, and her scent filled my nose and started to arouse me.

“I am fine. You are right; I had a really bad dream. I am ok now,” I said.

“Is it about the bulldozers?” Lola asked, waiting for me to give her details.

“No, far from it – it is not that at all.”

“By the way, what exactly do you plan to do about the bulldozers – are you just going to fold your hands like Rastaman and other useless boys and watch them destroy this place?”

“Lola, we can not fight an army with bare hands. I have seen many of my friends gone, and please you need to be careful,” I said and hope she did not think me a coward.

“But we can try, to be silent is to partake.”

She started to caress my head as if I were a baby. I did not want her to discover what was happening to my raging body. She had never been that close to me, and to find my head on her lap was something my body could not curtail. She slid my head back to the pillow and patted my shoulders as if trying to pacify me back to sleep. Electricity came back in half current. The single overhead bulb gave a faint

illumination to the room. As Lola stood up to leave the room, I realized she had nothing under her pink nightdress and she became prettier than I had ever realized.

“Lola wait. I will do anything, if that is what you want. But lets not be foolish, please,” I said from where I was laying down.

“It is not about what I want, it is about the poor people of Ira who have no voice. It is about the future of this country, about jobless people like you.”

She started heating up and losing the beauty that accompanied her to my room. We locked looks, hers was to fight and mine was to make love.

“Sleep well Christopher, we will see tomorrow.”

“Thank you Lola,” I said breathlessly as my erection began to hurt.

She looked back and smiled, “You are welcome.” She left the room.

From that point, I prayed and hoped she would not tie herself to any bulldozer. I opened my eyes wide and froze the image of Lola’s wide and sensuous hips swaying through my door.

Early morning clanging of buckets against well walls woke me up. I opened my window to take in the morning scene of screaming children and my neighbors getting ready for their daily hustle. Old Samson’s house was silent. I looked tensely through the tattered curtains that served as his door, but there was no movement. I was about to ask Rastaman if he had seen Old Samson when he staggered towards the sycamore tree. He must have gone to scavenge in an overnight party, I thought. Ira people were used to scavenging big parties in rich neighborhood, where alcoholic beverages and jollof rice were left over in tables. Only God knew where Old Samson went, because there were no longer rich people anywhere near us. His eyes were bulbous as he rested one hand against the tree trunk, clearly drunk, he started to urinate.

Lola came through the back door, slinging a book bag around her left shoulder. A silk scarf bunched her hair to a rising ponytail. She wore faded jeans that clung to her thighs tightly. The black T-shirt she wore had the inscription “SOUL REBEL” in crimson red. The T-shirt was too tight and too short; her deep navel stared at me like a one-eyed owl. I wanted to tell her not to tie herself to the bulldozer, that it was probably not worth it. I wanted to let her know that the soldiers would not hesitate to shoot her and nothing would come out of it. I wanted to tell her that ideologies that cater to monumental changes are fluffy at a young age, but ridiculous when one gets older. But after last night, cowardice or semblance of it was not a trait I wanted to advertise too blatantly to Lola. One must be careful in catching a mouse from an earthen pot, if the pot must be saved.

My eyes met Lola’s and she had a knowing smile hovering round her mouth.

“I hope you are feeling better now, oga?” She asked as she walked past my window.

“Yes, thank you so much for -,” she cut me short with, “Don’t mention” before I could finish my sentence. She never spoke to me at length whenever Rastaman was within earshot.

Rastaman came into view as well. He started singing Bob Marley’s “Stand up for your Rights,” when he saw me and Lola talking. I greeted Rastaman and Lola swayed away towards the bus stop on her way to campus. No matter what, I must let

Lola know my mind tonight, I thought. There was no use wasting time anymore. I should write poem and code my heart in words, a farmer must waste some corn to catch a chicken.

“Hey man – when you marry her, I will jam at the wedding for free man!” Rastaman said with loud laughter that revealed his missing frontal teeth.

“Thank you Rastaman I will remember that, but nobody is marrying anybody. You have any good joint on you?”

“All gone man – till dem boys come back from Ajegunle with some more.”

“Alright, let me know.”

I went back inside my room. Unsold used clothes piled up in a corner. I thought about ironing and refolding them. But I did not feel like going to Lagos Island to sell used clothes. I unexpectedly felt ashamed of hawking okrika, used clothes. It was not considered a job anyways. Lola made it even clearer for me last night, when she lumped me along with “jobless people.” I was probably a joke to her too – a university graduate who was afraid to stand up and fight for his right to exist. All the protests I participated in as student were now stale, an old song no longer suitable for the current dance. A veil of shame descended upon me and my hatred for the regime and the coming bulldozers surged. I decided against the love poem I had planned to write for Lola. She did not need any love poem from me; she needed me to show love for Ira, for my country. I paced around the room thinking of the best way to confront the bulldozers when they come. I walked to my window, folded my palms and rested my chin on the window frame, narrowly missing a spider. Close to the well, Ginger scooped water from a tin bucket and poured it on Sefirat’s back, avoiding her crippled daughter’s plaited hair. Openly my landlady was berating Jimoh for wetting his sleeping bed, while struggling with her wrapper that was almost off her waist. Old Samson robotically circled his bamboo flagpole, stopping at mini-intervals to stare at the rising sun. Rastaman had fallen asleep under the sycamore tree, he rested his head on the base of his wooden guitar, burnt out incenses formed a pool of ashes at his feet. A low branch of the ancient sycamore tree provided an answer for my dilemma. The tree branch was low enough for me to climb in waiting for the bulldozers.

## THE PEOPLE YOU WILL MEET IN MY VILLAGE

Yesterday your sister was ecstatic. She said you’d been posted to my country and to be quite honest with you, I couldn’t tell why she was so excited about it. When she showed me the piece of paper where she’d wrote the village name, I realized it was my birthplace, my very own village, Uwessan. And all I could say was “Wow!”

“You must be kidding me!”, “You gotta to be shitting me!” Excuse my French, I have being in America too long to avoid the usual expletives.

By way of intro, I am your sister’s co-worker. Technically I work as a security guard. She felt I might have one or two advice for you. Some kind of survival tips; like those offered by your State Dept. to first time traveler to foreign countries, nothing too elaborate.

Honestly, the first thing that came to my mind during my discussion with your sister was oil. I thought you were a geologist or seismologist who worked for an oil company in Houston; because your sister said you lived in Texas. I concluded that you were going to my village for the usual initial exploratory mission when oil is discovered, before the heavy machineries are deployed. This was my line of thought: he is going to check the truth or fallacy of the claim that there is oil underneath my earth. Well, I don’t doubt that there is oil under my village, considering the surrounding expansive rivers that we fished as adventurous teenagers and sometimes saw Olokun, the river goddess, rising with the morning sun with hair full of double-tailed salamander. When all this thoughts jammed up my head, I told myself, I hope he finds nothing. But your sister said you were volunteering as a Peace Corp to my village.

Then again, I thought, hmmm...why would peace crop members go to a village that was not at war? Does he just assume that the whole of that world was always at war? Does he buy into the hype that we are helpless self-consumers? Sorry to be this paranoid, I have seen so much.

Anyway, I am not going to dwell so much on why picked my village, humans always seek what they haven’t experienced – no matter how senseless. Like me, a graduate of English Literature, seeking a better life in America and guarding a peaceful office building in the heart of Washington, D.C. that a burglar in his right mind would never go near. I sit hear and do nothing – try killing time when you are idle, you will see how difficult it is to catch a dragonfly with bare hands. So writing this advice to you has given me something to do till morning comes. And I hope you find it useful like a map to an amateur hiker who is bound to get lost anyway.

I don’t know how you intend to get to my village, because the only road leading to that interior part of the country is treacherous during the raining seasons. Maybe your embassy will help you out. They know how avoid the highways and go through the bush paths with big Land Rover. But it would have been good for you to ride on the back of a Peugeot pickup van, where you will get to meet the Uwessian market women one on one as they tell tales of the old, while some hold cocks in their hands. You would have experienced the strength of these women as they bunch up their wrappers, remove their slippers and sandals to dig out the pickup from mud hole after mud hole. A young mother would not have minded your presence while she breast feeds her crying infant. Things women don’t do here or do behind closed doors. My village market women would have told you tales and laugh at your nasal inflection. They would have relaxed your tensed nerves. Some would have touched your skin, thinking it would rub on their fingers like wet chalk – but too bad you are going to be riding on an air-conditioned Land Rover, driven by a local driver that speaks broken English and you would be muted in the back seat as if you were a goat that was tired of protesting on its way to the slaughter house.

The first person you are going to meet in my village is Chief Edenogie. In front of his house is a water tap. It is just called tap because of its shape, it has never worked since I was a child. It is only good for a landmark, someone might say to his friend, “Meet me by the tap”, so in a way the tap is as useful as the Washington Monument or the Capitol.

The village Chief is known as Odionwele, and you must prostrate on the floor to greet the old man. Never stretch your hand for a handshake as if you were greeting a local senator from your district. The old man is ancient and you are recent. When you greet him say, Zaiki! Say it very loud because his ear-drums are about 104 years old. His hair is white like fresh snow on a black maple tree. He will stare at your face with dim old eyes and hold your hands with his brittle fingers. He will read your mind with eyes closed. He will smile and pray for you as if you have good intentions. He will ask for white chalk from his palace messenger and sprinkle it on your chest in blessings, don't be offended if your shirt is ruined. Oh that reminds me; don't bother taking white clothing with you to my village. The earth there is dusty and red. Red like palm oil. Red like when you turn red at an embarrassing joke in a neighborhood bar. Red like the eyeballs behind a black eye gotten from an abusive lover. Yes my earth is red, like a freshly dug grave. Take clothes that have earth tone colors. Jeans and khaki will be fine as pants (known as trousers there). The Chief will certainly offer you kola nut, do not refuse or he will be suspicious. Only an enemy refuses kola nut, (A peace corps looking for fun in a peaceful African village is not an enemy, right?). Accept the kola nut and respect my tradition. To his incantations to our ancestors and yours that first arrived there years ago, say a loud Pentecostal “Amen”. While he holds the kola nut in his old and sinewy fingers trying to break the lobes, be patient, he is not senile. You must develop a taste for kola nut; its bitterness is different from Starbucks coffee. If he also offers you bitter kola (different from kola nut) accept it fast, it will save your life in the bushes. It is the best antidote to a snake's bite, trust me. If you are afraid of snakes, you should stay back in Texas. My village has snakes the way National Geographic has pictures of tribal Africans. We even have one permanent pre-historic Boa in our community shrine, the high priest might let you see it – you are a white man, you can be accorded such honor.

Right after you step out of the Chief's palace, children will mob you. Please don't be offended, my village as you will see is far from any coastal city, so they don't get to see a white man everyday. Fr. Kelly, the old Irish priest that used to come is dead. You are a white elephant; no pun intended. Just let them call you Oyinbo, Whiteman. They might even sing for you and touch you and look at their hands to see if you rub off on them. Kids are curious everywhere, it is a universal phenomenon. The first year I got here, some white kids did that to me when I went to Frederick, Maryland, to buy goat meat in their father's farm. They came, all blue eyes staring at me and my friend, Abel. The tall lanky one stretched out his hand while we waited for our meat to be cut. He ran his fingers on my bare arm and looked at it as if I was from Mars. I laughed nervously as he left disappointed and his dog remained sniffing behind us as if unconvinced that we were not from Mars.

Sitting in verandahs in the hot tropical evenings will be farmers. Some young men will be playing a game of draught, swatting flies with their Cowboy or Redskins T-shirts that they bought at Okrika market, a second hand clothing depot. You may think, "I found a fellow fan of my team", but trust me, they don't know jack about American football. The sports T-shirt is just a piece of clothing, like a dashiki to you. What they are used to is football, which you know as soccer, (you might even see kids playing in the dusty sand using a battered orange as a soccer ball). Most of these men have just returned from the farms and are still too tired to explore their curiosity, you. They will be fanning themselves while they drink a native brew called ogogoro. Stay away from that shit, it is worst than Jack Daniels' Black Label whiskey. It will mess you up like you don't know what. Try the palm wine. The white frothing wine from tropical palm trees is sweet and heavenly but be careful because it can mess you up too. But one good thing about it is that it is the greatest aphrodisiac in the whole wild world - wink wink.

By the time you leave the Chief's house and observe the narrow streets and wild flowers by the main pond, it will be dark. An African village night is unlike any night you have ever seen. It is beautiful and ugly, at the same time. The night is dark, yet lit to those that are familiar with the terrain. My village's twilight is music to the ears. Cicadas do Beethoven and crickets do Vivaldi. Fireflies paint miniature kaleidoscopic Picasso and wipe them out before you grasp the images. Trees become human and humans become trees wearing bats as hats. Shadow can be anything in an African night; the spirits come to play when the moths are mute. Tread carefully; our nights have no friend or foe.

I am sure you would be thinking of a Holiday Inn, but Taxona Hotel, the only habitable place for a white man under this circumstance is another twenty miles away. As you would have seen, the roads are bad in the afternoon and murderous at night. So I would advise that you ask any villager to take you to my father's house. They all know him; just ask anyone for the compound of Cocoa Man. My father was a cocoa trader until he died. That is where he made his money with which he built the house where you would likely sleep and also the money that brought me to America.

You might not notice this but the house is painted blue. Like ocean blue on a warm day. Like your blue eyes. Like blue which I turn when I am cold in winter, waiting for the No.12 bus. On the south flank of the house, where my mother's goats scratch their itchy backs, it looks like the color of dried cow dung. Apart from my mother and some people I will tell you about later, do not tell any other villager you know me. Unless you are ready to answer a million and one questions: "What does he do?", "Is he married to a white woman?", "Is he a big man over there?", "How many cars does our son have?" Nobody knows that I am a security guard in America – we that come here never write home about such things. Even in America here, I tell friends that I am a security analyst.

Lest I forget, my mother doesn't speak any other word of English apart from "welcome." So ask for Amos, the store owner of PROPERTY PROVISIONS STORE. Amos lives very close to my father's compound. He is trustworthy; though a grammar school drop-out, he has a good command of the English Language the way I believe you like it. He will translate between you and my mother, just be patient and

be slow in your speaking. I have been in America for almost ten years now and I can hardly hear what my boss is saying.

When you get to my house, you will likely be given my old room. It is the last room on the left, of the eight rooms in my father's cement-block house built in 1970, right after the war, when cocoa was still cocoa in my country. To know it is my room, you will find a small reading table and a hand-made bamboo bookshelf. Most of my early literature books are there. You will find Chaucer, Milton and The Complete Works of Shakespeare. You will find almost all the novels written by a British writer called James Hadley Chase, I grew up on those and he sold America to me. It was in Chase's novels I first read about Miami as the "millionaire's playground". His novels were also the first place I found out that most American sheriffs do not like strangers nosing around in their little one-stop-light towns. You can borrow any of these books, that is, if you did not take your John Grisham or David Baldacci novels. Please do not touch my first edition of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Denis Brutus' *A Simple Lust* or Christopher Okigbo's brittle copy of *Labyrinth* or even my James Baldwin's *Collected Essays*, someday when I get my green card and I am able to visit my village again I would like to read his *A Stranger In The Village*.

Also, do not touch my Madonna poster on the wall facing my bed. On it I wrote her famous quote with a biro, "Poor is the man whose pleasures depends on the permission of another". Many nights that girl, Madonna, consoled me when my village heartthrob stood me up. Sometimes teenage nights can be stiff, believe me.

Whatever you do, don't wander to the room on the far right. It is sacred. That is where my father was buried; it is our tradition to inter an elder in his bedroom.

Try my mother's egusi soup and pounded yam, it is the best in the world. I hope you are not a vegetarian, because you will be hilarious in my village. There are many hunters that will bring you delicious bush meat. To say you only feed on leaves like a goat will astound them. You will see fishes with heads bigger than the hood of a Mercedes Benz. That is why I pray everyday that oil should not be found in my village, because all that would be gone in a minute. You must try the fish pepper soup, and I must warn you it is fire. It is like packing hot coals and halopinos in your mouth at the same time – but pleasure awaits he who endures. You would want to go to bathroom the first time you try it, but don't worry it doesn't take time to get used to. Your Big Mac gave me the runs when I first ate it. That reminds me, there is no indoor plumbing in my father's big house or any other house in the village. You must take a walk to the latrine at the back of the house, even at night. Take the hurricane lamp with you, to avoid soldier ants or stepping on piglets. The spiders whose web will form a film on your face are not poisonous; ignore them even when you are naked. Don't mind the rats roaming the toilet, life is a rat race.

When in bed and your mind ruminates your experience so far, ignore the sounds of the hooting owls; you can never discern their messages. Only villagers can read the voice of the night birds. But if the owls hoot consistently as if they are part of Philadelphia Philharmonic orchestra, you must leave the village at cockcrow, for some shit is about to hit the village roof.

The bathrooms in my father's house have no mirrors. Villagers are not obsessed with themselves in the bathroom, neither should you. And if you look anything like your sister, you definitely should not worry. She is a pretty woman.

If you like my father's house you can stay there for free. The village is not like Washington, DC where one pays rent with his life savings for a cold basement room. It is an honor to have you, the brother of a friend, stay in my house in the village. I may be a squatter in your country, it doesn't matter. I am the owner of that house in the village, my father left it for me. I am pretty sure you will be carrying out your first exploratory research in my father's backyard too, because there is so much tradition behind that house. My father's land runs into the vast forest where Amese the god of whirlwinds resides. I tell you, that forest is frightening because even during the day, the sun can not penetrate those ancient oak and obeche trees. Hopefully wood traders have not found themselves there. In that case I might not even recognize my village by the time I eventually get a green card to visit, I can bet my fake work permit on that.... Anyway, I got carried away a bit just thinking how my landscape would be when I finally return, that is if I ever do. What will I meet? I am sure the shrine and the boa would have gone. And to be honest with you, that would be like wreck-balling the Library of Congress in Washington DC. But who cares, everything is oral in my village and like everything else we would carry the memory of the shrine and the ancient boa in our minds like pall bearers carrying an oversized casket.

Depending on when you get to my village, you may fall into the season of Elimonto, ancestral spirit masquerades that cleanse the village at night. I really hope you do not encounter this season, which could be bad for strangers. Ask Amos the store keeper to tell you all about these spirit masquerades. They come out at midnight, with mournful voices that wail acid into one's bone marrows. Please, I beg you, do not let curiosity unlatch the door of your room when you hear them wailing and barking like crazy dogs. Their voices are unmistakable, you might think you have heard such voices before, but I tell you nothing compares to it. Not even those dim-witted simulated voices on Michael Jackson's Thriller. These masquerades carry machetes; no army not even your Marines can find your trace if you dare to attend their macabre operation. I tell you, it will be useless even if your Marines invade my village like Grenada. The night masquerades are faceless like your undercover CIA in foreign missions. We villagers don't even know where these spirit masquerades come from. So be careful, remember the African night has neither friend nor foe.

The next important person you will meet is the village headmaster who is also the catechist and post master. He reads every letter that comes to the village before delivering it. He is a colonial cloning experiment that went awry. He is a native, with a mind stuck in the mud of yesterday. The headmaster is a relic of British rule, a distressing case of "colonial mentality". A half assimilated old man who often wears a chain watch on his belt and a metal helmet on sunny days. Don't be surprised if Mr. Peter, that is his name, wears a three-piece suit just because you are around. Whenever he sees a white man, he wags his invisible tail and smiles endlessly. He speaks English; God forbids that he speaks the native language in front of a Whiteman. Words and spittle tumble out of his mouth like waterfall. His frontal teeth have given way to pinkish gum, allowing English words to phonetically inhabit foreign resonance. Mr. Peter will take you on a tour of the primary school, hoping you would donate some books to the children learning under rusted zinc roofs. Or

those learning under the pear tree. He wouldn't know what you are there for. Believe it or not, that primary school was where I started my educational journey and when I was five. Mr. Peter admitted me to Primary One by making me loop my right hand to touch my left ear as a sign that I was grown enough to start school. That was the only admission test needed, something the British taught him. I will always remember the beginning of the journey that led me to a university in the city all the way to America with another man's passport and visa and work permit to work for \$7 an hour with taxes taking half of it. I was once one of those kids under the sun, screaming God Bless the Queen. Don't feel sorry for them, they are used to it and some will make it out unscathed. Besides, there is nothing you can do about the dilapidated condition. You are just an ordinary Peace Corps not Rockefeller or Ford Foundation or the Federal Government of Nigeria.

Mr. Peter will tell you how a white man like you (don't bother telling him that you are an American volunteer, different from a British colonialist) established St. Kelvin Primary School and named it after his son in the early 1950s. Show some interest in the broken benches and falling blackboards. Tell him you will see what you can do about chalk supply, so that he can stop teaching with charcoal. Tell him you will see what you can do to get them the Globe for geography so the children will know the world is round and America is so far away from their folktale songs under the sun. Don't bother telling the children, who will greet you in high octave voices "Good Morning Sah!", that instead of counting with their dusty fingers, there are calculators and computers for children their age in every home in America. They won't understand. Moreover that is not why you are in my village. You are there to get away from the excess life of your country; you are there on a mini-vacation to clear your head. Or gather material probably for a novel you would title Whiteman. If you want to make Mr. Peter's day, tell him that you will talk to some people who would talk to the governor to ask the President to supply notebooks and textbooks to the school. He will smile and thank you and the stock of a white man in his chart would rise beyond its previous height.

The next person you will certainly meet is a young man named Lucky. Lucky is a university dropout, not because he is not brilliant, but for lack of funds to continue his education. You see, there are no scholarships for the brilliant in my village. His uncle who was his benefactor had an accident and bled to death on the spot, no ambulance and the hospitals are dead. Case closed. But you will definitely meet him; he has remained in the village, hoping for a better day. He has no one in the city to stay with, not even a friend. Everybody believed he lost it when his uncle died. He hallucinates sometimes and has taken to smoking newspapers and elephant grass before I left home. I wouldn't say he is completely mad, because I have seen addicts in high places here. But something about Lucky is not quite right. He will strike up a conversation with you and laugh endlessly. He will help you around in the bushes if you choose to explore a tropical forest. You don't have to worry about paying him, he will just be happy to find someone to talk to. Villagers try to avoid him, especially when he starts talking about America and London, places he has never been. He is useful in his own ways; someone that speaks English and has read most American magazines would have something to talk to you about. Lucky was the

first to bring the village a Playboy magazine; he charged me ten bucks to look just at the center fold. He was still in the university then, and I was in my final year of grammar school. I remember telling myself, a land where a woman would let you take her pictures without any piece of clothes must be really free. It must be a country where you can walk up to a girl and say take your clothes off, especially when you have a camera. Now I laugh at my naiveté, or should I call it stupidity. But I was a villager then, a teenager that did not know better. But for all intent and purpose, several years later the thought of seeing a naked white girl like the one on Lucky's magazine fueled my zeal to come to America. Once again, Lucky is not a mad man, maybe suffering from hopelessness which is like common cold in the country.

Interestingly you will meet my Uncle Fredrick. He is a jack of all trades. The Sanford of Sanford and Sons in the family. His house has everything; a spare tire, a wheel, a hammer, a broken magnifying lens, a transistor radio with a wire tied to its antennae snaking all the way to the top of his leaking corrugated zinc roof, an old bicycle hanging from the ceiling, his motorcycle dripping oil and staining the sand, two depressed sofas and an old Yashica camera in his parlor. I couldn't tell you what his profession is, but I know he takes photographs, runs numbers, repairs bicycles, fix motorcycles, does vulcanizing, all in front of his house under a shady tree. If you want to catch a whiff of the village gossip, his stall is your best bet. His place is a watering hole, where you are likely going to meet Mr. Peter attending to a tumbler of warm beer. Don't worry about the language of gossip; Uncle Fredrick or Mr. Peter will translate for you the laughter that doubles men up. You will also be able to read several weeks-old newspapers in his stall. You can tell him you know me, and he won't charge you an arm and a leg to render you any service. He has a good heart and he once worked with white people in a port city before independence. After the country's independence and all the white men left the country he too moved to the village. He is one of those that did not know what to do with the freedom called "Independence". He never stopped whining about "Why do we have to fix what was not broken?", "The British were good people and knew how to run things and paid salary on time", "Look at the country now, these stupid soldiers don't know one, two or three about government!." He would make a sweeping motion with his greasy hands as if his workshop was the entire country. But I love my uncle; he always gave me money when I was in school. He will treat you right.

You will certainly think there is no fun to be had in a backward African village like mine, where children look like clay effigies and women still breast-feed in the open while hawking goat meat openly and discussing the remains of the day. Don't be a fool, trust me, that village without electricity, pipe borne water or even gas light has a thousand mega-watt funs. You just have to know the right people and the right corner.

On regular weeknights tell Amos or Lucky to take you to Cecelia's Place. Sweet memories are what you will take away from that bar, if you are the type that doesn't care about color or race when it comes to catching fun. I can tell you that she was the one that turned many village boys to men. When I was a teenager, she too was a younger woman who had just returned from the city. She opened the local bar

after her husband said he did not want her and her three year old daughter any more. And no other man would marry a "second-hand" woman in my village. The men of my village can be picky when it comes to the kind of woman they marry, yet liberal when it is just for good old fun. It is not like here in America where a woman can be divorced ten times with grown children and still be able to marry as many times as she wish.

Anyway, as I was saying, back then, a young boy that had money would stay in Cecelia's bar like butterfly on over-ripe mango. Things were not expensive then and AIDS was not a word not to talk of disease. All the boy had to do was buy two bottles of beer and nurse them till midnight, waiting for others to leave. Then Cecelia would lead the boy to her inner chamber. The room was all red. The curtain hanging over the springy bed was red silk. The bed sheet and pillow covers were red velvet. The coffee table had red Formica. Red candles wafted waxy smell in the room and her Saturday Night talcum powder would be sprinkled everywhere to give the room a Potpourri aroma. She would reduce the intensity of the illumination from the kerosene lantern and take the boy's virginity to distant sensual places while his heart beat a thousand drums.

If Cecelia's bar is closed, which I doubt very much, there are many grown ups in the village. Once again, just tell Amos the kind of girl you like and it will be arranged for you. It is only in America that age difference matters. Many expatriate workers in my country date girls that are twenty years younger than them. Just make sure it is not somebody's wife, which is still a big taboo in my village. Not the village Chief, Uncle Frederick, Amos, Lucky, the village Headmaster, my mother, or anyone for that matter can save you from the wrath of the husband if you are caught.

Now, if you find a village girl you admire don't try to be lovey-dovey. When it comes to love, things are quite different in my village. We are yet to be globalized in your amorous ways. Don't try to hold your lover's hand in mid afternoon as if you are touring the Washington National Arboretum. She wouldn't like that kind of public display of affection. Daylight makes her shy, like bat. Besides, in my village public displays of affection are only exhibited by domestic animals. And if you are lucky and she agrees to take a small walk with you, do not try to kiss her in the public. Or start plucking flowers for her; that is just something for you people.

If you really want to be adventurous with your lover take her to my old hideaway. There is a tiny path that leads through the back of my house into my father's old cocoa farm. There is an old farm hut, run your fingers at the top of the lintel and you will find a key to the padlock. The place is not like your farm house here, so don't get any fanciful ideas in your head. It is bare earth and dusty. But the sand is smooth and gentle on the skin. Just be mindful of ants finding their ways to the wrong zone, you might end up dancing all night chasing them instead of making love. Regardless, the cocoa farm hut provides respite and privacy, far from nosy villagers. Remember the village girl is nocturnal; she comes alive at night when no one listens, so wait till it is a bit dark.

When you are done with everything, dab some local perfume call Sensorobia on your body. Your lover probably has some wrapped round her wrapper. This is to ward off the smell of semen that attracts village dogs and make them bark senselessly. Sensorobia is sold by a local Hausa street hawker. He is the same man

that sells an erectile dysfunction chewing sticks known as Burantashi. Unlike the colognes you would buy at Macy's or Lord and Taylor's with your monthly income, the village perfume is cheap. This Hausa hawker is another very important person you must meet. Like I said, he also sells Burantashi, which is like the Goat Weed sold at American gas stations or Red Bull energy drink except that Burantashi is a more potent herb that turns your lifeless water hose to a horse powered piston.

One warning note, do not forget your supply of "life jacket", I heard AIDS has crept into my village. There they call it the Slim Disease because of the way it eats up a victim before death comes. And the villagers also believe it is caused by some unknown bad spirit. A word is enough for the wise, as my mother would say.

On nights when you decide to roam around the village aimlessly, be careful so you don't trample a crippled woman that lives at the edge of the forest. She has no wheelchair and she only comes out at night. You see, in my village there is nothing like a wheel chair. Her tiny hut is right around the corner from the road that leads out of the village, away from the general public and closer to the bush than any house. She will know who you are, she knows everything despite the fact that she only comes out at night. How she survives nobody knows. And she has two grown up twin - boys, whose father nobody knows. I recommend her to you because she is the soothsayer, if you are interested in your future. She was the first to tell me that I would travel very far away, to a land that has so many people that look like the Irish priests, Fr. Kelly – she did not know the name "America".

We have no night clubs or lounges but don't miss the Kokoma dance on Friday nights. Everything has changed but Kokoma highlife remains. This is very different from your ball room dance; it is more like Mardi Gras. Every young man looked forward to it when I was at home. It is well organized and very well managed. The performers are ageless and for some reason I grew up to meet them performing and I left them behind in the village, performing. On Friday evenings you will hear them practicing on their musical instruments. That is the only time you will see a form of electricity in my village, because they will rent a power generator for the show. At the entrance to the dance you will meet a giant of a man called Koboko Shanta (not his real name, but any aficionado of the Kokoma dance knows to get a good nickname or he can kiss fame goodbye). You can't miss him; one side of his face is like toasted bread. Koboko Shanta mans the gates and collects gate fees and he is also the grey hair bouncer, our Hulk Hogan. He is known to have thrown many rowdy men through the roof or over high mud walls into thorny bushes. He will be wearing a burgundy beret, whose seams have been eaten by roaches. He wears old military boots, worn out. He carries no weapons; no need for any because he can kill a man with his bare hands if there is any need for murder. He worked for politicians during the 1979 elections as a thug and boasted of killing many men that opposed his political party. He told us that he was shot numerous times but no bullets penetrated his body; he is a juju man. Be nice to him and your life will be heavenly in the village.

The Kokoma band is made up of men and women. Awilo Kotoko is the one on the rusty saxophone; he plays the trumpet. The youngest is Gerado Pino, he plays

the clarinet. Karoki Dabuza (I believe his nickname is derived from karaoke) plays the bass guitar. Area Papa is on bongos and drums. Vasco Dagama is the lead singer. Belasco De Hill (or De Hill Belasco) plays the gong and he is also a back up soprano. The three backup singers are Veronica, Alice and Dorcas. They are ageless, but they all are grandmothers in their own right. If you have a tape recorder, you are free to record their music. You will be amazed at the sound when you replay it later. You will hear highlife/jazz/blues/meringue/salsa all fused together. Some slow jams will make you think you just woke Dizzy Gillespie and Ella Fitzgerald from their beautiful sleep. This group of local musicians will embrace you with all their hearts. Everything and anything you do will be a source of song for them. The way you talk, walk or make love will be scrutinized and made into kokoma songs. You can buy a song, the same way you do in American bars and they will play it for you. Watch how the girls dance as if they are being carried by an invisible whirlwind.

Tell Koboko Shanta that I sent you, Manu De Manu, which was my name as a member. He will welcome you with an open arm and let you in for free, maybe. I played *Ukoise*, maracas, before I left for Lagos, then America.

Finally the last person you will meet will be Angelina. She lives with my mother. She is not my sister. She is the reason I look forward to tomorrow, despite the stony-gravels life feeds me in America. She is the reason I endure my green-card marriage with Emelia, a woman so fat my hands can not even go round her waist. Angelina is the only reason I endure the humiliation of handing Emelia my hard earned money. Emelia is a lazy chain smoker with two grown up children who wouldn't even say good morning to me in the morning, yet they empty my fridge. Whenever I complain of these things, Emelia threatens me with deportation, amidst a hail of Marlboro Lights. "Fucking alien," she calls me. But nobody will call you "fucking alien" in my village, we believe strangers are angels. Anyway, as I was saying, my dear Angelina has the face of a Drum Magazine model and the body of a seraph. Her face has the smoothness of velvet tamarind, downy black like a sleeping sea at night. When she smiles, her teeth will remind you of South African diamond. Recently she wrote to tell me of her progress in the university, she is almost done with her finals. If I tell you she is my wife, I will be breaking America law because of what I had filled out in my immigration form. But I hope a word is enough for the wise. My point is, no matter how drunk you may be - don't look at her, don't touch her and don't even think about her, please. Once again, Angelina is reason I live.

Enjoy the sunflowers before they bow to sunset. Don't swim in the river when the sun goes down. And do not whistle in the night, it attracts evil spirits. Take as many pictures as possible of my village, because I know by the time I get back it would have been tainted. Goodbye and good luck.