THIS PACKET IS NOW AVAILABLE

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THE BEATITUDES. THE PEOPLE

Tonight, Akudo Street, like a reptile soaked in a jar of formaldehyde, sits still. Empty cans sail in the breeze a few meters down the road and then stop, waiting for the next gust to prod them on. A man appears around a bend, back arched with the effort of keeping his eyes on the road. His shoes drag a clop clop clop along the asphalt, sending echoes into the night. A dog starts barking afar off. Another dog joins in and then another, and the chorus brings the man to a halt. He looks up, stares ahead and taps his breast pocket slowly with an index finger. It isn't clear if he is thinking or just dazed. Along comes the wind and the cans clatter as they roll here and there. The chorus brings him back to the present. He walks on.

Just ahead, in a nook of this twisting street which got its name, Akudo (hand of peace), from the shoe merchant who first built a storied house on its red laterite earth, lies Monday's Barber Shop. The shop, easily distinguished on a regular night by string lights blinking about the barber's signpost, now stands in shadow like the rest of the street. But as the man walks past he can make out children playing round the lights, men laughing loudly under the zinc awning, and girls in short skirts pretending to be too busy to hear the men whistling at them. And now, Sisi Ego, the fat woman who runs the soup joint beside Monday's, can be heard calling out. She is waving soup ladle in hand as she warns the children— because her son was sure to be among them—to stay away from those lights. The wires were naked at some places, and the children could get *ilektrik shock!*

But this isn’t taking place. The string lights are nowhere. Monday's Barber shop lies dark and mute. Two wooden planks are crossed over the iron door, several posters of a wanted man glued onto the planks. Sisi Ego’s soup shed lies destroyed in a heap of zinc and timber. The man walks on, the happy noisy scene dissolved, empty cans rolling ahead of him.

But there is more. The man is past two or three provision kiosks and this brings him close to Boggy Boy’s Viewing Centre. Like mushrooms sprouting from rotting timber shouts and bets of soccer-crazed men come at him. Wenger’s Arsenal is sure to knock Liverpool down like a toy house tonight! Place the money if you’re sure! Gunners will show you! Now the walking man wills his ears to block out these voices because he hears other sounds rising in the background, not of soccer but of something different. It comes at him. It rises and will soon overtake. An angry babble of voices. The man quickens his pace, his ears pounding. Then he hops and skips down the road. Soon he’s running. The voices fade in the distance.

He halts sharply at 43A. He tries the gate by shaking it. It is locked. He reaches an arm through a gap in the metal and grips the latch at the other side. The gate swings open with a dull squeak.

"Na who?" a voice says. It’s a neighbor on the second floor.

"Na me." The man doesn't see this neighbor’s face. But they know each other's voices.

"Ah," the neighbor says. "Obiozo?" and is silent.

Obiozo, the man, is inside the compound now. He secures the latch and checks to be sure the gate is firmly in place. Then he finds his way into the building. The stairway is dark. A smell like the inside of a damp shoe rises to greet him. He begins to mount the steps to the third level where his flat is to the right wing. The flat has two bedrooms and a small, cramped sitting room

where Obiozo's mother, who believes that nothing happens if God has not willed it, stands now with a Bible in one hand and a bottle of anointing oil in the other. She's muttering prayers and dripping oil in small small drops on the floor as she prays. She stands at one spot and prays, then moves to another spot and prays yet another prayer. In four or five different spots she has the sitting room covered and has left a trail of oil on the floor, the chairs, the curtains, the table. Then she sings 'my redeemer liveth' under her breath, with eyes half-closed and hands lifted above her head. From one of the two bedrooms someone coughs. Obiozo's mother stops singing and listens, hands lowered to mid-air. The coughs die down. In a second they come again, harder-faster, like a rundown engine being forced to start. Obiozo's mother gathers her sweeping polyester dress and runs towards the direction of the coughs saying, "Ndo, nwam!"

Now Obiozo unlocks the door and steps into the flat. His eyes reduce to slits at the coughing. He hurries to the bedroom and his mother bumps into him at the door.

"Ma—?" he starts to ask.

"You're back?" His mother steers him away from the room.

"Is she—?"

"Come. Come." The older woman grips his elbow. At the table she has laid a bowl of beans and ukwa. "Eat first. She's asleep."

Obiozo looks in the direction of the room. Then he sits at the chair pulled out for him and picks up the spoon. His mother stands opposite, watching him. He stares at the striped table cloth and taps at a dried food stain with the spoon. His mother looks away. Her eyes settle in a crack between a curtain and one of the windows. She can make out the section of the street where Ronsco's Chemist had its sign standing three months ago, but which was no longer there, she

was told, because the Police pulled it down when they raided the street. She hums under her breath: “when I survey the wondrous cross on which the prince of glory —”

“My rosary is not on the wall.”

His mother keeps humming.

“Mama?” Obiozo has the spoon in a tight grip.

Outside the dogs start barking again.

He doesn’t talk anymore about the rosary. He digs in his spoon, raises it to his mouth. Half way up he pauses. Something glints: a bean seed. Its red coat pulsates in the low amber lighting of the room. The image of a bloodied tooth comes at him. The tooth lies in a widening mental space, red and melting in the sand like on that afternoon. At once Obiozo jumps to his feet. The spoon clatters to the ground. He rushes away from the table, holding his head in his hands. His mother is still humming. Then she says, “There is tea and cabin biscuit. If you want that.”

Obiozo still holds his head. He doubles unto the floor and remains on his knees.

His mother leaves the window and when she’s before him, bends to rest both hands on her son’s shoulders. “Release him from this guilt, Lord!”

Obiozo’s hands are trembling. He raises his face to his mother.

“Shhh,” she says. “You were not with them. You didn’t kill anyone. Rest now. Rest now.”

The coughs start again. Hard and racking like the brutal banging of a policeman’s baton on a car door. Then it fades and a faint wheezing with it. Obiozo’s mother checks the clock on the wall and says, “I have to give her another one by nine.”

Obiozo moves his head left and right, up and down. There is ringing in his ears, the ringing of his wife wheezing to her death. Inside the room she lay dying for his sin, each day looping unto the next in an avid race to complete his cycle of penance. He taps his breast pocket again as he listens to his mother moving around in the kitchen. She sings a new song about okwukwe — the faith that triumphs over tribulation. Still singing she places a tray of tea and cabin biscuits before him. She says, "we're cleansed, Obiozo. Now eat."

Obiozo lifts the cup, cradles it in his hands and feels the warmth seeping out, a corpse losing its heat to the earth— his wife's body, the bodies of the innocent lying around in the open, dragged along as he watched helplessly, his defense speech frozen on his tongue. His mother is humming again at the window and he feels her trying to piece together how exactly it had all happened. No matter the number of times she'd heard the story, the woman could not understand why, *or how.* So Obiozo had given up trying to recount the tale, for it appeared to him as a fizzy dream sometimes. Yet; a dream that slashed the lines of his reality, swirling about like the air bubbles in his tea. Yet; a dream he succumbed to again and again. To the beginning, to the middle, to the beginning, to the end. Yet; no end to it all. To the start of the dream, to the start of the day when the two men stood talking with him outside Monday's shop. The first man wore a blue checkered shirt with a white collar and his friend wore a T-shirt that read, 'Today, I Gat It!' This one's shoulders were wide like a board. Huge. His eyes small and squinting. He was the one who said to Obiozo outside Monday's shop, "we're looking for Chidi. Is this his shop?"

**

"*We're looking for Chidi. Is this his shop?"*

Hot Saturday afternoon. Akudo Street was abuzz with noises. Cars revved past, children chased lizards, music blasted from record shops. Obiozo looked up at the men from where he sat in the shade, under the zinc of Monday's shop entrance. His scalp itched from the heat. He was in a sour mood.

"No Chidi here," he said. A newspaper lay in his lap and he rolled it up and began slapping it around his scalp. Inside, the shop was choked full with customers queuing for a haircut. Their raised voices spilled through the windows and open iron doors, screened from the zinc shade with a moldy bead curtain. Obiozo had been inside a moment ago, talking with the other customers about an inside headline in the newspaper now being bounced against his head. It was a headline on a recent theft on the street, on merchant Akudo's house itself. A band of four robbers had shot the mogul's security guard and dogs, stabbed his teenage son and thereafter made away with hundreds of thousands of naira in cash. This wasn't the first robbery since the year began. Not the second, not the third. Last week it was a jeweler's shop, and a few days after, a banker's family of three. The robbers had cut a hole in the fence, neatly pulling out the concrete blocks till they could get in. They rounded the young family and with a gun to the banker's head, made him watch as they took turns with his wife, the new baby crying in the background. They laughed in his face and yelled, "this na real sweet sugar!" and the banker was reported to have said, "use me instead. She just had a baby."

So one after the other the stories tumbled out of the men, each one thinking aloud and then agreeing, that this was a case of out-of-job political thugs. Used to win the elections, most recent of all, the local government election where ballot boxes sprung out of nowhere, thumb prints wore all manner of shapes on ballot papers, and opposition elements to the ruling party were kidnapped and maimed. The election had been won and lost, and these thugs were let loose

on the streets; seeking avenues of occupying themselves till the next big assignment. Someone —Obiozo — then pointed out the other gang of culprits everyone was discounting: immigrant clans of Middle-belt families dotting the region. Their mainly virile sons were out of school and worked menial jobs in households where they were privy to lots of private information. As Obiozo said this a man sprang from his place under the barber's clippers and asked with heated eyes, "you dey insult my people?" to which Obiozo (who had overlooked the multi ethnic presence in the shop) said with a huge grin, "ah Big Joe! Relax! You too dey hot! Sit down man. We are brothers. Me. You." And Big Joe, with his half-shaved head where the hair stood heaped on one side in a nutty mound, unclenched his fists under the barber's hair drape and sat down. The side of his jaw kept twitching as he said, "I go run you out. Just mind. Just mind." The rest of the queuing men teased Big Joe and slapped him cordially across the shoulders while Obiozo stepped outside the shop to where he could breathe better. Not that he couldn't have found another barber's shop at that point: there were many all around, but Monday's clippers had a fluid, slick way with his skin and so did every apprentice's who worked under him— for it was Monday's apprentice, not Monday himself who was working on the men's heads at the moment. Monday was out of the shop for his daily betting pool over at Boggy Boy's Viewing Centre (not soccer) and wouldn't be back till an hour. So Obiozo looked these visitors over, the one in the collared shirt and the one in the T-shirt and told them that there was no Chidi here. Chidi was Monday's other name, which everyone on the street knew but didn't use. So clearly these men were not from these parts.

"But we were told to come here," said the one in the collared shirt.

"By whom?" Obiozo now started fanning himself with the newspaper.

"The woman in that shop just there, selling pepper soup." He swatted at a fly trying to perch on his ear and unsettled his collar in the process. He patted the collar back into place and Obiozo noticed the ring rosary on his middle finger. Obiozo's eyes narrowed. Son of Mary. No evil here.

"This Chidi," Obiozo stopped fanning, "how does he look?"

Collared Shirt wasted no time. He knew accurately who he was looking for. His friend in the T-shirt finished up the description— "small voice like a woman and he stammers a little."

It was Monday all right. Obiozo told them, "Monday. His name is Monday. Why are you looking for him?"

The young men, who couldn't be more than twenty five, exchanged glances before answering at the same time, "oh, nothing". The one in T-shirt heaved his shoulders as he added, "we're real pals. We came to greet."

"Hmm," Obiozo said.

They looked from one to the other, the three men, saying nothing more. Inside, customers could be heard arguing over whose turn was next and shuffling as they changed positions. The bead curtain parted. Big Joe walked out, head held high and glistening. He smiled a crooked smile and bumped knuckles with Obiozo. "One day," he said, "I will be Chairman here. Be careful."

"Don't mind me, my man." Obiozo said.

Big Joe nodded once. The two visitors moved slightly so he could pass. Big Joe was a good distance into the keen afternoon sun before Collared Shirt spoke up: "Will Chi—Monday be back soon? We have a class to attend and we have to get back soon."

Obiozo said, "Class? You're students at the University?"

"Yes. Public Admin."

"You are having class on Saturday? You are part time?" Obiozo asked.

"We are part time."

"I'm part time too," Obiozo smiled a little. "Social Work. What year are you?"

"Final year," said T-shirt. He looked bored.

"I'm third year," Obiozo offered again. "My class today was cancelled without reason. Our lecturers just cancel when they want. This one said she had researchers from Liberia to host and just like that, she cancelled— the wahala with women. Little power and they are all over the place."

"Hmm. You are in school?" said T-shirt, shoulders rising like a buoy.

"Yes. But I work at the ministry for land resources." Obiozo didn't want to say more, didn't want to say it was a lowly Grade 7 secretary's post. He noticed, from the way they averted their eyes and turned up their mouths, that they were amused at the thought of a man his age attending undergraduate classes. Fifty hadn't dawned kindly on him, he was aware of that. His genes had yielded too soon to the flattening curlers of time, hastened even so by his endless toiling in his adolescent years when he hefted multiple jobs to support his widowed mother and five siblings, all younger, all girls. Soon after secondary school he took up an office job as messenger with the local post office. Years and years after, got the present job at the Ministry. By the time his sisters were all grown and married into homes of their own, almost two decades had gone by. His ranks in the service rose only twice in that length of time, from 4 through to 7, but it would never get beyond that, according to Civil Service regulations, as he was no graduate. His boss, a woman who took particular interest in duplicating his duties in every way from messenger to cleaner to tea maker, often said to him, "it's people like you who unleash disease

on our economy. You just sit and make the government pay you for doing nothing! Honestly, this is why we can't move forward in this country. If I were Governor—"

"Go and get the university degree then," his wife told him, tired of Obiozo's complaints. "Get it and move out from under her . . ."

The curtain parted and another man stepped out now, head gleaming and carved around the hairline. He motioned Obiozo into the shop as there were more chairs available, but Obiozo lingered, trying to say more to the two young visitors. Then his scalp resumed itching and he got to his feet. He told them that Monday would be around soon and they would not miss their class just yet. Then he turned to go inside. Collared Shirt spoke up: "He cheated me and I want my money. Monday."

Obiozo paused. T-shirt's eyebrows had taken on a high arch. It was obvious what he had come here for: a henchman of sorts for Collared Shirt. Monday defrauding students of their money? How? Collared Shirt's reply was short. There was a deal with this middle man who referred them to Monday. Cheap, second-grade laptops from China. Monday supplied every couple of months and got his cut after the laptops were sold. Now the gadgets it seemed, had turned out to be mere discarded pieces revived in a tinker's workshop, because people turned up to complain of every conceivable malfunction, including the screens coming off at the hinges. The middle man disappeared and so had Monday. Now they tried to trace him, believing they were looking for Chidi. And finally here they were, after a long painstaking search.

Obiozo thought of Monday sitting shielded in Boggy Boy's parlor, betting away a young man's money and means for a good future. A young devout Catholic in whom there was no treachery for he carried about the very emblem of his faith on his body. He was devoid of shame for his okwukwe— the real faith in the Marian Immaculate. A faith deserted by many like

Obiozo's mother, too weak to resist the cheap, dazzling lure of Pentecostal orgies. This young man, Obiozo could see, was a worthy son of Mary.

Obiozo pointed across the street, "You see the building over there, across the road? With Boggy Boy painted on the wall? Yes there. Monday is there." And he watched the students as they strode off into the sun, looking left and right before they crossed the busy road. Then Obiozo turned into the shop where the rest of the men were towing a more confrontational line of discussion now that Big Joe was gone and the group was more homogenized. They spoke Igbo to one another, agreeing that there was a rising stink of lawlessness from the settlers. It was the idle minds who had time to plan robberies and these weren't just ordinary robberies where the owners were made to part with property; these were robberies designed to emasculate the indigene community in crippling ways: killing here, torturing there, raping there and turning the sanity of the area on its head; worst of all on a street once famed for gladness and peace. It was nasty, they surmised. Really nasty. This couldn't be allowed to go on.

By the time it was Obiozo's turn for a haircut the men had moved outside to sit under the zinc awning, reluctant to disperse. They bought beer from Sisi Ego and asked what they would do if Akudo the magnate withdrew his trust and perhaps changed his mind about continuing to live amongst them. Who would influence Government's attention to the state of the roads? Or pay huge bribes to keep the prying eyes of NEPA from their unpaid electricity bills?

Obiozo half listened as the clipper ran over his scalp in jagged movements. He asked the boy, "You did not place the razor well?" The boy said, "I put am well, sir" and kept on. At the end of the cut, for the first time ever, Obiozo saw dull patches dotting his scalp like molds. He pointed it out to the boy, trying to contain his rising anger. It was a wonder. First bad haircut in years from Monday's shop. The boy made an apology and stood aside to dismantle the clipper

head. He spotted a misaligned screw in the machinery and fidgeted here and there in several drawers in search of a screw driver.

Then Obiozo heard the scream.

It was a hoarse cry, penetrating the bustle of living on the street. He swiveled in the direction of the sound and peered through the bead curtain, saying, "whozdat?" but everyone too was looking in the direction of the noise. The men, whose talk was interrupted, streamed out from under the shade to where a crowd was gathering. The same voice screamed again, "he's a thief! Search him! He has my phone!"

Monday's boy forgot all about the clipper head and thrashed his head in and out of the window. "Sir make I go look," he begged and dashed off before Obiozo could say a thing. Now alone in the shop, Obiozo cocked an irritated eye at his mirror's image and twitched his body this way and that beneath the scratchy fabric of the drape secured about his neck. Just then the boy ran in from outside, breathing heavily. Obiozo turned to scold, but the boy said, "It's Sir Monday! Thief wan take his money and phone!"

"Eh?" Obiozo got to his feet.

The boy hurried to a corner of the shop where an old tire lay uselessly in the corner, bearing a pile of rusty tins and cartons. He brushed the tins and cartons aside and lifted the tire.

"What are you doing with that?" Obiozo's fingers were undoing the drape's knot at his neck.

"So that they go confess! If not, we burn them!"

Outside, a man was waving his hands frantically, calling out in a deep booming voice: "Bring the tires! Quick!" It was Big Joe. Obiozo was outside now, the drape still tied to his neck and fluttering around him like an oversized pinafore. From different points: Maxi's Cold Room

(where frozen fish and chicken turned stale because evening sales hours were no longer possible), Ronsco's Chemist (where the manager quit after receiving a note saying his Chemist was next), Boggy Boy's, provision kiosks, the butcher's shed— men and boys jogged out behind rolling tires. Obiozo shouted to Big Joe, "Wetin dey happen?!"

Big Joe was not answering. Instead he half ran, half walked to where the crowd was gathered. It was a crowd so thick that the road was partly blockaded at this moment. Cars tried to squeeze through, honking and finally making a detour when a small group of boys motioned at the drivers to take alternate routes. At the sight of Big Joe approaching the crowd parted so he could pass, whereupon they pushed back unto him and closed up once again. Obiozo's chest rose then fell like a spring within had lost its elasticity. He craned his neck. He pushed. He craned his neck again.

Like a warlord Big Joe gave a cry and the noise died down a notch. Obiozo heard him say, "Now, Monday, wetin you say these people do to you?"

Monday was somewhere in the heart of the enclosed crowd. His high woman's voice rang in the afternoon sun: "that one c-come m-meet me and say I o-owe him money! From where? W-where?! Who are you, my ff- riend? I-I don't know him!"

A voice protested weakly, "it's a lie!"

Obiozo observed that this voice, one he could recognize, came from a spot close to the ground. He leaned in with his entire weight and stuck his face past thighs and knees. Then he cringed as he made out the fabric of the blue and white collared shirt, ripped and dangling off bleeding shoulders. T-shirt was bare backed now. His huge shoulders gleamed in the sun, his shirt bunched about his waist as a dusty belt. He had a sneer on his face.

Big Joe raised his voice, “we all know wetin dey happen in Akudo! Since this year, thieves will not leave us alone! And now some people say it is my people who are the thieves. Today, you all people will see that we are not like that. We are innocent! Good people who love— who love ah! So now you people here, two men like you should be working and not stealing. You see? So now you will confess and take us to where you and your gang are keeping what you steal. If not, you will see what we can do to you!”

“I’m not a thief,” came Collared Shirt’s protest. “I will not lie.”

Big Joe gave a huge roar. “So you will not confess? You will not?”

The crowd erupted in shouts and Obiozo had his head butted on all sides with waving arms and jerking necks. Obiozo shouted, “No! No! Wait! They are not thieves!”

A huge hand clamped on him like the hand of God, smacking the shaved half of his head. Obiozo swung round to see who it was, cheeks blown out in readiness for a fight. Twenty, thirty eyes were on him. “You say what?” a woman said. “You know them?” said another voice without a face. At that moment Obiozo turned to see Monday slipping away. A sharp, stealth movement that caused him to shout “see him! He’s running!” And Obiozo was after Monday.

Now, a short limbed fifty year-old in a billowing pinafore was to be no match for a much younger Monday who darted with the same speed as his shop’s blinking lights — first around the bend by Boggy Boy’s Centre and two or three other bends after that, and then was gone like a rat into its hole. Obiozo stopped to catch his breath, the blinding sun adding to his frustration. The badly shaved speckles on his head itched madly in the scorching heat, just like the madness spreading through the street in cancerous dimensions, like a magic experiment gone wrong. People from neighboring streets had joined in the commotion and in the minutes it took him to catch up with the throng Obiozo’s protests were lost in the racket of chorusing chants: “Thief!

Nd'oshi! Thief!" And the throng marched; men, women, and children— parading their bounty in charged unison. A teenage girl waved a placard blazing with a scrawled line: "We No Want Tif People!" Big Joe and a leading jungle jury led the parade, shoving, hitting and dragging Collared Shirt and T-shirt along, both of whom by now had bizarre garlands of old car tires slung around their necks.

Whenever his mind got to this part of the dream, Obiozo liked to believe that it wasn't at this point that his voice froze. He remembered he was still shouting his protests all the way — mouth jacked open, chest raised, arms flailing— but maybe this was where his voice had frozen? This was when he kept flapping his lips like a fish upended on a shore; choking in a habitat where this brand of oxygen could not be consumed? He had gulped in the heat from the bodies of the marching crowd till his eyes glazed over and denied him sight. So instead of completing the passage to Calvary with this crowd to nail their Jesus, Obiozo lost his way and bumped into one of merchant Akudo's donated garbage incinerators, filled to overflowing on the side of the road. There he remained in that field of filth, kicking up debris with his shoes; blinking through the fish's glaze but seeing nothing. He kept shouting. Yes he kept shouting, even though he could no longer hear himself.

It was in the news as early as the next morning. Pools of blood mixed with crumbling asphalt. And the heap of ashes, along with black bodies frozen in roasted ecstasy. A left shoe was caught on camera too, along with a nanny goat chewing the cud and looking on without interest. There were close-up shots of the barber's shop — zinc shade, signpost (still with the string lights), and the shop's interior where the reporter indicated the very ground on which the barber got into an argument with the dead men over the price for a haircut. It was still being speculated,

said the reporter, for people had taken to hiding and no one wanted to talk to the news crew about what happened. *About who saw it actually happen*.

Obiozo's wife turned off the T.V and phoned the leader of her Catholic Charismatic Renewal group. He was a burly man who came over with two other men. Together the three men hefted Obiozo, mouth still open (yes he kept shouting), into a taxi, and from there to a room in the church's upstairs shelter for the temporarily stranded.

His wife hopped two buses daily to the other side of town to see him. Together they sat on the balcony — she patting his knees and Obiozo staring into the horizon— onwards into the evening when he would turn his face into his shoulder and break out in sobs. His crying signified the end of the day's visit and the woman would put her husband to sleep and hop two buses back to Akudo, and then return the next day to pat his knees again. Then one day she told him, just before he buried his face into his shoulder, that the Police had come in big trucks and towed away every single virile male. Then they struck down shops, signposts, and had a search announced for Monday. No one heard of Big Joe.

The sun came up, the sun went down and one day Obiozo did not step out to the balcony. He had a dream the night before where Collared Shirt stood pointing to a pregnant woman lying in the rain. Obiozo waited at the door for his wife in the morning and when she arrived, looked at her face strangely, and then at her stomach which reached down to her lap. He remembered that morning, that he used to be husband to a pregnant woman. That he had soaked her feet in warm water and rubbed her back. That that woman was still pregnant. His opened his mouth at which point a frail voice pressed through. "How are you?" said his small squeak and his wife burst into tears.

But it wasn't just the dream that gave him back his voice or pointed out his wife to him. It was those days of sitting on the balcony, staring in silent communion with the sun. He had seen himself again, a teenager wearing the cloak of burden; earning money to take his father's corpse from the fridge to the earth where it would be reposed; earning money to see a sister learn how to read and write. He was watching his mother renounce the Catholic doctrines in which both she and his father had raised their children. He was watching her drag his sisters to the new Pentecostalism where she said the faith was real and one had no need for prayer beads or figurines or even hallowed saints to pray on your behalf. The Holy Spirit was in all men, could bestow power, even the gift of foreseeing the future. Then every further disaster could be diverted right before it happened. She said as much to Obiozo. But Obiozo said no. He was his father's son. He would die believing what his father believed. And that included the sacraments, purgatory, the passion. It included penance.

So on the day he gained his voice, he knew that the one dream, along with the sun that had shown him an opening, had also shown him his penance. His unborn baby. So slowly he watched for that hand to strike, that exacting hand of punishment. Shortly after he returned back to Akudo and resumed work, he came home one day to find his wife hunched by the toilet bowl in a pool of water and blood, unconscious, her mouth agape. The doctors said it had to be her or the baby. He said the baby. Take the baby.

That was three months ago. Long enough to see his sin through. But who knew at what point a beginning was actually starting to begin? To the beginning, to the middle, to the beginning, to the end. Yet; no end to it all. Now it seemed to him that maybe he had misunderstood the terms of his penance. Had given up the wrong offering. Baby was given for him when he was actually giving up Baby for wife. Because it should have been wife to be given

up for him. Now she had taken to lying around since the baby died, wrapped in blankets all day and night, vanishing into bones. The depression hadn't worn away like the doctors promised. And he knew it wouldn't. He knew it from the moment she began wheezing like a squashed bee about to lose its hum. Today, he would make the depression run its complete course where he knew the spirits of purgatory would be waiting at the other end …

**

His mother: "It's nine. I have to give her another dose of her medicine."

Obiozo's fingers have lost the warmth of the tea cup. His vision zooms in and tightens around his present space; this dim sitting room closing in on him, his mother's sunken eyes, the scarf drawn low on her forehead. His gaze settles on the wall opposite him where his rosary ought to be hanging from a nail. He stares. He stares. In an appearance of linking dots, an image emerges from the wall and the rosary, beady and curvy, is hanging there on the nail once again.

"Mama!" the cup falls from his hands. "The rosary. But I thought you removed it?"

His mother's voice comes at him, "what do you see, Obiozo? Rest now. You must come in and rest."

Obiozo's eyes are pushing out of his face. He catches his lower lip in his teeth. "But they will not leave me, mama! They want to crush me too. They will keep crushing me till I'm like them. Till I'm a part of their ashes."

Outside the dogs are barking again.

Obiozo's mother makes the plea again, hoping it will be for the last time: "Rest, son. You must rest now." Then she stops and a puzzled look spreads on her face. Obiozo's face has broken into a slow smile. He pats his breast pocket and rises to his feet.

"But I will end it tonight, mama," he says. "I will. I will suffer no more. I will take care of my burden once and for all."

His mother stares.

"I will settle all my dues," he goes on patting his breast pocket where his mother's eyes can make out the slight bulge underneath the fabric. Obiozo looks at her. "You say her medicine is at nine?"

"Yes," his mother slowly sweeps up the edges of her polyester dress. "Can you —?"

"Don't worry," Obiozo pats her shoulder. He walks past into the room, saying as though trying out the opening lyrics of a song, "I'll take my burdens away. I'll take my burdens away. I'll give her the medicine."

THE HAPPY PEOPLE OF KAKAKI

Whenever the rains came in March, they fell like a band of excited soldiers marching onward, deep into July. Uniforms, helmet, guns and all, pulling their way through as in battle, drenching the soil but refusing to sink in, trailing puddle paths like huge unending worms in search of tunnels to burrow. The soldiers surged, rising in the gutters, chipping away at the asphalt and bearing bits of cellophane, paper and dead leaves straight from the gutters unto the roads. And when the soldiers had done their rounds, they went in, poured into people's compounds and drove them shrieking, out of their houses.

One particular year stood out. It was the worst Kakaki, a suburb stationed on the banks of the city's lagoons, had ever seen. The rains brought the governor out of his office, an offended look creasing his fatty brows. His ringed fingers clutched a microphone; a measured look of sympathy was on his face as he promised relief for the residents. He was accompanied by members of his cabinet, among whom was the commissioner for works, who stood behind the governor as the sympathy speech was given. The commissioner also wore a look of sympathy, but his was more, not measured. And the governor's close aides saw this look. And they told the governor about this look. When the governor was told by his aides that the commissioner looked more sorrowful and more compassionate, that the commissioner appeared closer to tears than he the governor and thus stood a better chance of swaying the people's trust his way, the governor banned the commissioner from his company of public escorts. He rather instructed that the commissioner hold his own briefings. The commissioner did as asked.

On days the commissioner spoke on television, the governor cancelled all appointments to watch the speech. He studied the commissioner's gestures, nuances and eye movements. After a short

time, when the governor felt he had mastered every uhm and ahh, he set out on his own guided tour. He shook hands with the flood victims, he promised money, help, relief. He even shed a tear, dabbed his face with a handkerchief. He sang out the promise, "This is a government for the people. I am here, this moment, to take care of all your problems." And he clasped a wailing child to his chest, held a toothless old woman to his side and everyone grinned into the reporters' flashing cameras. Then the headlines carried it the next day— a front page picture of the people's governor in Kakaki, hugging the homeless.

The news photos ran and ran for days: the front page, the inside front page, an inside page, then the middle page, and back to the front page if there was nothing special to grace the covers . It never ceased to amaze people. The governor smiling into the face of a crying, snotty faced child! What humility. What generosity. How blessed they were to have a governor this real. And how sincere a man too, for he had truly deployed a team of construction workers to expand the gutters so the rain would drain away.

The workers came in big yellow bulldozers. They wore fluorescent jackets and red helmets. They barked orders one to another and pointed frantically. They planted poles with flags to divert and guide traffic which had dwindled now to a few favored jeeps with high floors and rugged tires. The rest of the traffic came from the legs of the people, trudging through the high waters, loads on their heads, children on their backs. The men rolled up their trousers to wade through. The women hitched up their skirts and wrappers. This was nonetheless like car traffic to the construction workers in bright jackets. So they guided the people, waving them through with their flags. Red flag for 'Stop'. Green flag for 'Go'. Orange flag for "Easy! Easy!"

They said to the human traffic, "Ho! Move on! To the right! Hold it there!" and the people smiled and obeyed, dragging tired bodies through waters that were the color of a putrid wound,

evergreen with pus. The dead leaves and cellophane from the gutters floated around the people, circled them in worship and yawned when they tired, after which they clung to the bodies of the passersby, apparently in need of passage to a home themselves. The construction workers barked into walkie-talkies, communicating with their colleagues at other parts of Kakaki. The silt from that side of the settlement was making way towards them, they yelled. And the bull dozers pulled and shoved the silt, revved and revved.

The birds of the air cackled nervously. They circled the flooded roads, watched the men, perched on trees to sing and chatter to one another about this interesting thing going on down there. They watched to see if nuts would swim out of the gutters, or a bit of wet bread, better still a chunky juicy worm. They chitchatted till their beaks ached, or till another bout of rain descended. Pata, pata, pata the drops came from the sky, down on the yelling and gesturing workers, down on the backs of wading people, down on the rusty roofs of the flooded houses, down on the gossipy birds. And events would take yet another course. The workers ran for cover, got into their high jeeps and drove away. The bulldozer handlers pulled the vehicles away. The people cursed at the skies and moved even faster, the gutter trash clinging to them all the tighter for fear of the rain's harsh handling. The poles of flags waved the commotion on— red, green and orange all at once— coordinating the chaos with good cheer. In that moment a group of newsmen drove by in a high floored jeep, and they took yet more pictures and sought an interview with the commissioner for works.

The interview was in the papers the next day.

"It's the rain," the commissioner said. "Am I God that makes rain? Why can't the people petition God? Desperate situations call for desperate eh, eh—"

"Measures?" said the interviewer.

"Measure? You are funny. I meant eh, desperate motions. Law of Maslow. Motions like praying. Pray to God to stop the rain."

And the photo in the papers showed the commissioner holding a hand to his cheek, eyes half closed. Sorrow. He was in sorrow. The commissioner also quoted the amount of money government had pumped into this drainage project. It was printed in bold in the papers. It was put this way: 'Kakaki drainage project already gulps nine hundred and nine point nine-six-nine quadrillion naira says commissioner'.

This interview was read by the governor as he sat at breakfast, clapping a fried chicken thigh to his jaw. He was relieved that the Man of Sorrow didn't take a photo with any person: man, woman or child. He licked the juice dripping down his lips and carefully began to search the words of the report for any mention of his name. Governor Yawaike Orogo-ladola Jr. He put a pudgy finger on the paper and ran it down the columns, muttering, "go…va…noh.. Yawa…ke… oro… go… ladola… Oh there it is!" and he smiled, licked more juice off his lips, and sat back in his chair as he pushed the paper away. Almost immediately he sat up with a frown on his face. What did the paper say about him after mentioning his name? He bent forward to take another look. Then he frowned. This Man of Sorrow said that he, Governor Yawaike was dedicated to the relief of the victims. That was all he said? Hmm. This man in sorrow must be made to open his mouth more, talk the truth more. How could he have a member of his cabinet with closed lips like this? With a small heart for his benefactor like this? Who was boss? Who was paying the other? The Governor folded up the paper with his chicken juice fingers and called for one of his bodyguards outside. The bodyguard, wearing a T-Shirt that read, Y.O. Jr. THE MAN OF THE MOMENT, quickly cleared away the dishes from the table. On his way out, something made the guard stop. He saw that the Governor had not touched his American pork chops and Argentinian pasta salad. The guard was worried that his master had

something bothering him. He hesitated in order to find out more and in that moment the governor shouted, “Are your hands too heavy for you? Move away!” And the body guard said, “Sorry, Sir” and closed the door behind him.

Next the governor reached for his mobile phone and dialed the Man in Sorrow. It rang once, twice, three times. The governor tapped a stubby foot on the floor. Finally the line was picked up and at the other end the governor could hear some commotion. The commissioner’s voice said, “Hello Sir? Thank God you called Sir. We are in the middle of a gathering, Sir. Me and the Kakaki people, Sir. I was just telling them about our commitment to bring them relief, Sir. Can you hear their voices, Sir?”

At this point the commissioner turned to talk to the people, “You see? The governor has just called on the phone to show his solidarity!”

The governor heard the people cheer and clap. In the background he could also hear the sounds of big trucks, moving things around. The commissioner raised a song, ‘We are moving ahead unto Zion’, and the people joined in, clapping and ululating. The governor hung up. He jumped to his feet and paced his dining room. Did the Commissioner just say that he, the governor called to show solidarity? The governor showing solidarity for his commissioner? How could this be? The governor developed in that moment a huge hatred for his commissioner. And this was how the trouble began, the cat and mouse chase.

The idea was to remove the Man of Sorrow from office as quietly as possible. That is, to have the Man of Sorrow kicked out without making himself, the Man of the Moment, look like the whole sack might have been planned or orchestrated. Thus he called two trusted advisors to a closed door meeting and asked, “How do I remove this bedbug biting my skin?”

The governor's advisors told him in all truth that it was best to have the rains subside before sacking this commissioner. The commissioner was already loved, and his sack would anger the people. And with the people angry, there was little or no chance at securing their votes for a re-election. Commissioner or second term, which was more important to the governor? They asked.

"But I know how to get their votes! Commissioner or no commissioner," the governor said.

Yes, his advisors agreed that this was so, but how about the people's affections? Their high praise? Where was the sense in losing that? Wasn't it because of that that the governor was after the commissioner in the first place?

"Look, Sir,' they said with finality, "it's best that you wait for the rains, and then we can strike. One charge of corruption and we will get him out."

And the governor listened. He was especially excited now at the thought of having the commissioner disgraced. All that mention of misappropriated money would turn the people's hearts against their Man of Sorrow. And how much was it? The governor had the morning's paper brought to him again. Nine hundred and nine point nine-six-nine quadrillion naira. Oh, to think what he could do with such figures! A tribunal would be set up, a press conference called, and tra la la ti la . . . the governor began to sing under his breath. "Call me the Commissioner of Finance and the Chief Judge," he told his advisors. "We have to get this ball row-ling."

Meanwhile the Man of Sorrow had returned to his home to rest after the meeting with the Kakaki people. He took off his embroidered caftan, soiled from the muddy hands of clingy Kakaki children and their dirty parents. At once the housekeeper rushed to take it from him, straight to the laundry. The man fell into a plush leather settee and put his legs up on the table, a remote control pulsating in his hand. He pressed one button and then another and his eighty-four inch screen flicked images of women dressed in miniskirts and shaking their backsides. Someone appeared at the Man of

Sorrow's side like a genie and presented him with a glass of pineapple juice. The man took it and sipped with his eyes still on the screen. Another person wafted inside and gave him a saucer of fried beef, taking away the now empty glass. The man placed the beef cubes in his mouth and chewed slowly. Yet another person blew into his presence in the smoke-like manner of the other two before him, but instead of handing drink or food, this one just stood there, looking at his boss clad in a singlet and boxers, a look of uncertainty in his dancing gaze, till his boss said to him, "Yes?"

This third genie told his boss that there was someone to see him.

"Tell the person I'm not at home," came the reply.

The third genie said, quieter this time, "It's Mr. Heavy D. Ume and he says it's urgent."

The Man of Sorrow said nothing and this silence implied, well the genie knew what this silence implied. He went out and returned with Heavy D. Ume.

Heavy D. Ume sat without being asked to. As he sank into one of the leather chairs, his glasses pushed out of his face as he doubled over to open the briefcase with him. He pulled out a sheaf of papers.

The Man of Sorrow said with his eyes still on the screen, "Heavy D, is this my office? Why can't I be left alone?"

Heavy dropped the papers on the table, right beside Man of Sorrow's feet. To this, the owner of the feet asked, "What are these?"

"Look at them first," Heavy said.

But Man of Sorrow was in no mood for intrigues, so he did not comply. Genie Number One stepped into the room and handed Heavy a tall glass of wine. After a gulp, Heavy said, "Sir we have to revoke the contract on the soil pH and moisture meters. Look here," Heavy pushed the papers at his boss who still did not look at them. "Look here," he pressed. "See, I have found a contractor in

India who will sell us an anti-flooding chemical for half the price of the soil meters. Forget the meters. Just see. Gold has landed in our lap!"

This finally got the Commissioner's attention. After poring through the papers, with his eyes of sorrow now gleaming, he asked, "Heavy D, what chemical is this that can dry floods? And for half the price?"

The details now got unclear from this point. But the newspapers did their best to report it as they saw it. And what they saw was this: A truckload of drums was delivered in Kakaki the following week. The drums, totaling about fifty, contained a thick aromatic liquid and the construction workers bustled about these drums all day, wearing masks over their noses to protect themselves from the fumes. The residents noted that the flood waters now burned when they waded through them, but the workers explained that it was only the heat of the sun burning the waters and increasing evaporation. E-V-A-P-O-R-A-T-I-O-N. They spelt out the words for people who asked what the word meant.

But this, if one were to look at it objectively, appeared true. The debris that swam along with the people started to give way. The paper bits had shrunk to nothing. The polythene scraps had melted, and roots of dead grass stopped drifting and now stood still, like jelly fish with filaments anchored deep. Even the flags no longer waved, for the wind was too hot to cheer them up. The flood level dropped. Instead of coming up to the waist for tall people, it was now at the knee. For short people, the very short ones shorter than the drums from India, the flood waters now rested at the top of the thigh, at that point where the pelvis locked.

Evangelist Dada was one of such shortest, shorter than the drums. He lived on the west end of Kakaki and shouldered his four-year-old daughter to and from school on weekdays. He was especially glad at this drop in level. He excitedly told a newsman, "I'm so happy that God heard our

prayers! Now I can move more freely in the waters without my daughter's delicate sandaled feet brushing the water."

But there was also a second reason why Dada was glad at the drop. He would no longer have the water lick his belly button, his congenital malformation that strained against his shirts and formed a shape like an enema pump. When he walked his button undulated, when he laughed it heaved. When he preached it sat silently, but it pulsated nevertheless. And it never failed to fascinate the people. And this included *all* the people, who were also members of his church. They loved to watch it as the evangelist preached his sermons on how government was working and the commissioner delivering on his promises. They loved to see the button bump against the side of the pulpit as Evangelist Dada stood on a pile of concrete blocks to elevate above the flooded church grounds. At times like this, bumping his button and preaching, he also raised songs of thanks to God for the foresight of the leaders, the leaders who had made the waters start drying up. And the people sang along with him, beating their tambourines and swerving their heads. They grated on raised planks of wood lined up like rail tracks along the artificial pond in their church. They stomped and marched. If you were to listen from a distance you would think an army of tinkers was at work. The people gyrated. Outside on the streets the construction trucks were parked, resting on this Sunday and baking in the sun. The birds stared glumly from their perch on the electric pole wires. They wondered at the likely reason behind the softening wires beneath their feet, at the constant balmy smell in the air. They wondered why no juicy worms twisted upon the flood waters.

The reduction in level was a feather in the Man of Sorrow's cap. Within a week the waters came down to calf level for tall ones, mid-thigh level for short ones. Also within this week the construction workers cleared their trucks and flags, but not the drums of the liquid which had been punched in the bottom and allowed to slowly release their contents till the streets were completely

dry. During this same week, the week when the workers left, when the waters reduced to calf level for tall ones and mid-thigh level for short ones, during this same week, the reporters turned their faces to issues now more interesting than Kakaki.

The Man of Sorrow had married himself a second wife and the wedding held in a resort in Dubai. It was lavish and the pictures showed the wedding guests posed on a high glass tower, opening arms and laughing. There were big musicians, movie stars even from Hollywood, and a private air jet was said to have carried off the couple to their honeymoon in Paris. When the people of Dada's church read this they sang to the Man of Sorrow's marital bliss as they danced upon the rail tracks, their hearts gladdened at the fact that the man responsible for their drying streets had found true love a second time around. They sang their happy songs with little handkerchiefs tied to their noses, for there was now a constant smell surrounding their waters. They no longer opened their windows for long, and could not hang their wet laundry in the open to dry. It had grown hotter inside their houses than outside, as though the sun had left a part of itself behind in their homes after setting.

Also the people began to rearrange their furniture to avoid the heating concrete walls of their houses. The walls had begun to shrink around the corners. The concrete fences surrounding their houses were shrinking too and the people wondered at this thing happening before them. The concrete gave way to a gelatinous substance. It still felt hard though. But it ate away little by little and changed shapes. The gel-like walls soon formed into leather-like textures. They had the look of thick brown leather. This softened the foundations of the houses and soon these began to push out of the ground to form fat square corks.

Meanwhile the Man of Sorrow's wedding remained the talk of the papers for months and months. The Man of the Moment, who had been waiting patiently, saw his moment. He saw an opportunity to strike. His advisors agreed with him and an investigation panel was set up. The people

wanted to know, the panel said, where the Man of Sorrow got the funds with which to furnish such a lavish wedding. There was a hearing seven days a week, then two days a week, then one day a week. It was difficult to collate the Man of Sorrows bank accounts information, you see. For a delegate of inquirers had to be sent to Sweden. From Sweden to London. From London to Amsterdam. So as the tribunal waited for information on the accounts, for physical investigation was more to be trusted than wireless investigations so as to prove the Man of the Moment's transparency to the people, another headline blazed across the papers. It read, 'Kakaki Residents Complain of Shrinking Houses."

The Man of the Moment saw another opportunity. He arrived at Kakaki with a team of environmentalists from China. And the environmentalists took water samples and had these samples sent to laboratories in their country. In weeks the results were in. The waters were loaded with industrial toxins. The source of the toxins was traced to the drums of liquid from India lining the roads. At once the Man of the Moment sacked the Man of Sorrow, seized the Indian drums and set up a tribunal to question the Man of Sorrow on yet another criminal charge. Then the figures expended in purchasing those drums of toxins were in the news. "Charged for corruption," the headlines screamed. He was tried again. And again. But then, the Man of the Moment wanted the trial to appear fair to the people, so he sent another delegation to India, another delegation to the shipping company in Madagascar, and another delegation to China were the drums were manufactured. The case was adjourned again and again, waiting for the report from each and every delegation. The wedding delegation and the toxins delegation sent in information, and the Man of Sorrow swung from this tribunal to that, depending on whatever delegation sent in what. And months passed.

The Kakaki houses now stood in the air, suspended by the shifting cork foundations. The people began to let down ladders to get in and out of their homes. In church Dada said he had a

dream. In the dream God said that their waters had been poisoned by demons, Nephilim from hell. He tapped his tambourine and shook his legs. His belly button heaved and heaved. His congregation wept. After weeping they sang. After singing they danced. They had now built rafts to float upon the pond within the church. They paddled their rafts to the front where Dada held the offering basket, and they dropped their money before paddling back to the floor space. Their rafts now collided with the walls, for the church too had not been spared from shrinking. And every day they tuned their radios to follow the trial proceedings. They still thought that their Man of Sorrow had been wrongly accused. Dada said God told him so in a dream. So they waited. Their man would be vindicated.

But the tribunal now had a new problem in addition to the problem of the crisscrossing delegation reports. No one could prove the amount of nine hundred and nine point nine-six-nine quadrillion naira. The treasury said its paper records had been chewed up by cockroaches. The Man of the Moment instructed everyone to buy calculators, which was what everyone did. So they punched out the figures, liaising with the delegations in India, China and Madagascar to be sure the inventory tallied. But no one could arrive at nine hundred and nine point nine-six-nine quadrillion. They punched and punched their calculators. The batteries burned out and an order came for more calculators. They punched and punched the more. And while the whole city of lawyers punched, the Man of Sorrow who had been out on bail and not yet jailed, began to make stealth plans of his own.

He had accrued a group of loyalists by now. These loyalists were political enemies of the Man of the Moment— jailed at a time by the leader, attacked and conned, or they simply wanted a turn at the seat of office. So the enemies formed an opposition party. It was named R.H.P. — Renaissance Hope Party. And they granted interviews, stated that the Man of Sorrow was a victim of political scheming. When the people of Kakaki heard this they rejoiced. They were still in their homes, climbing in and out with ladders, now coming out through the sides. The front parts of their

houses were sealed shut as the gel had not yielded enough leather to hold up their front verandahs. The verandahs had instead squeezed into projections like the pointed mouths of fishes. To accommodate this compression, the houses' roofs had speared into the air like chimneys, while the back of the house, though still shrinking, retained a blunt but wide shape. The cork bases still remained. It was strange for the people to see the shapes their houses were taking with each new day. Moreover, they noticed that no matter how small the houses shrunk, they were still able to fit into them. Were also they shrinking along with their homes?

As the panel worked assiduously to resolve the mutating figures, elections drew closer. R.H.P. had by now drawn a reasonable membership, had made enough noise in the press and was ready to campaign. Thus the posters went up. The posters said, 'Vote The Man of Sorrow, Shegedu Bagambu for Governor to wipe away the tears of the people!' Banners were erected in every corner of the city. R.H.P. members sat to map out sections and areas to which to take their election message before the Man of the Moment's party got to them. And what better place to start other than the place where the Man of Sorrow first saw his largest support? The place where the gods foreshadowed his elevation to a higher seat? Kakaki went up on the list as number one campaign spot.

R.H.P. campaigners appeared in Kakaki in June of the following year, the Man of Sorrow leading the train and flanked by his two wives, political aides and bodyguards. It was a bursting entourage. Trumpeters in colorful costumes blasted the air with loud tunes. Drummers struck their drums in frenzy. Over a public address system the P.R.O was announcing, "The hour of salvation is here!" People dressed like mannequins moved about with posters pinned to their chests and backs. As the entourage approached the Man of Sorrow observed something different. He asked his aides if this was Kakaki to which they had come. He was told that it was. It was strange, he told them. The last time he was here the roads were not this narrow and the electric poles were straight not bowed.

He shaded his eyes against the sun and scanned the horizon, for the year's floods stretched before them like a sea and small brown domes sat in the distance upon the waters. The party's entourage could not go beyond the point where they stood.

"Where are the people?" Man of Sorrow asked his aides.

"The people were on their way," came the reply from his men. "They have to come in boats to this shore where we stand."

The Man of Sorrow watched the horizon carefully. He saw as he peered closer, that the brown domes upon the waters had long spires in the air and were blunted at the back and tips. Ladders reached down from the sides. Little figures moved about the domes, making gestures, making sounds. The Man of Sorrow asked his aides, "What is this I see? What are those brown things shaped like shoes? And are those little things people? Are they moving in and out of the shoes?" To this his aides looked at him and then at one another. They were surprised he didn't know.

They replied, "Yes Sir, those are shoes. And those are people moving in and out of the shoes. Kakaki's houses shrunk to shoes last year. Didn't you know, Sir?"

The Man of Sorrow was quiet at first. Then he looked at his aides as though he thought the whole thing a joke. He started laughing. His aides also laughed along. Ah. Their boss could be funny-funny. The two wives joined in the laughter too. Soon the whole entourage was laughing. The trumpeters laughed through their notes: pah! pah! pah! and these sounds carried far across the flood seas to where the people of Kakaki said to one another, " See we must hurry! He summons us to be quick!"

The Kakaki people rushed out of their houses, pausing at the ladders to zip their shoe-doors shut. The men called out to the women who were rushing down the ladders with babies strapped to their backs. Children clapped joyously. They paddled their canoes faster to meet the campaign team

on the shores. Evangelist Dada led a chorus, “Salvation has come to us!” and everyone sang along. It was an hour before the people reached the shores. On the shores they stared into the eyes of the campaign train, lifting their heads to see the Man of Sorrow properly, for they stood below knee level now. The Man of Sorrow returned their looks and he got down on his haunches to shake hands with the Evangelist Dada, their leader. He told the diminished leader, “Look no further. Your search is over. I am the change you seek. Today I make my promise. For your vote I will restore your houses, repair your roads, make your legs longer, your bodies fatter.”

Then the Man of Sorrow did something else. He reached out with a ringed finger and tickled Dada’s belly button. Flicking it from side to side. As he did this he said, “I will invert this boll of yours back into your body and it will strain against your clothes no more.”

The Evangelist began to giggle at the sensations from the tickle. He put down his head and shook from his giggles. The Kakaki people saw this and hid their smiles behind their hands. Soon they began to giggle as well. The campaign train joined in and giggled. The giggles shook everyone from head to toe. The newsmen flashed their cameras. And the people agreed they would vote the Man of Sorrow. Then they took turns shaking hands with him, his two wives, the political aides, trumpeters, and on and on. Cameras flashed. Everyone smiling into the cameras. In the background the sun continued to heat the flood seas, the shoes shimmered in the horizon, watching with calm pointed gazes, ready to welcome the shrunken people back. But for the moment the shrunken people were delighted. They rejoiced at this politician, this God-sent who had remembered them yet again. They said to another as they danced, “What humility. What generosity! He will give us back our homes, our roads, our former bodies, and even repair swollen belly buttons!”

The pictures were in the papers the next day. The headlines said, ‘The Happy People of Kakaki Renew Their Praises.’ It was on the front page, the inside front page, the middle page. It was everywhere. Pictures, pictures and more pictures.

The details as always, remain unclear.

CONVERTS

In the early hours of a warm Saturday afternoon, Ebere received two phone calls which set a different tone for her quiet day. The first call was from Sister Grace, leader of the women's prayer group. It was a bad case, Sister Grace said over the phone. The district sisters were in the hospital with Sister Rebecca, whose husband was in a coma from a car crash that morning. Ebere was to meet them at Mount Carmel, the hospital where Rebecca's husband was being treated. Rebecca, Sister Grace added, was in bad shape. Now Rebecca was Ebere's new convert. So Ebere dressed, put her bible, anointing oil and phone in her handbag and locked her apartment, rushing to board a danfo to Mount Carmel.

As she descended the back steps leading out of the building, her handbag pressed to her chest like a third breast, the second call came in. Ebere retrieved the phone from her bag and said, "I'm on my way! I'm on my way!"

"On your way to see me?" the voice at the other end said. It was a man.

Ebere stopped. "Who is this?"

Next came the deep huh huh huh laugh. Ebere recognized the voice. Zuby.

She gripped the stair rails. Zuby 'the bullman' as she and her best friend Chichi used to call him. How many years had it been? Eight?

"How did you get my number?" she asked.

He said the gods had revealed her number to him in a dream. This was a joke of course, because Zuby prayed to no god, except well, the god of women's vaginas. Zuby asked how she had been all these years. He asked after his baby doll, Chichi. Ebere told him Chichi died four years ago. Zuby said, "oh heavens," and Ebere wanted to spit at him through the phone. The

word of God came to her. John fourteen verse twenty-seven: my peace I give unto you, not as the world giveth…

But Zuby was still talking. He was now based in South Africa and had come into Nigeria for a week on business. So would she mind meeting him this evening at the Ocean View restaurant on Victoria Island? He just wanted to see his sweet Madonna's face again. His voice dropped to whisper, "I hope you haven't lost flesh in all those places? I haven't changed from hating skinny girls." And he laughed again.

Nothing came to Ebere's mouth in that moment. Not even the testimony of the saved, which is, "The things I used to do, I do them no more." No. This didn't come to her. Instead she grew sweaty palms and an ache in her jaw — panic reactions she'd developed since the first night her stepfather came into her bed. She was twelve at the time and yet to have her first period. It would continue like that over the years— aching jaw and sweaty palms— whenever she was anxious about anything.

She told Zuby, "Don't you ever call me again."

"Madonna, what's this now?" he asked.

"Don't call me Madonna!"

And she hung up. Her palms were so moist the phone slipped out of her grasp. She picked it up and continued down the stairs. She was taking the back stairs to avoid the neighbors. It was a building she shared with three other families. She lived alone, a forty-two year old divorcee. She still told people she was married, and that the devil had turned her husband against her. She hoped to be reunited with him someday, even though word had come to her again and again that he had remarried and his new wife had borne him two fine sons in the three years of Ebere's divorce.

She stepped out into the afternoon sun and took the alley at the back of the building. The alley curved to the building's side, which led out to the front yard. She walked around this side, which also held the common verandah for the boys' quarters. The quarters comprised a block of four one-room apartments, two of which were rented by students of the nearby College of Technology. The landlord's relatives lived in the other two apartments. Solomon the school teacher was one of such relatives and a group of children were presently squatting beneath his window and giggling among themselves. When they saw Ebere approach they ran away with all the strength in their stick legs. Solomon's groans could be heard, gruff as a rusty mill engine and a woman was squealing puppy-like in between.

"May God have mercy on you," Ebere shouted after the brats. "I'll tell your parents what you've been up to."

She boarded a danfo outside the compound's gates. The conductor motioned her to a space at the rear, beside a woman cooing to her crying baby. Ebere settled in, rubbed her palms against her A-line dress and looked out the window. Her eyes were vacant as the bus ran through the streets. She tried to focus her mind on something which she realized now, had grown beyond her. How could it be that Zuby's call came minutes after the call about Rebecca? On the same day Rebecca's husband had an accident and slipped into a coma? Rebecca, Ebere's convert, had always known that something would befall her family and she had told Ebere as much— not once, not twice, but as many times in the week that Ebere counselled and prayed with her as an older Christian in the born-again faith.

Ebere had always found Rebecca quite delicate, too shaky of heart. The first time she met Rebeca was at a midweek prayer fellowship, when ten of them sisters living within the district met in Grace's dining room. That was a year ago. Ebere saw Rebecca from across the long

mahogany table bearing everyone's Bibles, pens and notebooks, and thought how so much like Chichi she looked. Those large brown eyes, sculpted cheeks, high forehead… she was so close to that face that would always be in Ebere's dreams. She watched Rebecca turn her lips up in a bid to smile at Sister Grace's dry jokes, and then get serious almost at once, the sign of seriousness being that she would pick her pen and gently tap tap tap on an open page of the Bible. At the end of the meeting Ebere made to pull her aside to talk, but Sister Oge was on Ebere again, telling the old story of the evil brother-in-law who was pressuring Oge's husband into making Oge give up her shares in the family's meat packaging business. So Ebere told Oge the same thing she'd always told her: "Don't sell those shares, love your brother-in-law, make friends with his wife who will turn out in time to defend you against her husband." Oge listened, nodding in sullen agreement.

It was at that moment that Grace walked up to Ebere with Rebecca beside her. She put Rebecca's hand in Ebere's as a first gesture. Then she said in her tremulous soprano, "Sister Ebere, this is Rebecca, our new sister whom the Lord has told me to hand over to you. From now on you will be her spiritual guide, to pray for and with her."

Rebecca was what Ebere would call workable. She was eager to learn, easy to chastise and full of deep respect for her mentor. She said how noble Ebere was, to have laid aside all that beauty for the service of the Lord, when some women would have played it to their highest advantage instead. She could only imagine what Ebere must have looked like as a younger woman, how long the queue outside her father's door must have been. Ebere laughed at this and said she didn't grow up with a father since no one seemed to know what had happened to the fellow after he abandoned her pregnant adolescent mother. And Rebecca's face went pale. She said, "Ah, how evil this world is! But a man's sins will always be visited on his generation. Your

father will definitely get his reward for ruining your mother's life and chances at a decent respectable married life."

Ebere didn't say anything to that. She didn't say that her mother had in fact married ten years later, to a man from the north, from a place called Potiskum where the heat was enough to singe the hairs on one's skin. He had the long straight nose and perfect teeth of northerners, a long lithe body, and a soft greeting for everybody. No. Ebere didn't say she had grown up with a stepfather. She didn't like to give out too much information.

But she wanted to know everything about Rebecca. And Rebecca told her as much. She had grown up with both parents, had attended government public schools all her life. She had been married five years and had a son who had just turned three. In these details Rebecca was so different from Ebere, but in a bunch of other facts, both women had few things in common. Facts like being an only child. Facts like being married to Isoko men from the Delta region.

At this revelation about their Isoko husbands Ebere told Rebecca that she shared some kinship with her and her now dead best friend, Chichi. Ebere explained that she and Chichi had actually married two brothers from the same mother. Rebecca was intrigued at this and she pressed to know more. So Ebere beat out a quick story about coincidence and nothing more. But Rebecca corrected her. "There is no such thing as coincidence," she said. "Everything happens because it is carefully arranged in God's calendar." To this Ebere told her that the idea of a fixed calendar would negate the freedom of choice that God had given all men. Rebecca listened as Ebere made her point, and like in everything else she agreed and did not argue.

Her son of three, Okoro, was Rebecca's spitting image. The cheekbones and high forehead stood out prominently and when Ebere pointed out that there was little of the father in the boy (for she had seen the husband's photograph), a faraway look came to Rebecca's eyes

which had Ebere wondering. But the look was gone and Rebecca was laughing. Sometimes Ebere could not understand how the other woman would break out in a laugh all of a sudden, for instance in the middle of prayer or a conversation not at all funny. She'd look at Rebecca a while, trying to reconcile this behavior with the joy of the spirit she'd always preached about but not yet grasped. Because this realization took away a bit of Ebere's confidence, she would say to Rebecca, "I can see the Lord's joy has reached its completion in your soul." And this would cause Rebecca to look away, her laugh thinned down to a wary smile. Both women would be quiet afterwards.

Now as Ebere considered these things in the danfo towards Mount Carmel Hospital, she asked herself why it was that about this accident involving Rebecca's husband, she should be the last to know. Why had the sisters gone ahead without asking her along? Shortly the danfo paused at another bus stop. Mount Carmel Hospital was three more stops away. Ebere watched the conductor as he shoved more passengers inside. Someone sat down heavily on the seat in front of her and the spring pushed down on her knee. Ebere shifted her legs. The woman beside her began to dandle her baby on her lap, bumping an elbow into Ebere's side in the process. The baby enjoyed his mother's game for a while but soon began to cry again. His mother turned to Ebere, "Abeg help me hold him, let me bring out his bottle," she said.

Ebere took the boy. He cried all the more. She began to bounce him on her knees. She wiped her sweaty palms on the child's back. She tried to smile but the ache in her jaw made the smile come out as a wince. The baby cried harder.

Ebere turned to the woman, not knowing whether to hold out the baby or not.

Her mind traveled to the first time when Rebecca missed a meeting at Grace's house. It was when her son Okoro fell ill with a fever. At first Ebere knew nothing about the boy's illness.

She only went to Rebecca's to find out why the other woman had been absent from fellowship. She was met at the door by Rebecca's husband who showed her in and told her his son was sick. Rebecca was in the room with the boy.

"Can I see them?" Ebere had asked.

"They are asleep," the husband replied. He offered Ebere a bottle of Fanta.

Ebere had struck up a conversation with the man then. She told him how important it was for him to make out time for the Lord in spite of his busy work schedule. The man replied that getting his new business off the ground was a time devourer. It was a business just over a year old— wine importation from South Africa and Italy— and a shared partnership with an old boss of his. Ebere congratulated him, said a prayer for his new business. Just as she was about to leave, Rebecca walked into the living room in a dress covering her neck and arms. The husband fussed over her, and then he went inside to check on their sleeping child.

Alone, both women greeted with a hug. Rebecca's body felt hot. Ebere asked if she also had a fever but Rebecca replied, no. It was only a small rash, she explained. Then she laughed her strange and sudden laugh. She offered Ebere more Fanta. Ebere declined, asking to see the sick child instead.

"He's still sleeping," Rebecca raised a long sleeve of her dress and scratched her wrist. "You would have seen him if he were awake."

Ebere did not insist. Instead she took Rebecca's hands in hers and drew her gently till they were both sitting on the couch. "Let us pray for him then," she said. Before Rebecca compliantly shut her eyes, Ebere noticed a flicker of irritation cross her face.

The following week, Rebecca missed the district sister's fellowship at Grace's. This time, all the sisters went to Rebecca's at the end of fellowship. Rebecca's husband met the women at

the door. He told them that Rebecca had made a short trip to the village to see his mother who unexpectedly fell sick. The women asked if their son had recovered from his fever. The man said the boy was fine, and that Rebecca had taken him with her. Rebecca herself was fine as well and he assured that she would attend the next week's fellowship.

Everyone seemed satisfied at this. Rebecca's husband, who had come home to pick a forgotten document for work, quickly got in his car and drove away, waving to the women as he went. The district sisters returned to their homes. The following week, it was still the same. Rebecca still did not attend fellowship. No one had seen her in Sunday's church service either. Ebere (who had been unable to see her all week because there was no one at Rebecca's house each time), went over to her convert's house again. She stood knocking for several minutes till the clouds turned purple and rain began to fall in small showers. Ebere decided to go home. But just as she turned away, she heard the sound of a latch coming undone from within. She waited, her heart beating. Rebecca opened the door and stood in the doorway. Ebere saw she had on another long sleeved dress. Both women went inside.

Rebecca led her into the master bedroom where Ebere saw a collection of medicines on a stool beside what had to be Rebecca's side of the bed from the huge head scarf on the pillow. Ebere thought they had to be Rebecca's boy's medicines. She went over and read the bottles and packets. They had Rebecca's name on them.

"But your husband said you were better," Ebere was aghast.

"I was better." Rebecca sat down tiredly on her bed and began to cry. "The new doctor changed my medicines."

Ebere asked, "What is wrong? Where is your son?"

"He's at a neighbor's house. I just needed some quiet." Rebecca wiped her eyes with her palms.

"And he is well?"

"He is."

"But you are not?"

"No." Rebecca pulled a sleeve up to her elbow and scratched her arm. Ebere saw the red welts.

"What is wrong?" Ebere asked again. Rebecca said nothing. She only scratched her arm. Then she lifted the other sleeve and scratched the other arm. After that she undid the zipper at her back a little and scratched her neck. As she watched Ebere was reminded of the rash that had filled Chichi's body before her death; tiny angry things with red points. A dark, sinking feeling crept over Ebere then. She tried to brush it aside and without asking the crying Rebecca more questions, held her close and began to sing and pray. Rebecca held Ebere at arm's length after a while and said, "I know I will die soon."

"What are you talking about?" Ebere opened her eyes.

"It's not the medicine," Rebecca said. "It's the sin I committed. I am a woman living out the consequences of my sin."

Then Ebere began to comprehend something. She began to comprehend Rebecca's lost looks and sudden outbreaks of laughter. She had that look as she spoke. It was the same look she had the first day Ebere saw her across the mahogany table.

Ebere waited for the story.

It took a long time. As Rebecca told it, the rain rumbled on the window panes and a cold began to rise from the floors. Then both women were silent at the end. Slowly Ebere realized she

didn't come there to be silent. She came to give hope. So she said, "If Jesus could forgive Mary Magdalene the adulteress, a woman who slept with so many men that she had lost count, why won't he do the same for you, Rebecca, who slept with only one man outside her own husband? Mistakes are made all the time and I know your husband's boss forced himself on you—"

"No. I wanted the debts cancelled. I offered to sleep with him." Rebecca was staring into the air.

Ebere fingered her Bible's cover. "But the man was first attracted—"

"And I gave in. No force involved. I just wanted to save my husband's new business. And now what I did is," she shook her head. "The plague has started."

Ebere knew the plague Rebecca was talking about. It was the plague that befell the wife (born Isoko or married to an Isoko), whose adultery would always provoke the ancestral gods of her husband's family. These gods exacted their fury by striking with deaths; it could be the woman's own death, her children's, or her husband's. The wife was required to confess to her husband's family to stop the plague, and afterward the clanswomen would sing her shame around the village. Then a cleansing sacrifice would come next. The sacrifice it was believed, was the way to stop the plague.

Rebecca said that the rashes were clearly a sign. She needed to return to the village for this sacrifice.

Ebere shouted, "No! Those are the beliefs of old. Now Jesus has changed all that. He can wipe away every curse. Do you believe, Sister Rebecca?"

For the first time Rebecca didn't agree with Ebere. She explained further that there had been other things too, like the endometritis diagnosis she received weeks ago. It was affecting

her womb also. Ebere asked if she'd received treatment for it. Rebecca said yes, and that the antibiotics were among the drugs the recent doctor put away.

So, slowly Ebere watched, anointing her convert's head each time she visited. In time the rash left Rebecca's body completely. Ebere promised that it was all right now. But each time she went home she could not shake off the thought of Chichi's body on that dying bed, boiling hot with on and off fevers, a rash covering the length of her torso. In those days Ebere wasn't yet the woman who could pray over illnesses. She was not even the woman who wore A-line dresses, long flowing skirts and high necked blouses. Her name was not Ebere, it was Madonna. And instead of flowing clothes she wore minis and cropped blouses with plunging necklines. .

The danfo had paused at another bus stop. Its sudden jerk brought Ebere's mind back to the present. The woman with the crying baby alighted. Mount Carmel was the next bus stop. The danfo driver was calling out to a roadside vulcanizer to come balance his tires. As the vulcanizer unfurled his hose pipe and pumped the tires, Ebere said to the conductor, "I go stop for Mount Carmel."

The conductor was counting money. He nodded.

Ebere called a boy passing by with handkerchiefs on a hanger. She chose a pack of three and paid. She opened the pack and took one out, pressing it deeply into her palms. The thought of Chichi's rashes was making the sweating worse. Chichi's rashes had been four years ago, before Ebere had ever met Rebecca. When they started, the doctors had ruled them as some drug allergy, for Chichi had been on therapy for her periodic hormonal imbalances. The doctors put away the related drugs and the rashes subsided. Weeks after they were back again. So back and forth went the trip to hospitals, the rash yo-yoing to everyone's bewilderment. One day, with tongue white from fever, the tired Chichi told Ebere that this had to be the plague of the

adulterous wife playing out on her for what they had both done with Zuby. “We should never have gone back to Zuby,” Chichi said. “We’re both married now.”

In their younger days when Ebere first met Chichi in an undergraduate business class, the chemistry had been immediate. They bartered histories and when they knew one another well enough, realized that the very things Ebere’s stepfather had done, one of Chichi’s uncles had done to Chichi in quite the same measure. Both girls were of the same resulting affliction, turned inside out with the perverse addiction to older men’s bodies. They gave out their photos to hotel managers and circulated stealthily around the hotels’ customers. After school they moved to Abuja and settled into more elaborate networking. They picked ‘business’ names to support this profile. Ebere was Madonna; Chichi Dolly. They swapped men, traveled extensively. Life had never been so good, never felt better, and then the signs of aging started calling: a wrinkle here, a wrinkle there and neither girl was even thirty five. That and the building reprisals from their customers’ wives served as a sign that it was time to settle down and look to new things. Have a family for instance. Madonna and Dolly moved to Lagos and in six months, met two brothers who proposed to them.

It was a year after their marriages that Zuby called. He said he’d missed them since they left Abuja. It had taken him a lot to locate them in Lagos and he wanted one last shag. Chichi and Ebere felt the ever familiar rush of adrenaline, for out of all their former customers who could be like Zuby? Thwacking and humping his way with two women at the same time, and with no sign of exhaustion for hours and hours. To do what Zuby did an average man, like both their husbands, would require extra doses of burantashi.

Chichi died after a long battle with the unnamed sickness. This was three years after the tryst with Zuby. Her cause of death was explained by the doctor as complications from drug

interactions. Ebere's ensuing depression made her lose her job. She could not focus on anything of value and one day, for no reason at all, rushed at her husband with a cudgel, causing the man to raise an alarm that brought his nephew on holidays rushing to his defense. The nephew beat Ebere into a state dire enough to send her to hospital. It was at the hospital that Ebere met Sister Grace who was on an evangelical hospital mission. The peace in the holy woman's eyes was such as Ebere had never seen before. The woman smiled all the time, touched the newly forming rash on Ebere's shoulders as she would an expensive piece of diamond. No mother, no man, had ever touched her like that.

When she got kicked out by her husband's family, Ebere went to Grace who welcomed her to her church and helped her find a job. Grace became the only one, apart from Chichi, who knew her story. Grace never judged her but said instead, "When a woman becomes a new creature in Christ, all things become new."

Ebere's rashes picked up soon after she joined the church. Then they died down and never returned. For the fever and drowsiness which the doctor said was as a result of the onset of menopause, she took a few medicines now and then. But these were things Ebere had never told Rebecca. She had never told her that she was living proof that the plague of the adulterous woman was powerless. A figment of fancy even. Today however, when she got to Mount Carmel, she would take Rebecca aside and tell her.

Now the conductor was calling out Mount Carmel's stop. Ebere snapped out of her thoughts and alighted. The sun shone in a harsh white light. She pressed her palms into her new handkerchief and soon there was a feeling of something missing on her. She looked at herself. She had forgotten her bag on the bus. She turned to see the danfo's taillights rounding the corner and out of sight. She stood right there, rooted to the spot. Now her Bible, phone and house keys

were gone, flowing away from her on a strange bus. She turned and walked down the road, through the hospital's gates, a hollow feeling sinking her stomach.

At the parking lot, Ebere spotted Rebecca being led into a car by Grace and about four other district sisters. She walked up to them, calling out. The women looked at her. Grace paused but did not say anything to Ebere who was close enough now to ask, "Where are you taking her? How is her husband?"

Again the sisters said nothing. In that moment, Rebecca pushed her head through one of the car windows at the sound of Ebere's voice. In an instant she opened the door and rushed out. With a wild cry she flung herself at Ebere and was hitting her on the face and shoulders, shouting: "Get away from me! You've gotten what you wanted! You've made me as wasted as you!"

Sister Grace and another woman seized Rebecca and pulled her away. As they tried to get her back into the car, Rebecca screamed, "She wanted me to be wasted as her, isn't it? No husband, no future. Owee!!" Rebecca laughed that sudden laugh, pointing at Ebere. "So you think I don't know your story? You think I don't know you now?"

The women held her down, whispering things. Rebecca was howling like a trapped animal, her eyes rolled to show only whites. Her legs beat against the inside of the car door.

The hospital security was hurrying to the scene. Two men in green and yellow khakis.

The air about Ebere began to choke. She felt it spinning. She looked at Sister Grace, but Grace didn't return her look. She was busy trying to calm Rebecca. Ebere felt a hand on her shoulder, light and stiff. She turned. It was Sister Oge.

"Anyone will say anything when in grief. New widows are never gentle with words." Then Oge looked away. "Don't take it to heart."

Ebere leaned forward. “Her husband is—?”

Sister Oge took her hand off Ebere’s shoulder. “It might be best to go now. We will see her home and you can come later.”

The men in security uniform hovered. Except Grace, all the district sisters present were looking at Ebere.

Rebecca was wailing loudly, “Johnny! Johnny! I’m sorry for killing you.”

Ebere left.

Outside the hospital gate she walked, walked, walked down the bustling road, feeling like she was floating. She stopped and bought a sachet of water from a kiosk. Then she inhaled deeply. The ache in her jaw had clamped her mouth shut. She closed her eyes to wait out the ache and as she did so an image flashed through her mind. It was the image of Rebecca beating her shoulders and face. It felt familiar, being something like what Zuby did sometimes to get himself in the mood.

Zuby. He had asked to meet her today. Ebere wondered if her phone would be ringing again with his calls, deep in the folds of her lost bag. She opened her eyes, headed down the streets, the sight of the bus stop swimming in the distance. There was urgency to her step as she walked. This was one important recovery mission.

She shaded her eyes against the sun, started down the corner where she’d last seen the bus drive through. She continued walking.

She was going in search of her phone.

MINISTERING MAN

As he sat in the living room and slurped his tea without sugar, Nnamdi 'The Duke' winced at the racket his wife and children made preparing for school. His transistor radio was perched on a low table opposite him, and the early morning news was on. Now and then his wife would yell at the children inside: "Don't let me catch you there! Big head like your father! Where did you leave your socks? And you, how long will it take you to brush your teeth?" and the news got submerged. He reached for the volume dial and turned it up.

Soon the children bustled in to take their places at the dining table. The first thing Junior said was, "Mommy! The tea is too hot!" and his sister, Baby, cried, "But that's my cup. Give me my cup!" and began to bang her hands on the table.

The Duke said, "Shatap you two!"

His wife, Nneka, breezed in wearing her yellow nightgown with the thousand stains. She set down two smoking plates of rice left over from yesterday's dinner. She picked Junior's tea and began to stir and blow into it. "It's cooler now," she said, giving it back to the boy. She stood behind Baby to tidy her hair. As she pulled and tugged at the girl's tresses, The Duke cocked glances at his wife's brassiere-free bosom as it jiggled, remembering how she had pushed him away earlier on, saying, "Not now. I have cramps. Not now."

From the flat above a woman started screaming. There was a thump and then a scraping of objects. The screaming woman ran out to the balcony, her voice carrying into the calm morning. "Leave me alone! I say leave me alone!"

The Duke shook his head. "Tony and his wife have started again."

Nneka said nothing. She continued dressing Baby's hair.

“Tooni and his wife,” Baby chirped. “Tooni and his wi—”

“Sshh. Eat your food,” her mother said.

Upstairs Tony’s voice was going, “You woman, are trying me again. Now tell me where you kept my check book or I will do you many many things!”

“Leave me alone, you wicked man,” Tony’s wife said. “Everybody come and see!” And a scrape and a tumble, indicating a scuffle. Things— could have been pots and pans— began flying from the balcony. They tumbled onto the concrete yard and raised a cacophonous chorus.

Again, The Duke turned up the volume dial on his radio. It reached its highest valve and stuck. Then there was static. He extended the antenna which jammed after a certain point and would not budge. He rose from his chair and walked to a point beside the TV where reception was best. He lifted the radio to his right ear and held it there. The loud bang of a shutting door sounded and the woman went on screaming inside.

“Will this ever end?” said The Duke. “Jesus.”

“Mommy I want more,” Junior said.

“More what?” his mother shot at him. “Food? Why don’t you ask your father for the money?”

The Duke pressed the radio closer to his ear.

Junior pushed back his chair and got up with a long face. He fished something out from his school shorts pocket and dabbed his mouth with it.

“Where did you get that?” The Duke said.

“It’s a handkerchief,” the boy said, now putting it away.

“Where from?”

“My friend gave me at school.”

“You have no business with things that don’t belong to you. Return it to its owner and don’t bring it home again.”

Junior looked at his mother.

The woman, not looking at The Duke or the boy, said in a low voice, “at least the child has some sense to go after something.”

Baby giggled. “Head like your father!” she sang.

“This child!” Her mother stared at the girl. “Who put this mouth on you?”

The Duke coughed. “We should start going or we’ll be late. I don’t want us to run into that traffic.”

His wife kept at Baby’s hair as if he hadn’t spoken. Minutes later she went inside, and when he heard the splashing sounds of water in the bathroom, The Duke put down the radio on the old Panasonic TV. Then he saw that the radio had been placed on the landlord’s eviction notice. He shifted the radio to another spot on the TV. He moved the eviction paper slightly; careful to realign its borders so his wife would think he hadn’t seen it yet. He remembered the radio, took that away and held it to his ear again. The news commentary was on the minimum wage for civil servants, and a quoted speech by the state governor on yesterday’s May Day. The speech quoted the need to cut back on worker bonuses which were currently emptying the treasury.

The Duke smirked. “Liars. So now they forget their bullet-proof cars and big parties.” And he laughed a stiff laugh that caused his tea to slosh to the cup’s rim.

But he had lost his appetite for the news. He turned to the sulking Junior and said, “When you’re older you will start learning what they call geeo-gra-phee. Do you know what it is?”

Junior looked up at his father. “Is it a big river?”

"No.". It's a subject. Like Math. Or English. In it your teacher will tell you that this earth we live in is actually moving very fast."

"Do you mean like a car?"

The Duke nodded. "As we stand here now, like this, do you know that we are inside a big car?"

"Is it like your bus, daddy?" Baby was not pleased at being excluded from this grand discussion.

"Bigger than my bus." The Duke smiled at her and she smiled back, two holes showing through her upper row of teeth.

"But how can the earth be moving? And yet we're not shaking!" Junior lowered his voice reflectively.

"That, my son," The Duke said as he turned off his radio and set it carefully on their aged Panasonic TV, "is one of the wonders of creation."

His wife was now out of the room, dressed and ready to go. The Duke took in her vanilla scent and tied back braids and said, "Okay everybody we go." At the door, as she stood aside to let the children walk past with their school bags in one hand and lunch boxes in the other, he ogled the sensual hyperbolic swell of her bottom in her secretary's skirt. Enthralled, he reached out and squeezed the soft mound the moment the children were beyond the door. Nneka turned and followed out, as though a fly had only grazed past her clothing.

Tony's wife was hauling a large box down the stairs. The box had clothes tumbling out the seams. She looked up at the apartment from which she was fleeing. "Devil! I will never come back here again!"

Tony appeared at the landing above and threw a heeled shoe over the bannisters. “So why did you forget this?” And he threw the other foot. “And this one too!”

Tony’s wife ducked to avoid the shoes and almost bumped into The Duke and his family coming out of their apartment.

“Careful. Careful.” The Duke pulled his children out of the screaming woman’s path. Nneka his wife hurried along, her eyes half closed. When the family was outside, Junior turned to his mother. “Mommy, when are we going to move out of this place?”

“Yes.” Baby nodded in agreement.

Nneka said nothing. She didn’t even look at The Duke as she’d done in the past whenever the children asked the question. She instead began to hum a tune as she walked over to the other end of the yard— side stepping Tony’s pots and pans— to arrive at where a minibus stood parked by a row of wilted Ixora shrubs, dank and sullen in its fading blue paint circumscribed around its middle with a stripe of white. The Duke unlocked the doors and Nneka and Baby got into the front seat. Junior got into the back, careful to move to the far end of the row as there would be other passengers along the way.

It was 6:50 am and the air still enfolded the smell of dew in its depths. As they pulled onto the highway Nneka said to The Duke without moving her lips, “The landlord was in the house about the rent, before you came back from work last night.”

“Why are you just telling me?” The Duke said.

“That is not the issue. It is when are we giving him his money? It’s six months now.”

“I will soon finish with the loan,” The Duke said.

“Well, my salary will not go into rent anymore. I told you that.”

The Duke fixed his gaze at the sun rising in the horizon, an orb of fuchsia and gold in a soft bed of grey wool. He inhaled, “What a beautiful day!” and exhaled, then drummed his fingers on his steering wheel.

Soon passengers began entering. A man and his two school children got in not long after The Duke had driven past the first main intersection. The man cradled both children in his lap to save cost. A short distance ahead three more people got in, all with sleepy countenances. At different points more people filed in till all nine seats were taken. The Duke pulled onto the shoulder of the road to collect the fares and give change as needed. Junior acted as intermediary, stretching out to pass the money from the passengers to The Duke and back to the passengers, whether or not their hands were unable to extend beyond a particular point due to the placement of their seats. He enjoyed doing this for his father, his brow knotted in concentration as he called out each denomination as he handed it over. “Twenty naira. Ten naira. Two five nairas.” This morning when the boy passed down a “Fifty naira and two ten nairas” from his father to the passenger at the far left end of the bus, a woman in a brown men’s shirt with a collar so thick it obliterated her scrawny neck, the woman said, “Ah, no. My change is not complete!”

“Where are you going, madam?” The Duke asked.

“First Bank by Bala bus stop.”

“You gave me hundred naira and I gave you seventy change. It’s complete.”

“So it’s thirty naira? How can?”

“Madam that is what it is—”

“No. No. No. I am paying twenty naira. Let me come down!”

By now other passengers were saying, “We will be late. What is this? Are we not moving? Aaaa.”

In order to avoid an incident, The Duke wheeled into traffic and nosed down the road. He said to the woman's image in the rear view mirror, "No problem, but because it is early and you are my first customer so I will add five naira to your change. But thirty is what we take. Are you new?"

The woman did not reply.

The man with his school children alighted not long after. Baby waved to the children as the bus pulled away. Her mother calmly lowered the girl's hand. The next stop was Bala and The Duke pulled over. He rummaged through the slim bundle of notes on his dashboard and slipped out a five. The skinny woman looked at the note.

"I said I'm paying twenty."

The Duke looked amazed then irritated. "See —"

The woman had come round to the driver's side and fixed her rat's eyes at him. "You are looking for my trouble," she said.

"What is this? But didn't you see what other people were paying?"

"Why didn't you let me come down?"

The Duke pushed the five naira note toward her. "Madam just take this and go."

The woman lurched and grabbed The Duke by the neck with both hands. Baby screamed. The Duke heaved forward at the sudden attack and reached up to pry the fingers off. His wife was leaning over the now whimpering Baby and tried to free her husband's neck as well. At the back people were exclaiming, reaching to intervene, yelling. Junior had his head and upper torso out the window and was boxing the woman by the ears shouting, "Leave my daddy alone!"

Unable to sustain her grip in the face of such intervention, the skinny woman was overpowered. A brutal rage had distorted her face, spittle pooled at the corners of her lips and

she was breathing heavily. Nneka dug in her purse and took out a ten naira note. “Take!” she thrust the note at the woman who snatched it, now with a sardonic smile easing over her features. The Duke put his hand to the ignition and revved the engine, his demeanor rankling in an assortment of emotions he was too dazed to recognize. But just before he pulled away, the woman made a last move by throwing her head forward and splatting a gob of spit in The Duke’s face. The Duke screeched off.

“God save us,” a passenger said.

Another called the woman crazy; that she didn’t look like she’d slept in a home all night.

Baby buried her face in her mother’s bosom.

Further on, traffic had gradually thickened and the bus slowed to a little more than a crawl as it waited in line to navigate a roundabout. The spit was dribbling downwards, seeping into his ear. He still had the five note, crumpled in a tight grip. Without thinking he wiped the drool with it, then let the note fall to the plastic mat beneath his flaking faux leather shoes. He could hear his wife’s breathing, knew she was looking ahead. He ran a palm over his face as if to clear his sight. The sky lay in a blue then white then yellow expanse, bleached to nothing by a scathing sun. The car ahead pushed forward. He pushed forward.

One after the other the passengers alighted at their stops. A middle aged man was left in the bus when Nneka alighted with the children. She came down first and Baby after her. Junior got off the bus without a word to his father. The Duke said, “Shut the door well” as his wife was leaving with Baby but she walked off into the street in silence, her head slightly drooping.

The man in the bus said, “I will drop at the next stop.”

The Duke dropped him at the next stop.

The next intersection, a roundabout after that and then the street to the right off the second turn, he pulled into his office premises. It was a sprawling government ministerial complex, only half of which was in use. The remaining half was swathed in decaying scaffold, the roof blown off by decades of rain and wind. It lay unpainted, the windows had no panels. Algae and mistletoe ran along the cracks in the wall. He parked in a slot between two rickety hatchbacks, careful to choose the space because it reinforced hope for his bus, wedged like that between more ailing mates.

His office was on the third floor, announced by a brown mahogany door with the inscription 'Information Unit.' It was a large rhomboid space with a mangy brown carpet notorious for being a recurring subject of the Unit's memos to authority. These memos, sent out every three months on average were crafted by The Duke who revised his adjectives with each issue to curry attention: 'health-hazard, unbecoming of a public office, apoplectic, disease-breeding, save our noses dear Sir—" and on and on. Mrs. Banjo who typed the letters always said, "The Duke! Please isn't this grammar too much?" But she typed them anyway because this was what she was paid to do. Other than that she laid her head on her table and snoozed, just as she was doing at this moment when The Duke walked in and dropped his briefcase on his desk opposite.

Mrs. Banjo opened one eye and peered at the Duke. She turned her head to the other side and closed the eye again. Farther to the left sat the third occupant of the office in her wispy permed hair that began two inches away from where hairlines began for normal people. The hair she let fall around her face, giving her the appearance of a figure just emerged from rolling about in a heap of hay. She was Mrs. Moka. This morning as always, she sat calmly chewing bitter kola behind her table on which there was nothing except for a dog eared Bible and a duty

register. The Duke flipped the register open and signed his time of arrival. His watch said 8:23. He signed 8:00am.

"The Director wants to see you in his office. He has sent for you twice," Mrs. Moka said.

Mrs. Banjo opened one eye. "Yes, he has."

"What does he want?" said The Duke, snapping the register shut.

The Director was on the phone as The Duke walked in. The man didn't acknowledge his presence but went on enunciating carefully into the phone, angry over something and thumping his desk with his knuckles as he spoke: "But why," thump, "didn't they tell us in time?" thump, "and so? They want it this minute?" another thump.

The Duke remained standing opposite the desk. His eyes darted everywhere — the standing fan whirring in the corner and bobbing its head like it was tipsy; the pages of the daily Guardian, spread out on the table and fluttering in the fan's breeze; the director's swivel chair with the scalloped head rest— he saw these things with a familiarity brought on by decades of acquaintance. He saw without actually seeing. They were simply images, still and static before his eyes. And into this still scene the fan in the corner breezed a whiff of the crazy woman's spit. As the smell hit his nostrils he felt a jab in his chest, a flash of shock and anger as he pried those fingers off his neck. He should have held the woman's wrists afterwards and shoved her onto an oncoming car. It shouldn't have bothered him that the passengers would demand a refund of their fare, or that his children would be late for school. After all, Junior had to see what it took to handle bad situations like a man. The boy was nine now and The Duke was only ten when he fought for his own mother, shielding her from his stepfather's drunken beatings in the middle of the night. "If you touch her I will kill you," he had said in his shrill boy's voice, waving a stool above his head and baring his teeth. He had learned early, that this was what one did to these

kinds of people. Tumors and cancers of society. But he hadn't shown his son today. He was bothered with money, about not letting crumbs trickle through his fingers. He was bothered about his wife turning him celibate because there was always something to do that was not being done with money that was not available. But whose idea had it been that he obtain the loan in the first place?

She had learnt of the estate a year ago from the co-op society at her office. It was a huge expanse of fallow land on the outskirts of town, mapped out for development by a real property organization affiliated with government. It was straightforward, his wife said. A plot of land went for two million, but there was a short cut for the less fortunate like themselves. With an initial deposit of four hundred and fifty thousand one could secure the plot if all the paper work was done appropriately. You had to show them your past bank transactions, confirm you were in good standing with your present employers and sign an undertaking. What was better, you were allowed to commence building of your own home. The Duke said no. He didn't have four hundred and fifty thousand and why did they need to start building a house when the children were in school? She looked incredulous. But *that* was why they had to own a house! Were they to own a house when the children were all grown up? Besides they could construct an annex of about three or four rooms and rent these out to students or singles. She also wanted to be a landlady. She was tired of paying rent instead of collecting, especially as this rent was for a two-bedroom apartment in the midst of crazy neighbors. The apartment had no pipe-borne water, and the bathroom and kitchen shared a connecting door. But if they could obtain the estate land, then they could become their own masters and with rent collected as landlord and landlady, could offset the secured loan every month and invest their salaries in other deals. The Duke said no. It

was then that she told him, “Nnamdi, listen. If you don’t do it I will. You’re afraid that I’m thinking for you. And what if I am? I am tired of being humble, of being small.”

So he quarreled with her. But while she slept in the other room with the children and he slept alone in their bed, he lay facing the ceiling and thought of what she had said.

He had always believed in a life of principle. That is to say, an existence modeled after methodical progress. One thing had to come after the other as dictated by nature’s code. No cutting corners, no over stepping of boundaries placed by conscience. If something didn’t come to you today it would come tomorrow. If not, leave it. What he had today, even if it wasn’t much, he was proud of because he had obtained them earning an honest salary with the Ministry of Culture. Ten years and he had built an untainted record for himself as Cultural Information Officer 2, then 1, on grade level 10. And when he passed his promotional interview due in two years, would be a high-ranking Information officer on the crucial level 14. Then he would be entitled to huge Estacode allowances for duty tours and driven around in official vehicles from place to place. He could do things with those allowances and thus buffer the low salary, because in this job the salary didn’t start to make sense till you were a full-fledged Director and then a Permanent Secretary. That was ten more years if he stopped to count. It would take time but victory was certain.

The job was slow, pay was low. Young people kept away from Ministries, but at least one didn’t get sacked in the middle of ones job like he’d seen friends in private firms suffer. That was what happened to Boniface, Leke and Willie, all friends from university days. Willie’s case had been the worst, felt most deeply by The Duke. During their undergraduate days both friends had placed a bet to see who would be first to win Nneka’s heart in three months. He The Duke had won the bet, though not in three months but nine, and this was only because as Nneka told

him years later when they were married, The Duke had been the gentleman of the two— the one who opened car doors and read poems, which was why he was called The Duke in the first place. Courtesy as when necessary. It didn't matter that Willie had termed it something else. Too soft, was what he told The Duke in disapproval. Too afraid of the system.

After graduation Willie had gotten a position as Protocol Assistant with an oil servicing firm. This was before The Duke had even begun looking for a job. The pay was huge, the transformation in Willie's life instant. Then one day he came to work and was barred from the premises, his official car taken from him. He was told he was being suspended over an allegation of misconduct. No further explanation. He was sent home. A week after, he was sacked. What misconduct? Willie pressed. It all came to nothing. But he was let in on the intrigues later when he learnt that his immediate boss had laid a complaint about him regarding a joint project. It was fabricated of course. Someone simply wanted him out of the way because Willie's presence was threatening. The devastated Willie never recovered. His resources dwindled, he withdrew from people. The next thing The Duke heard, Willie was out on a business thing to Malaysia. Some said Spain. Everyone knew it was drugs. Heavy, Class A drugs. Eight years now, no one had heard from Willie.

Boniface too. Leke as well. All these men had lost jobs on the whims of their employers. Grown men with responsibilities, having their bread torn from their mouths just like that. He The Duke didn't need that; didn't need his blood pressure shooting high and low, dangling between life and death like the homeless. Maybe they found their feet after their disappointments, maybe they didn't. But the thing was, the change was often shocking, threw one off balance and distorted focus. His was a steady climb. One, two, yes, yes. But now came this loan he had to take to make Nneka see that he wasn't indifferent to their condition. After he took the loan his

office began monthly deductions from his salary, leaving only a third as his take-home. From this third came the children's school fees, feeding money and in recent months, maintenance money for the bus. Not even a farthing could be saved to begin building a new house. And now that they couldn't save up for house rent either, why was she angry with him? The loan would be paid off by year's end. Hopefully he would save up for the rent afterwards. If only the bus were stronger, newer, he would hire it out for days, for more money…

The Director was waving his hands in the air and talking in puffs. "You see, these people want to kill me! Oh good gawd."

"Sir?" The Duke said, trying to capture what he had missed.

"Look. They said the governor was sending his special adviser down with a delegation of UNESCO people. They want to donate something ethnic to all state culture ministries. Then they said it had been postponed to a later date. Now they have called to say the adviser is on his way with the delegation and a press team—"

"What is the delegation bringing, Sir?"

"I don't know! Books for the library! Sculptures! I don't care! They don't even know that the section of the building where these things are kept has been under renovation since Jesus ascended into heaven!"

"But now? Are they coming now?"

The Director glared at The Duke. "Now this is what you will do. I want you to write me a speech. Something, em em, big! Big English. Just to thank them and make some small talk about our past work this year dedicated to the promotion of culture —"

"Like the Adanma dance we staged for the First Lady —"

"Yes like that. What? Of course not! That thing with the troupe wagging chicken legs, is that a big thing? I mean something this big," he spread out blubbery arms, "so that we can look good in the papers too. Now don't fail me. What are you senior Information Officer for?"

"I will try Sir, even though we haven't done much this year —"

"Good. Ten minutes."

When The Duke stepped out to the corridor, there were cleaners dusting the windows and sweeping the floors. In his office Mrs. Moka was brandishing a can of air freshener and aiming it at the carpet. Mrs. Banjo was watching her with a pessimistic eye, certain her mission was bound to fail. The Duke whipped out a note pad to write and Mrs. Banjo saw at once that there would be work. She turned on the computer and the machine began to rattle and fart hot steam as its bones rose from the dead.

It was three pages long when Mrs. Banjo finished typing. Culture as the only heritage left a surviving people. Culture as what made Africans' Africa Africa, the body stamp that ensured definition without mix ups or misrepresentation, war paint as in battle—

"Why battle?" The Director struck that out with his pen, his lips working furiously as he read on. Slowly he began to nod. "Yes, yes," and he didn't seem to mind that The Duke had mentioned the First lady's dance after all, coating it as "spurred on with the need to constantly re-emphasize our rhythms in an enlivening habitat of shared space…"

They were gathered to receive the delegates just as they saw the entourage drive in. The Director and three immediate assistants, the head of administration and a retinue of sub-heads, The Duke as S.I.O 1 and Mrs. Moka as the more junior S.I.O 2.

The three-car convoy curved to a slow halt before the complex's entrance where the national flag stood flapping in the wind. At once a team of photographers leaped out from the

third car like a gang of robbers and began to click away with their cameras. Two women and a man got out of the first car, smiling and uncertain. Business in their eyes as they gazed about in wonder, then aversion. At once a rotund man in a tie and suit, who had emerged from the second car (the government man no doubt) was beside them and gesturing to the section under renovation, grinning and explaining that government was working without rest to complete construction by the following month. It was an abandoned project inherited from past administrations he explained, but it would be set aright nevertheless. The women and man nodded, smiling at the site which was empty of builders or any trappings of ongoing construction. As the government man went on and on The Duke wondered at how much the fellow actually believed his own words. He had never been here till now. He, like the foreigners, was only seeing this structure for the first time. The Duke watched him. He was definitely a new addition to the cabinet. Young, naïve, greedy. Just what it took. The government man was now laughing with the team, leading them up the steps to shake hands with waiting staff. He walked with a brisk, self-assured air. Smooth gleaming skin as shiny as his shoe caps. The Duke went still.

Willie…

The cameras were clicking. The videos rolling close up shots as handshakes were passed around. His head angled to the side, The Duke held on tight and whispered, "Willie?!"

There was a moment's pause. A glint caught in the other man's eye. His podgy fingers closed about The Duke's bony wrist. But he laughed out loud and pumped The Duke's hand up and down as the press crowded about them. "And you, what's your name? How are you today?" he went on laughing.

The Duke faltered. Took a step back. "I am very fine, Sir."

"That is good. Good." And he slapped him genially across the shoulders and went on to the next handshake. Mrs. Moka was grinning, bowing, curtseying. "Thank you, Sir. Thank you, Sir," she said over and over. "God bless you, Sir."

But what The Duke saw in that moment began to present itself in the ghostly manner of the furniture in the Director's office. Or even of furniture in his own home: the transistor radio resting on the old TV, the pots and pans hurled down by fighting neighbors, the blue and white bus parked in the sun outside his office. The image, the moment, froze before his eyes and for once he thought his mind was playing a game on him. A hand was flipping another page of his life's book and on this page lay bigger, bolder ink marks. For how else could he explain this heavy feeling in his heart as he watched his onetime good-as-a-brother friend from a distance? This brother who did not make eye contact as he smiled the smile of politicians, as he walked the foreign delegates up and down the complex, as he talked to the press with a toss of the shoulders? This brother too busy to throw a sly wink when the cameras turned on the Director now reading The Duke's speech with gusto.

When the meeting was over the people pressed in on the visitors. The Duke pressed in too and managed to say to Willie in a low voice, "Willie, can I come later? I will like to talk to you." This was as both men were at the outside steps, right where they had shared the laughing handshake. Willie had his face averted so that The Duke had to strain to hear him. "I left my complimentary card with your boss," he said. "You can get my number from him. Call me in two weeks. I'm a busy man. Remember, two weeks. Or I may not attend to you."

The Duke smiled a small smile. He knew that tone. The tone for subordinates, when inequality had set in. Perhaps it would have been different if their meeting had been over beers and sweating women, or across from prison bars in Malaysia.

So this was his fault as The Duke. He had ruined an opportunity by simply being here, at this moment and irrelevant.

Timing. Timing was wrong.

You are afraid that I am thinking for you.

REAL PAPA

Shortly after 4am when the last customer left, Affi and two other girls who worked for Madam Constance began clearing up the beer shack. They turned off the music, brought in the loudspeakers and charcoal grill from the tarpaulin tent outside. They wiped down the tables and stacked the chairs. Chifo swept the floor of the shack while Bebe locked up the four windows. The shack, which sat on beach land, was roofed with old rusty zinc. The tarpaulin tent was attached to the roof extension at the front to create more room, while the roof extension at the back served as covering for the kitchen. The interior was divided into two sections. The outer section was for the customers; the inner space was smaller, a little bigger than a standard shower booth. This was where the cartons of drinks and foodstuff were kept. It had no windows, being where Madam Constance sat to count her money at the end of the day.

Now, after making sure everything was in its place, Chifo and Bebe walked past this small inner space, saying to Madam Constance who was hunched over a low stool and had her back to the doorway, "E kaale, Ma."

"O dabo," the boss woman replied without looking.

In the kitchen at the back, it was Affi's turn to wash the pots and dishes. She began by scraping bits of bones and leftover food into a large polythene bag. Then she tied this up neatly for Madam Constance, who would later sell the pack to a local dog owner. Next she found a large washbasin and went to the freshwater drum by a thick wood pillar supporting the roof. As she bent to scoop water, she heard Madam Constance call her name.

Affi stopped. "Ma?"

"How much you hold?"

Affi dropped the basin and went to her.

Madam Constance had a huge wad of notes in her lap, and by her left ankle lay a ledger book with a pen inside. She looked up at Affi, snorted to clear her nostrils.

Quietly Affi said, “All your money I have given you. This one is free money the customers dash me.”

“Your want salary this month or not?”

Affi raised the long sleeve of her boubou and pulled out a thin roll of maroon-colored notes, held there by a rubber band. Madam Constance looked at the money. “Is that all?”

Affi said nothing.

The boss woman rose to her feet. Her perfume smelled of acetone. Deftly she placed her hands on Affi’s shoulders and felt under her straps. Then she felt her armpits, ran her hands over Affi’s breasts and crotch. She placed her hands on the buttock cheeks and snapped her underwear. Without a word she took the money held out previously and returned to her low stool by the stacked cartons of drinks. She counted the money, picked up her ledger book and made an entry. “Go,” she said to Affi without looking up.

Back at the kitchen Affi stopped to blink at the moon, which was now receding behind a cloud that shimmered like transparent jelly, ready to tip onto her. The cold breeze of the Atlantic nipped at her jawline. Once again she picked up the basin and bent into the water cask, a huge hunk of plastic large enough to take her body up to her shoulders. She heard a dull sound come from the wood pillar against which the container rested. Affi straightened and listened again. She heard only the swishing waves of the ocean. She bent into the cask once more and came up with a washbasin full of water. After finding a stool and dropping the first set of dishes into the washbasin, she heard the sound again. Her hands went still in the suds. She was sure it wasn’t a dog. She dried her hands on a rag and grabbed a pestle.

She walked over to the cask. The moan came again and Affi lunged in the direction of the sound. It came from a dark hole behind the cask, between the pillar and the back wall. She lowered the pestle and felt around the hole with it. The pestle stuck. Affi gasped. Then she pulled. The pestle came up at once, a small hand holding onto it. A face appeared with the hand. And from that a scrawny figure stood to its feet. A little boy. He let go. He was shivering.

Affi stared. "Jesus me."

The boy's small chest rose and fell beneath his brown button-down shirt. He couldn't have been more than five.

"Child, what are you doing here?"

The boy said nothing.

"Who brought you here? Mama?"

The boy said nothing.

"Papa?"

Still nothing.

Affi watched his eyes roam the large expanse of white sand, stretching for meters and meters till it came to the concrete barricades erected by the government after last year's ocean surge. From the distance where they stood, the barricades appeared as tiny cubes of chalk, keeping the ocean from the highway.

Affi saw the dried tear tracks on the child's face, his uneven haircut, higher on his left temple than the right. And there was a slight red scar running down the bridge of his nose. She recognized the boy from hours earlier, seated beside a customer in a thick business suit, who had ordered almost a dozen beers before midnight, had come to the kitchen to pay Madam Constance himself. After paying he asked where he might take a piss. Where he might take a piss and no one saw him again. This was before midnight. Now it was past four-thirty.

“Was the man your Papa?” Affi asked the boy.

From the store room Madam Constance started coughing. When she stopped for breath she called, “Affi bring me the business you have put.”

“Yes, Ma.” Affi turned to the boy and pushed him back into the hole. “Stay here and I will come back. Be quiet.”

The boy’s form sunk back into the dark and Affi grabbed the bag of scrap food and went inside. Armed with her composed ledger, wad of revenue and bag of essential residue, Madam Constance locked up the store room with a key she kept in her brassiere. After a final word to Affi to make sure she locked up the front and back doors, the woman walked off into the foggy morning where Suleiman, her husband and driver, was waiting in his yellow cab at the beach’s gates to drive them home.

With her boss gone Affi went out into the open, a few meters from where the kitchen stopped, and began to dig at a spot in the soft white sand with a plastic dustpan. She didn’t dig for long before she hit a cardboard box. She pulled out the box and carefully smoothed over the sand. She took the box to the boy. In it was a covered bowl wrapped in old newspaper, and inside the bowl were two other covered bowls and a long thing wrapped in foil. The two bowls held white rice and pepper soup. The thing wrapped in foil was a whole croaker fish, grilled and garnished with onions and tomatoes. Affi brought the boy a chair and made him drink a bottle of Schweppes ginger ale, retrieved from a spot where she had hidden it in the roof. She broke the fish in two and served him a portion of rice and soup. “Easy, easy,” she said as she watched him eat, her hands scrubbing the pots and dishes at the same time. Done with arranging the washing on a shelf in the zinc’s loft, she locked up the doors and told the boy, “Come. You will sleep now. Later we look for your people.”

Kuramo beach stretched for a distance of over five kilometers along the ocean's shore line. It was a fifteen-minute walk to the other, residential side of the beach, made even slower by the child Affi was leading by the hand. The recreational section for tourists and drinkers behind them, they were now embraced by low-roofed settlements of tarp, rice sacks and wood planks. The tax chairman's house stood a little off from the others, more dignified as it sported a brown tarp engraved with a Guinness Stout logo, a roof crowned with tassels from the rice sacks, foundational wooden stilts and a cordoned front space for head council meetings. Affi's house was farther, located at the end of a row of lean-tos. She led the boy up the three stone steps to her door, unlocked the padlock and lit a kerosene lantern. The moon's dying rays were still sifting through the cracks between the walls of wood planks. She dropped the box of food on a mahogany-topped table with wrought-iron legs, last year's birthday gift from Abass. On the table was a pile of old magazines and style catalogues. Beside the table stood her sewing machine with spools of thread, slivers of fabric, and other sewing implements sticking out from its small drawer. Her bed stood in the middle of these two, the table at the head and the machine at the foot. It was a spring bed, dressed with a wax print fabric and two pillows without cases. She sat the boy on the bed and looked again at his scar. In the light of the moon on one side and the lantern on the other, the scar looked like an old, dying insect.

"What is your name?" she asked. She ran a rough finger down the scar. The boy turned his face away. She began pulling his clothes. "I won't let you be dirty when you see Papa."

The boy obediently raised his legs for his shorts to slide down, stretched his arms for his shirt to come off. Affi grabbed a bucket and soap dish from behind her door and led the child to the communal well. She filled the bucket and led him closer to the ocean shore, careful to avoid one area in particular where last week, she had watched a group of neighbors try to rescue a drowning man. It was strange how the visitor died. People said he was a rich man with a big company that lost everything in the business market. Then the workers of the company went on strike because they

were not paid. And so much wahala followed that Affi couldn't even recount the stories. What stuck in her mind was that the rich man came to the beach with his driver, told the driver to park and wait for him. As the driver waited, the man walked away from the visitor section of the beach, down to this side, and walked into the ocean.

Affi quickly lathered the boy and rinsed him clean. He was shivering so much that his teeth began to clatter. She wrapped him in a thick blue towel and walked him back inside. After clothing him in one of her t-shirts, she covered him in thick wax wrappers and watched him drift to sleep. She checked the time. It was past five. She went outside again to wash her tired feet as well as the boy's clothes. As she hung the laundry in the open to dry, she heard footfalls behind her. She turned. It was Abass, his sergeant's cap tucked beneath his shoulder board. He had a small smile on his face. She ignored him and continued hanging the clothes. When she was done she went inside her house. Abass followed her. He shut the door behind him and waited. There was only silence from Affi.

"Mamma cakes. My sweetie jolly tomato." He drew close and took her hand. She pulled away.

"See what I brought you." Abass moved to the wrought iron-legged table and began to unload the package under his right arm. Affi watched out of the corner of her eye, but carefully so. She didn't want him to think she cared. He placed things one by one on the table— a large tin of her favorite Nido powdered milk, a tin of Danish butter cookies, three sachets of Ovaltine, a pack of Five Alive fruit juice and two loaves of bread. He turned to her with the satisfied smile of a magician after performing a hat trick. Affi was still frowning. Abass sashayed to her and put his arms around her from behind.

"Mamma cakes," he said into her ear. "What now? Give daddy some loving, eh?"

Affi turned and pushed feebly at his broad chest. "Loving is only for good men. Where have you been? Five days and you just leave me like that."

“But you know my work, Mamma. You want me to leave my work? You want them to sack your daddy?”

“Ah, you can’t lie well.” She wagged a finger in his face. “See your eyes shining. You have been busy with Yemisi.”

He looked away. “But you too know Yemisi is pregnant. I can’t leave her like that.”

“And you leave me instead? Because I remove all my pregnancy for you and Yemisi can keep hers?”

“Mamma, she is my wife.” Abass sat down tiredly in the chair opposite the table of presents. “I’m hungry. Give me some food.”

“Why don’t you go to your wife?” Affi walked over and grabbed the chair by the top rail to tip him over. “Go to your wife.”

Abass got to his feet. “I should go to my wife?”

“Yes, go.”

He walked to the door and placed a hand on the doorknob. “I’m going.”

She said nothing.

“Should I go?” He was turning the knob. Slowly the door came open and he put one leg outside. As he was putting out the other leg, Affi said, “So this is how it is? You’re going, eh? See, are you going now?”

He turned. “But you said I should go.”

“Then go!” Her voice was shaky.

Abass retracted his legs and shut the door. She had started sniffling. He put his arms around her again and began the old speech of how if he didn’t love her he wouldn’t have stood by her all this while, paying her fees through sewing school, buying her a machine, helping to set up here at the free beach after her eviction from her last place, seeing that she was adequately protected and no one

could harass her about. What he was doing for her was more than what any man would do for even a wife.

He put a hand under her chin and tipped her face to him. His lips were pouted as though about to kiss her.

"Stop it," she whined.

He chortled. "I'm doing like in the films. You hold your woman's face like that and mmuah!"

"And I don't like that. All this saliva stinky things," she laughed. "Sit down. I have fish and pepper soup for you."

He sat in the chair with a pleased sigh, drumming his fingers on the table. He began unbuttoning his policeman's shirt as Affi went about preparing his food. He asked, "But why didn't you call me all this time?"

"I called you from Joy's business center. You don't pick."

"What of the phone I gave you?"

"Died. When you give me phones you seize from your prisoners."

"What do you want me to do? All the ones I buy for you, you send to your family in the village."

She giggled. "Ma and three of my sisters now have phones. It's remaining the youngest one."

"And you want me to buy one for that one too?"

Affi giggled again.

"You women." Abass was smiling.

Affi placed his food before him. He began to eat. "Half fish," he said. "You always bring full fish."

"Yes. I gave some to the small child."

"Small child."

Affi pointed to the bed. As she related the story, Abass stopped eating and watched the boy sleeping beneath several layers of cloth. When Affi's story was over he told her, "Why bring him here. What of police?"

"You are police. Take him."

"You don't know if that man was his Papa."

"Then his real Papa will come."

Abass watched the boy for a long time, his keen eyes expressionless. Slowly he finished his food without another word. As Affi cleared the table, he stood and shut the only window in the room. Then he started pulling off his trousers, dropping his baton carefully on the pile of magazines. His shirt he draped over the chair's back just as Affi began protesting that this was not the right time, that there was a child with them in the room that it was morning and she was tired from work that her back hurt from grilling fish over the last twelve hours. But she finally went on her knees on the wooden floor boards, stomach over the edge of the bed with her boubou flung over her head. The spring bed bucked up, then down. Left, then right. It groaned, it squeaked. Affi clung onto the head post like a squid. Once she stuck her face out of the boubou for air, just peering out of a gap in the fabric. Her eyes met a pair of small white eyes, shining like coins in the dimness of the room. They were so startled they didn't blink.

"Abass, stop. The child is looking. Stop."

"What sort of child is this? Does he not sleep?" And Abass said no more.

Affi placed a hand over the child's eyes and panted an old lullaby to send him back to sleep. The lullaby was a family staple, one she had sung to all her younger sisters when they were babies. One she was sure her mother had sung to her when she was a baby. As she sang she felt the boy's eyelids shut against her palms, and in that moment the bed made a far plunge to one side, slightly lifting off on an incline. The child's eyes flew open again.

"… eeck!" Affi shrieked, arms flailing. "My neck!"

Abass was past hearing. He had brought down his forearms on her neck and pressed them there, as if to stop himself torpedoing. He thumped and buckled. "Mother!" and slumped on Affi. His arms released her neck.

Silence came over the room like a slow gust of salty air.

Now stretched on the bed, all three people watched the morning spin patterns on the walls with streaks of white light. Soon the neighbors could be heard chirruping around the well.

"You can't sleep." Abass got off the bed and began to dress.

Affi shook her head.

Abass tucked his shirt, picked the baton from the table and slid it into place by his waist. He knew about her periodic sleeplessness, brought on by an assault she suffered two years ago, when thugs hired by her former landlord bumped her head against a wall as she tried to stop them throwing out her things. When Abass got there the thugs were gone. So he turned to the landlord, who by way of apology had Affi taken to a street clinic. Nothing serious, the nurses said. And they gave Affi paracetamol and vitamins. With time it became Valium, paracetamol and vitamins.

"Why you don't take your Valium?" Abass now asked.

"Valium don't work anymore."

He sighed. "I will come back tomorrow. We will go and see doctor."

"Now you have two women you take to doctor," Affi said.

Abass tucked his cap beneath his board. Affi saw him off to the gate where a band of area boys waved in salute. As she walked back home the beach front had taken a new look. A church congregation in white robes and toques were clapping and dancing about their leader who was waving a bible and a wand, his own robe billowing around him like a cloud. The worshippers turned to the ocean and prayed, turned back to their leader and prayed. Children ran up and down the beach.

Neighbors were squabbling around the well, others swept their compounds. Someone called out to Affi, asking if her new blouse was ready yet. Affi said it would be the next day. She greeted more people along the way, up to the door of her house, when she went in and shut the door after her.

The child was not in the room.

Affi looked around wildly. She went back outside. She searched the faces of the children around the well, the faces running up and down the beach, the faces helping the white-garment people fetch water for a token. A few neighbors looked at her curiously. She went back inside and began to overturn the wrappers on the bed. She beat the pillows without knowing why. She looked under the bed. It was there she found him, folded like a roll of cloth. He was still wearing the t-shirt. Affi pulled him out and held him to her chest. "Oh child, why is this?"

The boy put his arms around her neck.

Affi began to pat his back. "Don't be afraid, hmm? It was just two people playing."

She sang the lullaby again.

The boy slept all day. She kept an eye on him as she worked on her sewing all afternoon. She piled clothes on him when someone came in to talk to her about something, or to give her a fabric to be sewed. When he woke it was close to 6pm, time she was to resume work at Madam Constance's. She fed him bread and a huge cup of milk, after which he went back to sleep. Affi stood at the edge of the bed, taking in the rise and fall of his small chest, his eyes twitching in sleep, his fist clenching and unclenching. She contemplated his folded clothes in a plastic bag hanging from a nail in the roof. He was all dry and set to go. She took down the clothes, turned them in her hands and felt them—small, thin and needing her protection. She put them back up. She laid a dish of rice, bread and milk for the boy to eat when he awoke. Then she dressed up and left for work, locking the door after her.

At Madam Constance's nobody showed up asking for any child. From scaling, dressing and grilling fish to serving the boisterous customers, Affi listened for word of someone looking for

anybody. The suited, dozen-bottle man of the previous day didn't show up. Yesterday was the first and only she'd ever seen him, meaning that he most likely didn't live nearby. But then not all of the customers lived nearby; some came from as far as Berger, Okoko even— hours and hours away from Kuramo. And they stayed on till morning, from bus drivers to bankers, patronizing the short-time girls who went from beach bar to beach bar, about five in total, dancing to highlife and makossa. In the morning everyone dispersed, the bus drivers hitting the expressway again, the white-collared workers hitting the office straight from the bars. Now as Affi trotted about attending to them, they slipped her dash money, pausing in their talk to crack jokes. One of them she frowned at and brushed his hand away. As she walked off he clicked his tongue, made a pump motion with his right index finger and left fist. "So Affi, you forget that I get the razor blade, eh?"

"In your mother's backyard," Affi retorted.

The men hooted and slapped their mate on the back. That one laughed good-naturedly and drank his beer. "When the sea go rise and clear this beach like the church people prophesy, Affi will beg me to save her."

"Sea rises once every year," a man said. "Nothing new to anybody, old boy."

Before dawn was breaking from its pouch on the horizon, Affi walked back home from work, her ankles swollen and her eyes red from grill smoke. The boy was up and sitting in bed when she entered. He was surrounded by her magazines, all of them open and scattered about his legs. When she drew nearer she saw that he had made drawings on the pages with her tailor's chalk. A circle here, a wiggly worm there. Most were stick sketches of people with cube heads. He had pulled out all the fabric swatches she'd pinned to particular client styles.

'What is this?" Affi screamed leafing through the pages. The child looked up at her with mouth agape.

"I say what is this? Spoiling my work? My fine magazines?" She was gathering the papers in frenzy. The child dropped the chalk and raised his hands to shield his face. Affi pulled him down from the bed. "Pick them all up. Now!"

He remained on his feet, arms hanging stiffly by his sides. Affi's t-shirt reached down to his ankles. He put down his head as she continued yelling. A sound like that of a zipper sliding open hit Affi's ears. Then there was a heavy stench. What followed next was a thick slide of yellow porridge pooling by one ankle.

Affi said, "Jesus, me. Jesus, me." She fetched a roll of tissue paper and lifted the shirt to wipe his bottom. She wiped the floor boards and took him outside to rinse him off. When she brought him back in, she noticed that the food she'd left hours ago was still intact. She looked at the boy, speechless. He was already snuggled under the bed covers, eyes fluttering close in readiness for sleep. His small chest rose and fell, his fist clenched and unclenched. Affi sang till he fell into a deep sleep. While he slept she gathered the rest of the magazines, reattached the pages and sat to sort her fabric swatches. In the midst of this she studied the chalk sketches of stick people, the circles and the worms with eyes bulging from the tops of their heads. When she went out at noon to have her phone fixed by repairers along the expressway, she bought a pack of twelve wax crayons and half a ream of plain white paper.

In that stretch of day between noon and 6pm, Affi and the boy sat up working. He scratched figures with crayons clutched in a bunched fist, zig-zagging from one end of his paper to the other. As he scratched he made low grunting noises in the back of his throat. Across from him Affi pedaled her sewing machine as she told him stories of her childhood in the village. She told of her four sisters, strong girls who hauled cassava and maize to the grinding mill every day. By next year when she would be twenty-seven, she hoped to have saved enough money to bring her mother and sisters over to Lagos. Hopefully Abass would have married her by then. Then they would all be one happy

family. Affi paused to look at the boy. “If your Papa has not come by that time, you will be with us too.”

Three days later, as dawn cracked over the ocean, she joined one of the several queues of people praying and waiting to be blessed by the white-robed prophet. She put a fifty-naira note in the offering basket and was given a bottle of blessed ocean water. This water she sprinkled on her sewing machine, the child, and the few second-hand clothes she had recently purchased for him. Lastly she sprinkled the water on her repaired phone. Now even when she called with the phone he had given her, Abass was still not picking her calls. That night when a familiar throbbing stirred in the pit of her loins, she quietly stepped away from Madam Constance’s grill and punched Abass’ number with greasy fingers. At the fourth ring a woman’s voice answered, “Hallo, whoyisthis?” and Affi froze. A baby could be heard crying in the background. Yemisi, the woman said, “Hallo? Hallo? Ah, this babyill not let me hear…” and Affi hung up, her heart thumping in anger.

With brisk steps she spun round to resume her place at the grill. Someone stepped in her path. It was one of the workers, Chifo, dressed in thick clanging bangles, even thicker makeup and a tight shiny gown. “What have you come here to hide this time?” She eyed Affi.

“Please move,” Affi brushed her aside. “I don’t have time for masquerades.”

Chifo cackled. “Is it your policeman again? Has he run away?”

“At least he didn’t run to you. He is careful not to catch a scratching sickness.”

Chifo made a move towards Affi. Her hand came up and her bangles clinked.

“You just try it,” Affi scoffed. “Try it and see if I won’t tell Madam why till date, no one has caught the rat that has been entering the store to eat her smoked meat.”

And that settled it. Affi went back to the grill and served till morning. When she walked back home, she saw a few neighbors making a ruckus as they scooped water from their homes in buckets. The boy was awake and waiting for her. His eyes wore the same haunted look as on the first night she'd found him. Affi, who had already taken off her shoes and was splashing barefoot to him, saw him turn glances everywhere as if seeing the room for the first time. She held him and patted his back till he fell asleep, her wet feet curled about his warm ankles. By evening the water had ebbed a little and Affi was careful to ensure their clothes as well as her clients' clothes remained secure on the nails in the plank walls. She called Abass again, for it was he who rallied the area boys to sand-fill her floors when the tides started to rise. His phone rang and still no answer. She cursed at the phone and flung it across the room where it sat in a puddle of water in the ground. She left it there and went to work.

That day was yet again her turn to wash and lock up. After Madam Constance had retired, Affi fetched the usual bottle of drink stashed away in the roof. This she turned into an empty plastic bottle used previously by one of the customers. Next she went into the open and stood over her spot with the plastic dustpan. There was no moonshine, only a murky darkness hanging in the air. Just as she hit the cardboard box and began brushing away the sand to pull, she sensed a flash of light behind her. She stopped and looked over her shoulder. It wasn't just a flash from one source. It was a collection from several flashlights. She froze.

"No. Continue digging." Madam Constance's voice was unruffled as always. As she walked her weighty walk towards her, Affi saw that the woman had a team of people behind, enough to hem Affi in. So many faces.

"I said keep digging," Madam said. "I want to see the chicken egg too."

Affi wiped sweat off her forehead with her sleeve. She slowly turned back to her hole and pulled out the box. She dropped the box at Madam's feet.

“Look. It’s not even an egg.” Madam shone her flashlight on the box, amusement in her voice. “What can it be then? I hope it won’t bite me.”

“It’s a computer egg,” a male voice said but no one laughed.

Madam took a step back. “Is that so? Then I must see inside this wonderful computer egg.”

Affi knew what that meant. Her armpits itched like someone had stuck pins in them. She felt dizzy, unable to believe that this was actually happening. She remained as she was, squatting on her haunches and unable to move. At length a man, probably the one who had made the joke, came forward and peeled open the flaps of the box. He showed Madam the exposed contents. She ordered him to uncover the bowls. He obeyed.

A murmur rang through.

Madam, still in her calm voice, ordered him to unwrap the foil package. The spicy aroma of barbecued fish filled the air. Now the group was making a ruckus.

“You see it?” A female voice rang louder than the others. “You see it, Madam? Do you believe me now?” The owner of the voice came forward. It was Chifo.

Madam did not reply. She wasn’t even looking at Chifo. She was adjusting the damask scarf tied over her perm curls. She fiddled with the scarf like she was before a mirror. Satisfied she took the box from the man, closed it up and held it under one arm. She snorted and everyone waited.

“What do we do with her?” another male voice finally asked.

“To collect the other eggs she has been keeping at her house,” Madam said.

And so they elbowed the protesting Affi along the shoreline, down to the other end of the beach where the neighborhood was rousing from sleep. When they got to her house, a few men broke down the door without needing a key. As they rampaged about, overturning her clothes and magazines into the water, Affi was held back by a man whose fermented breath was enough to choke her. The boy was sitting up in bed, staring at the commotion going on. His legs trembled under the

covers. Madam Constance strutted about in the water, telling her gang to search here or there. She had them bring her every tin, every container, every polythene bag. They found nothing.

"Eh! And who is the pikin?" Now Chifo stepped forward and grabbed the child by the shoulder. He flinched and whimpered.

Affi made to move but the man holding her tightened his grip.

Madam Constance peered at the child.

"Madam," Chifo said. "But you know that Affi has no pikin. Ask her where she get this pikin."

Madam Constance said nothing. She seemed to be looking at the child for some other reason. Finally she turned to the men and told them to search beneath the bed springs. She told them to move the boy away. Affi shouted to them not to touch the boy. For the first time Madam showed that she was losing her patience. "I said carry away the pikin!"

The boy started screaming and kicking when the men laid hands on him.

In anger Madam marched to the bed and tried to pull the boy away. In the moment she turned to place the box on the table in order to free her hands, something happened. What came next was a sharp wail and the boss woman's torso fell forward. Her damask scarf fell into the water. She was cupping her behind with a hand. "Pikin bite me! It's hot. Oh God, hot iron!"

And they watched as Madam Constance howled and jigged Rastafarian style. Meanwhile the boy had stretched on the bed, legs stiffened and eyes rolling about in his head. His mouth frothed at the sides. Affi's captor let her go and she rushed to hold up the child's head and turn him on his side. Madam Constance had stopped jigging, her heavy breathing mingled with the many voices rising up at once, telling Affi to hold a spoon to the boy's teeth. A spoon appeared in her hand as if by magic and she forced it through the gnashing teeth. Another voice told her to rub the boy's body down with palm kernel oil. And then a bottle of the oil appeared and was tipped onto the boy's body. By the

time someone else had turned up with a nurse, the child had calmed down in her arms. The nurse dabbed a cool towel all over the child, gave a few drugs and left. Madam Constance and her gang had emptied out of the room, leaving behind the neighbors who now murmured, asking whose child was this that Affi was holding? Others said that they had seen Affi come out to bathe him only under the darkness of pre-dawn and yet a few others speculated that the child might be hers, perhaps the policeman's son even. For who knew Affi's ways from the start? She'd always been quiet about her business.

Affi was vaguely aware of their voices. They stood around talking and left, leaving her to watch the boy through the hours till he stirred again. She fed him bread soaked in milk and gave him the medicine given by the nurse for his fever. He went to sleep again in her arms. About her legs was the marshland of her wardrobe, client's clothes, spools of thread, pins and buttons, toiletries, magazines and utensils all overturned in water. Her front door was now hanging on a hinge, ready to come off at the slightest force. As the neighbors walked past they could see her cradling the child, and giggling children came and peeked at her before running off again. She swung her legs sitting on the edge of the bed over the ruins, singing her mother's lullaby in a loud tremulous voice. She nodded to sleep, and then awoke to restart the song, sitting, her face looking out the window at the tarp wall of the next house. She slept. Sang. Slept. With the child across her lap. Over and over till the sun set above Kuramo.

When the sun set the second batch of visitors came in and finally knocked off her door. Affi's eyes could only make out a haze of people moving about. Her head was now in a fog, her ears buzzed. Her skin felt hot and flushed, and she could only watch as tiny people raised her to her feet, holding her up. They swam around her making noises, and she found herself gulping when she tried to talk. Now and then she heard a man say, "Now look, didn't I say no trouble? Just take your child and go." Abass? The people floated like cotton, someone pouring tears on her, pulling a weight from

her hands. Another voice was saying, “But woman how could your husband come to drink and forget his own son?”

She slept for two days. There were brief moments of consciousness, someone waking her to eat something, placing something cool on her head. The interior of the room was bright, then dim, and then there were noises of people again. Finally she came fully awake one dim evening. She sat up in bed and looked around. A kerosene lamp was burning in the corner. Beside her someone was asleep in a chair, head lolled to one side. Abass.

She got out of bed. Her legs touched dry wood.

“Mamma cakes.”

Abass was smiling, his eyes heavy lidded. She turned an empty, scared look at him.

“I want to piss,” she said.

He hurried outside and was back with a big aluminum bowl. She squatted over it and Abass went out to empty it after she was done. She sat on the edge of the bed and looked around again. Her machine. Her clothes. Her door. They were all as before. She got to her feet and lifted her mattress. Her savings was still secure between the bedsprings, wrapped in a wad of cloth. She placed back the mattress and sat down. Abass came back inside and held her hand. She put down her head. After a while he went to one of the nails on the wall and unhooked a polythene bag. From the bag he pulled out a magazine. He turned to her. “See what I brought you.”

She took it and opened it. It was a sheaf of colored sketches bound with a cover from one of her fashion magazines. The papers were warped from dried moisture, folded and wrinkled in places. Affi looked long at the red worms with blue eyes, green people with red lips, yellow lips. Scattered, spindly lines. Zig zag lines. Red circles. She began to cry.

“Mamma cakes,” Abass flipped more pages. “But you haven’t looked at everything.” He flipped some more till he came to a page with a large drawing of a stick person seated at a table. The

person's cube head was brown, the arms yellow, the legs yellow and wearing black square shoes. There were two orbs pushing out from the chest area and even lower down the figure had a green triangle for a skirt. On the table was a most interesting object in the shape of a cuboid. This cuboid was colored purple and had a knob extending from one of its corners. The knob was S shaped, one tail of the S trailing off into a wheel. The figure in the triangle skirt had one arm on the wheel. The other arm was resting on a flat broad thing streaming out from below the knob. Four letters were scrawled in black below this drawing: 'PAPA.'

Affi took the album from Abass. She ran her fingers over the letters. She was smiling. She stood up with the album pressed to her chest and walked to the door.

"Where are you going?"

'I'm coming back. Wait for me."

Abass watched as she left the room, closing the door behind her. She walked past the tax chairman's house, past the well, past the area she'd lined for holy water days ago. She was now close to the zone where the rich man had been seen walking. She sat in the sand and the tide washed over her feet. Afar off to her right, she saw the distant twinkling lights of the beer shacks and heard the vestiges of their loud music. Dark forms of people ran around, holding hands and laughing.

Affi looked behind her. She saw the shadowed figure of Abass standing close to the meeting escarpment before the tax chairman's house, hands buried in his pockets as he watched her. She looked to the horizon, felt the sea water seep through her skirt to her skin. Affi hummed the lullaby, thinking she could hear another voice humming the same. Of someone like her across the ocean, seated at another beach and looking out. Come over, the double was saying. For here the lights never go dim.

The horizon stretched, violet fringed with fading gold. At the point where the waves embraced the Atlantic she imagined the world at that edge. She imagined the world the rich man had chosen over this one.

NOW, LET'S CONSIDER THIS CASE

And so they meet for drinks at the open court in the shopping plaza, something that happens quite often as they are wives with no jobs (depending on how you look at it) or wives with jobs (also depending on how you look at it) in the sense of the usual definition of 'job' as work that a) comes with a dress code, b) is defined by a time range, and c) is rewarded with a specified amount of money, which you must consider carefully now, for though these women's duties did not come with any, not dress code, not time range, nor salaries, they were always busy, the explanation being that to them, husband and children were more than all of the above, and chores like washing up after meals, helping out with homework, presenting chests to receive vomits and sick heads and so on, were the ultimate fulfillment of their presence here on earth, because Almighty God said through Apostle Paul who was under the influence of the Holy Spirit, that the woman is the weaker vessel, to be under her husband, to call him "Lord", placed there as an earthly representative for Jesus the ascended Lord of Lords, which is ok, so ok in fact, that when their earthly Lords at home commanded that the women leave the work of family provision to them alone, these women were exceedingly glad, for how else could a man show he loved his family except by taking command, showing the way, and even devising spousal duties, yes, these Lords devised some statutory job functions for their wives, or maybe the functions were an outgrowth of sheer necessity, and they were things like a) auditioning a house girl for the post of housecleaning, diaper changing, or impromptu shopping for food items, b) contracting a mechanic to fix the broken car, c) all other things in line with a) and b) that have not been mentioned, to which these women said "yes darling" and laid aside their University Certificates, "yes darling" and sacrificed themselves on altars of what they perceived to be a higher calling, "yes darling" because the world said so, and this world included their mothers in the village who thought it a good idea, that it was best for a woman to focus on raising a family, things were getting worse

these days they said, civilization was ruining moral values, children were getting molested by the hour, were taught all sorts of horrible things by peers, so bad that the things these little ones knew about sex their parents had not even imagined, so their mothers said that this was noble, face the children, love your earthly Lord in the name of Jesus, and don't let your society down, and this sealed everything about everything, making the equation of the world as ordained by the creator balanced.

Their meetings which may be called the meeting of the 'Association of Jobful Women at the Shopping Plaza' are never planned, or maybe the women prefer to think of them as not planned, which truly, if you were to observe closely may not be planned, because these women coincidentally bump into themselves here and there, weaving in and out of shops that deal in children's clothes, kitchen ware, children's toys, men's fabric, women's lingerie (but only for those tummy shorts tough enough to keep their fat spools on a firm leash, the sinful lacy stuff they frown at), so yes, that's the way it is, they walk around the shops with shopping lists, compiled at the end of the month when Lord Darling has released the monetary allocation for food and other expenses, for which reason these lists called miscellaneous lists or M.L for short, may come with special asterisks and markings beside certain items, in which case the item of desire may be a surprise something for their Lords, like a cologne or can of shaving cream, as these women are told in church fellowships that it is important to keep that marriage going through the God-given element of surprise, though you must consider carefully now, as these happy lists could also contain something recently advertised on T.V, something like Brazilian extensions, something like a push up bra, something like tummy shorts, all coming from advertisements which the women stumble upon on lucky days, lucky days because they don't always have time for T.V from running around as the wife job demands, for now you will agree that four to six children is no joke, fending off and thereafter surrendering to the libidinous nightly

assaults of a hot-blooded-Lord Darling is no joke either, but anyway, when these women can watch T.V they watch, and T.V comprises mostly movies and soaps, majorly because the news makes them think the world is coming to an end as predicted in the book of Revelations, which they don't want to be reminded about, though they watch the news sometimes, maybe twice a month, and when they do, they do so in order to determine what to pray about in Church, how to use some scientific information on one another, like the fact that an earthquake is measured by a Richter, Rich-tah, and they would nod at that information, good news for good brain, and they pray in fellowship, trying to calm their beating hearts at the news of wars and famine, signs that Jesus's coming is at hand, which you must consider sensibly now, because even as these women want to go to heaven they are not ready for Jesus to come just yet, appearing in the clouds with his army of warring angles to take the Faithful home, because the Faithful would not include their husbands, their Lord Darlings, men who still drink and smoke and watch videos of naked people, men who have not given their lives to Jesus, no not yet, but they would do so soon by the precious grace of God, and thus the women pray to Jesus not to come yet, to step on his chariot breaks for the sake of their husbands, something which is interesting when you think of it, for according to the Bible Jesus had made it clear that in heaven they would be no marriage, no man and woman, for all would be happy together, enjoying mansions and streets lined with gold, joy and righteousness evermore, forever and ever, to which the women said amen, but still prayed for their husbands to come along with them all the same, for the holy family had to be complete nevertheless, everyone receiving presidential handshakes from God, receiving crowns of glory as God would announce, and this is for you oh noble daughter, for converting your husband here is a diamond star, or a golden scepter, or maybe God would simply say well done and nothing more, since there were to be no genders in heaven, and man and woman would have no differentiation, nothing between the legs, wearing similar clothes, or robes, maybe even trousers, or tummy shorts, like the ones bought in the shops, tummy shorts described on the adverts on T.V,

tummy shorts written down on the lists they carried, weaving in and out of shops, for kitchen ware, children's toys, men's cologne, engrossed in studying these lists so much so that they bump into one another, and then look up in embarrassment to apologize an apology that goes thus, oh it's you, sorry I wasn't looking, and what is this, you're pregnant again!

Now what they talk about varies greatly, but it will always be sure to come round to you know what, and they laugh a lot when they talk, and watch each other for signs of aging and sagging in determinant places, take for instance the chin, the neck, the puff above the elbow, and then they imagine the rest, ones like the milky cellulite trajectories on the butt or thighs or breasts, sometimes even the arms and legs (if any was bold enough to put on a knee-high skirt), and they swap information on brightening creams, weight-loss capsules, medication for children's fevers, and praise Jesus for the gift of life, for the gift of a husband in these days of husband scarcity, in these days of good-man scarcity, for Jesus had seen their chaste hearts and rewarded them for staying virgins till their wedding nights, very true indeed, though there was to be no way for each woman to ascertain if the other's claims to virginity were true or not, a research mission they imagine themselves embarking upon, only they wouldn't know who to ask, or what former lover to consult, or what commission to report their findings to, not that, they wouldn't know at all, although it could be said that they are not totally ignorant about some of the other things, for they hear news about one another from other sources, which is what applies to the ones whose children attend the same schools, yes, sometimes they catch snippets of the school teachers' chatterings crisscrossing about, gossip about misbehaving children, a family issue, about the husband who pushed a child over a balcony in a fit of anger, these women hear things like these about themselves now and then, and they whisper behind the back of their unfortunate jobful colleague, saying how important it is that they pray for the unlucky one, saying how virtues like patience and righteousness must be upheld at all times, though

this is in fact a thing they say with leers in their eyes, unable to see that someday the tables would turn and a new name, a new story would get leaked, causing the discussion wheel to swing to a new unfortunate, provided she were not around the shopping plaza that day, which would send the women into a new fit of excitement, chatting about how important it was to pray for the one whose husband was cheating behind her back with one of his secretaries, to pray even harder because this secretary had straight legs and bore what looked like a firm 36DD bust on her chest, qualities that must have endeared her to their jobful colleague's husband for all this time, could be months, could be years, and for this what an unlucky woman their colleague was, what a poor thing she must be not to be aware, or perhaps she was aware but had chosen to be silent in a show of demure endurance, which might be the wiser option because if you left who would take care of the children if not this prostitute secretary doomed to hell where Jesus would be sure to make her chant apologies for all eternity, hmm, so they were right, for finally whatever injustice was committed would be avenged in the end, hallelujah hallelujah they chorused over ice cream at twelve noon, along with fried chicken laps and Coke, sitting now in the open court of the shopping plaza, around a big round table to pass the time till it was time to pick the children from school, or do something else like check on the man repairing the generator at home, or on other ancillary jobs as mentioned before which are not necessary to repeat at this point, but are jobs nonetheless, even without a dress code and time specification, because as the rest of the world is thinking and strategizing for a future, these women are doing so as well, and for this they grow closer, look forward to seeing each other for want of what to discuss, what new thing to learn, what new thing to do, thus drawing the cord around their hearts tighter, and sometimes they follow themselves to their homes, in twos or threes, and it is said that they touch and lie together sometimes, though the veracity of that cannot be confirmed, for if they did such things then it would be a sin before Jesus, although one cannot say at what stage it becomes sin, take for instance running a finger around the edge of the shoulder, or giving a close hug, or helping a sister

with aching breasts undo her bra clasps, one cannot say there is sin in that, and if the other says this must be sin, then she clearly had bad intentions from the outset, just like for the sake of anonymity we shall call her S.K, just like when S.K began to avoid the shopping plaza and would not pick their calls, and when she was accosted in her home she said that this was sin, to which anger and pity and then love flushed over the other women, because S.K was not the good one it had turned out, which was why something very bad befell her, something worse than what their Lord Darlings would ever think of doing to them, and to pray for her the news had to be passed around in the plaza, with shopping M.Ls in their hands and leers in their eyes, in the manner of making sure no one would say she hadn't heard the latest development, which caused them to begin by asking around in low voices, did you hear what happened to S.K?

S.K was HIV-positive, and her husband had given it to her it seemed, but the strange thing was that the man was negative, and SK swore she had been with no other, a perplexing situation on which her family and her husband's family deliberated upon for days and days, after which it was finally decided that S.K's husband undergo another test, which the man did, and it was still negative, therefore surprising everyone all the more because S.K was the woman with the secretary-sleeping husband, and the secretary wasn't even the first woman he had been with outside his home, nor was she the second nor the third, for the man simply had an entrenched reputation for this sort of thing, so how then did it turn out that though the field was sterile the farmer had turned up with a handful of rotten fruit, which was the proverb S.K's family used in searching for answers, and an answer pointed to the fact that S.K had obviously been involved outside and was lying about it, an answer which made S.K's family shout their daughter's defense, as S.K's husband's family shouted theirs on behalf of their son, then a fight ensued, whereupon S.K's family stormed back to the village with their daughter, leaving behind the children for the secretary, though it can't be said that the secretary

came around to take care of them, rough intimidating children they were, the older one of whom was a teenager, the younger of whom screamed every day for his mother, till one day younger and older absconded from school, stole their father's money and made for the village to see their mother, a decision which proved to a bad one, because they met their mother all by herself in a room, talking to herself and pulling out her hair, hair that used to be the envy of these women at a point in their friendship, hair that they could see now as they sat talking around the table even as they asked themselves that really, could it be possible that S.K had been carrying on with a lover and not saying it, or could it be that she had sustained an injury in some way, or could it be that her husband was the one to blame, though it was not fathomable how he could have altered or bribed for his test results and why, and then they understood why, and when they understood why, they wondered if that was what had really taken place, but as was said earlier, these women heard in snips and snatches and never really got the actual stories behind each other's situations, so what was always left for them to rely upon was the lengths to which their imagination was capable of taking them, so who could it be said introduced what at what point in S.K's story, or removed what at what point in the story, if it was a story at all, for these are the kinds of things they told as they shook their heads, things reeling with bubbles within, and when these bubbles broke, a need to pray would burst forth, for it has been said if you would remember, that a job was a job depending on how you looked at it, all that was needed in this case was a vacancy, a willingness to fill it, expand it, fill it again, expand it, and we could go on and on and on.

HEAVEN HOURS

Pepper's 'heaven hours' came once a week. This was on Tuesdays; between nine in the morning and three in the afternoon. Then she could do the things which she believed put her in the way of the 'Assertive Modern Woman' as postulated on the NTA Saturday Morning Show. There were three, these things: Wash and oil hair with Faith-Gro antidandruff aloe conditioning cream; two, sing before a full length mirror in the manner of Miriam Makeba, hands raised and waving to an imaginary audience; and three, watch the last twenty minutes of 'Back Locker', her favorite movie. These minutes showed the climactic scene of a female prisoner holding a prison guard (also female) hostage in a dimly lit cell. The prisoner had a gun to the guard's head as she commanded, "Now give me the keys, your shoes and belt." The guard obeyed, taking off keys after belt after shoes. As she took these off she said in a shaky voice, "Where do you want me to put them? Just don't kill me. Promise you won't kill me."

These three liberating or better yet, assertive things were carried out every Tuesday in the order mentioned. Pepper performed them with the front door closed. There was no need though, to worry about intruders. The twins were at school till three-thirty. Their father, Ibezim, was at work and it was her day off from the Women's Centre.

But this Tuesday was not to be like other Tuesdays. After dropping off the twins at school she found her way, not to peace and quiet, but to Shoprite where she paid (well, why should the price matter?) a wallet-terrorizing sum for a bottle of Kosta Browne, a smoked whole chicken, a bottle of Chérie d'amour (because the bottle in her wardrobe contained just a little of the old fragrance) and a host of other things that rose to the brim of her shopping basket, too several to mention. They were just the sort of things an Assertive- Modern-Woman-hopeful would need to keep an important guest satisfied. At home she scrubbed the bathroom free of stains, especially under the faucets. Then she

beat out strands of spider webs from corners of the ceiling. She dusted surfaces and waxed thereafter with a bit of Vaseline applied to one of the twins' socks as it wouldn't give off lint. The chicken was shoved into the oven after she poured a little extra curry on it, the wine refrigerated and the sitting room furniture sprayed with a mild Lavender mist. Now it was eleven o'clock. Her visitor was to arrive at twelve-thirty. Actually he had said, "Pepper, I should be there any time between twelve and one." But by applying her law of averages, she had set the most likely time of arrival at twelve thirty, twelve forty-five.

Time. Define time. Time is something that comes out of the clock when its hands are scratching its belly. Like how? The children in the class laughed. Look at you! You don't even know simple time! But then they didn't laugh for long. They were called up to the front, one after the other and ordered to write on the chalkboard: I WILL NEVER EVER LAUGH AT MY CLASSMATE AGAIN. IT IS NOT GOOD OR FAIR. Pepper sat stiffly in her chair, pulling at the hem of her uniform as they took turns writing, all thirteen of her classmates. Their scribbling soon took up the entire board and for those who had no room left to write, a spoken apology was to be tendered. Her head remained bowed as these ones pushed past her desk to say loud enough for the teacher to hear: "I am sorry for laughing. I am sorry for laughing. I am sorry for laughing." Three times.

"If at nine she still cannot add or subtract and has fallen two classes behind her peers, do I put her in a special school?" Pepper's mother asked at the end of the term. The woman was clutching her daughter's report card. On it read the sparse end remark: Good in Handicraft and Music.

The teacher watched Pepper staring out of the window, looking so small in the passenger seat of her mother's car, her lower lip wedged between her teeth. Now and again she picked at her hem or buried her huge forehead between her knees. "Pepper has an attention disorder," he said finally. "It's not uncommon with children her age."

"Her younger sister is already ahead of her!"

"It can be managed. Sometimes this is as a result of undue mental exertion. What does she watch on T.V?"

Pepper's mother stared at the teacher.

He continued; spreading his hands for emphasis, "What I mean is that any form of stress at home can . . ." he paused. "Pepper just needs closer monitoring. Smaller classes where she'll feel lesser need to compete. If that doesn't work, then you may really start to panic, Madam."

"I see," the woman started the ignition. "And you signed this report card?"

"As her teacher, yes."

"I've lost count of all the new teachers they bring every year. You are—" Pepper's mother peered into the card in her lap, "Ezeji?"

"Yes Madam," he said. "Azu Ezeji."

Pepper hums now at her image in the mirror. All around her the anti-dandruff smell of Faith-Gro conditioning cream hangs mid-air in balmy adulation. Her hair is parted in four and she works the cream at each section from forehead to nape. Then she kneads each part into thick Bantu knots. Later, when it's almost time for him to arrive— perhaps just as his footsteps can be heard at the door, she'll undo the knots so the hair can come out in bouncy waves. She is bathed; she has put on the Chérie d'amour too. Also later, just at the time of arrival, she'll infuse whole cotton balls with the fragrance and wedge the moist balls into her bra tails. There, her pores would alter her scent to something more original. Feral.

She'll not watch the scene of the prisoner and guard just yet. She has chosen to reserve this till after her visitor arrives. But even before that, before they would sit to watch the movie, she'd play

a nice tune on the stereo and do a dance with him in the sitting room. She would prefer at this moment, something snuggly. Like Maliaka? Yes, Maliaka. And after dancing she'd tell him all about the NTA weekend breakfast show and how her head grows warm at the things they say about self-love, self-esteem, self-truth. "Do one crazy thing today." And these are women discussing with fellow women in this show. Fat women. Short, round women. Not glossy, not glamorous at all. Can he believe that? She knows he will say that yes he believes. Azu. Only Azu has ever believed.

She goes to the sitting room and searches the T.V shelf where Miriam Makeba's 'Forever' album, with Maliaka as second track, lies in a stack of other albums. There on the shelf are framed pictures of her and Ibezim on their wedding day; pictures of the twins through their earlier years—naming ceremony, first tooth to appear, first day at school —lined up neatly in one row. She sifts through the stack of albums. Presently she notices her palms are moist and her knuckles speckled with small beads of sweat. For a moment she studies her hands, the dark gnarled forms they've become. Her wedding ring curls around the left ring finger from where it stares up at her with a blank gaze like a lost eye. Now she rubs her palms against themselves to dry them, a familiar nostalgia washing over her at the thought of those days when Azu taught her nine-year-old self that two palms equal ten, one palm equals five and no palm equals zero. Now a new understanding comes over her. She's feeling these palms anew, but not in the sense of two palms minus one palm which equals five, but in the way of one finger crossing another finger, both palms forming a link. And how many make a link?

"How do they sing that song? It takes two to tango?" Pepper's mother stood in the doorway, strangely illuminated like a badly colored drawing. Her boyfriend's car could be heard pulling out of the compound downstairs. As she made her way into the room, the woman reached for an imaginary

dance partner, sashayed and bumped into a side table. She giggled, slumped into a chair and blurted, "And what will happen now that you want to call off your wedding?"

Pepper was in a far right corner of the room, huddled over a heap of raffia straws. She went on weaving, tugging string after string to form a handle for the basket she'd been making all day.

Her mother reached into her handbag and stuck a cigarette in her mouth. "Go on. You are already pregnant with his baby. But won't he keep you even after he finds out you still piss your bed at twenty eight?" The woman laughed. "Are you afraid he will find out and not marry you?"

Pepper paused in her weaving to let her fingers play with the engagement ring. She slid it off her finger and put it back. Her wedding was to be in three weeks. Now her mother lolled her head, bouncing it back and forth as if she were listening to some music in her head. Pepper felt a movement inside her, the baby bumping an arm maybe. Suddenly she needed to use the toilet. She rose to her feet. Her mother stuck out a leg and Pepper stumbled. "You haven't answered my question," the older woman said.

Pepper steadied herself. "Leave me Mama. You too don't have your own husband."

"Is that? So you won't marry him and what will happen to your pregnancy?"

"I can take care of myself."

"You can't take care of anything because you are good for nothing!" Her mother sat up, eyes flashing their yellow corneas. The woman strode to the heap of straw and began kicking at it. "Your sister is away in Law school but look at you. You dropped out of university to weave these stupid baskets and chairs. Is that a life? Go with a man and have children. You were made for nothing else!"

Pepper was silent. She watched the woman stumble around, waving her arms. She swore she still had the power to make Pepper serve time in the wardrobe like in the days when she was little. The woman's face was damp with sweat. She said, breath thick with gin: "I will have no bastard in this house. You are marrying him. You took your father's fish brains and I wish I hadn't taken you

with me the day I left him. Blockhead. And on top of that, still pissing in your bed at twenty eight. No more in my house. God knows I have tried. Maybe in heaven he will reward me with a proper first child."

If you could see how this has turned out for me now, Mama. If only you could see. This Pepper thinks as she checks on the chicken in the oven which is an even brown now, like the inside of her elbow. The wine is chilling nicely in the fridge. It's twelve sharp. Her palms won't stop sweating. Those days when they sweated like this, Azu was the one who offered his handkerchief and told her to wrap her pencil in it as she wrote. He taught her to place an extra top sheet beneath her palm because it was necessary to present a clean homework page to your teacher. He also, was the one who suggested that since she could knit; wouldn't it be a nice thing to knit a little glove to wear on the writing hand? So Pepper got her first Christmas present, a set of needles and three balls of yarn. She made the gloves, made them so quickly that her teacher wondered. What she didn't say when he asked was that she had knit them in the dark of her mother's wardrobe, locked in there for still pissing her bed at nine years old. She knit a glove for her teacher, for her younger sister, and soon she began knitting other things: a little table cloth, a pencil case. And then one day the teacher told her to knit a glove for every hand she wanted to shake when she became famous in the future. Pepper knitted two gloves, for the two hands of Miriam Makeba. She was taking music classes then, and even though she could never read the basic notations, her music instructor said she had a good voice. Azu congratulated her at this, told her that if she tried harder at singing her dream of shaking hands with Miriam Makeba would surely come true. "Will you come with me to meet her?" Pepper asked him. "I will go with you anywhere," he replied. "I always go where the stars go."

But then he didn't keep his promise. By the following year, Pepper's mother moved to Jos to be with her new boyfriend, a Lebanese who lived in a house with a driveway lined with carved lion heads. Pepper and her sister went with their mother. Azu was paid his salary for the extra tutoring hours with Pepper, and that was the last she saw of her teacher. She was ten years old.

But she wrote letters, never more than a page though, because she got dizzy trying to tow all the alphabets on the same line. She got her replies in return, twin letters in the same envelope; the first a marked copy of her previous letter (corrections in red ink— this should be capital "P" for Perpetual. What did I tell you about nouns? Cross your 'F' in the middle (the waist) not at the bottom (the foot). No full stop here, use a comma…) and the second letter would be his personalized reply where he described an accident on the way to school two mornings before, or a rare bird that perched on his window ledge on his twenty fifth birthday just as he sat reading a book on King Jaja of Opobo. Sometimes he reminded her that he hadn't forgotten his promise to escort her on her Makeba mission. But she had to work hard to be able to do that because the stars even though they lived in heaven where everything was perfect, had years given them to shine before they were no more. She, Perpetual, must guard her Heaven Hours.

Her mother joked to her boyfriend that Pepper had a sweetheart teacher and the boyfriend laughed and said "Silly children", which made Pepper cry. It distressed her that there was no way to stop her mother reading those letters before they got to her. As years rolled by the letters trickled to a stop and Pepper's distress got worse. She kept writing and wouldn't stop. Sometimes her alphabets dangled away from their rightful sentences and clumped together at the end of the page like a jigsaw puzzle, but that didn't stop her writing. Nothing came back to her in reply. No corrected compositions, no reminders to prepare for a Makeba visit. No one to pat her on the back for the slim pass through secondary school. No one to tell her she could brave it through university even when strange wheezy sounds filled her head and lulled her into a deep sleep as the lecturer stood talking

before the class. No one to stop her from sinking into that state of malaise they say comes over you when a man tells you he thinks you're beautiful yet you know he's lying but you let him have you anyhow, because you foresee he may be the only man to ever tell you nice things, especially now that at twenty-three you are old enough for these kinds of pleasures. No one to tell her that it didn't make sense to marry a man just because you were going to have his baby. What if there was no love, no common traits?

There was no one to say she could be her own person; could wave her own flag as high as she pleased. Just no one.

She got angry the day Ibezim found her letters, two years after they were married. He had brought them and dropped them before her in one crumpled ball, a big grin on his face. He wanted to know if this was how she wrote at age ten? And who was this twenty five year-old teacher who didn't mind writing the same corrections over and over in up to fifty different letters, including how to always put a capital P for her name Perpetual? Pepper said nothing, but reached for the ball and started straightening out the letters, an ache building in the corner of her eyes. The twins were beside her, strapped in their high chairs and making a mess of their corn meal. Her voice shook as she told Ibezim not to go near those letters again to which he knocked the straightened sheaf out of her hands and said she was a crazy lunatic like her mother. One letter floated in the air and landed on the head of one of twins who snatched it off and ripped it in glee while his brother, thinking what an unexpected but welcome game this was, laughed and swatted at the remaining pieces as they sailed past his face. Pepper let out a hoarse sound like an animal stung by a poacher's bullet. She flung herself at the shreds and grabbed frantically, exciting the twins all the more as they wouldn't stop. "Stop it!" she heard herself shout and in a blind shot of impulse, hit one across the face. Ibezim was behind her, pulling her away. The hit twin started wailing and his stunned brother joined him. Ibezim shouted many things at once, called her an ugly frigid corpse of a woman, an unhappy blockhead

who wet her bed the same way as her small children. He would have sent her packing, he said. He would have demanded a refund of his bride price if it weren't for the twins. As he said these things Pepper continued assembling her letters. She was mumbling under her breath, the twins still wailing in the background: "Don't touch my letters again. Just don't touch my letters."

She is finally dressed and once again before the mirror, twisting herself this way and that. It's a basic dress, blue (Azu's favorite color) with lime green frills reaching just below her bust line. It fits nicely over her hips to stop mid-thigh, leaving ample room for upward migration when she would sit beside Azu on the two-seat couch. She feels a moment's panic at the thought of him asking after her family, since she had told him that he was to meet her husband and children on this visit. But the feeling washes away and she reasons that she can explain it away: Oh, the children went to the drug store with their father and will soon be back. My husband got an emergency call from his boss and had to take the twins along with him because they can't bear to be away from their daddy; you know how children can be sometimes. Or better still, she would tell him, I just want us to talk alone. After nineteen years, don't you think we ought to be catching up? And Pepper feels him being satisfied at this final, truthful explanation. She is sure he would understand as always. Today. Only Azu could understand.

On one of the nights she pushed him away and backed into a corner, Ibezim had asked her, "What's the matter with you? Is it me, or is there someone else?" She had turned her face to the wall like a scared child and mumbled something about not feeling well. Her husband scratched his head and said she had been unwell for too long now and yet he saw no medicines around. What sort of

sickness was that? When he approached again she shuddered and warned that she would scream if he came close. That stopped him in his tracks. Then he left the room. A minute later he was back and she was still there in the corner facing the wall. He came close, but not close enough to alarm his wife and said: “If it’s about her, I said it won’t happen again.” Pepper did not reply. It wasn’t about his boss and it wasn’t about his promotions. But she couldn’t tell him that then. She couldn’t tell him that even much later when she was certain beyond doubt that he still went to her. The business trips, the hotel receipts. She knew he was with his boss twice a week to Calabar, once a month to Cape Town. Pepper reasoned that a man had to do what a man had to do to keep his job and the income coming in for his family. What was even better, the man in question didn’t bother her for pleasures any longer.

It is raining slightly outside and a fine mist gathering on the window panes. The clock ticks towards twelve-fifty. She stands at the window with forehead flattened against the glass. He would be coming in a black Mazda, the same car she saw him with when they met yesterday. It was magical, almost unreal the way they bumped into each other right there, before the wide steps leading up to City Hall where the Women’s Centre sat on the second floor. At first he didn’t recognize her but she felt his presence even before he lowered his tall frame to help her gather the supplies spilling from her craft box. The thunder gripped her at the base of her spine and pulled her up in a slow dazed motion. He was still bent over, gathering what he could and muttering his apologies. She stood with her eyes on his back, rocking on her feet and asking if this was merely one of those dreams. Then he came back up, smiling and handing her the box. “I really must keep these eyes of mine open,” he said. But she didn’t take the box.

“How could you forget me so?” She asked. It came out in a low voice, rough and thick.

Azu stepped back, his face blank. A tear slipped down her face and he began to fidget and look around in alarm. Pepper said at length, “What if I told you that I was still waiting for that trip to Miriam Makeba and that the gloves are lying in my suitcase right on top of your letters?”

There was silence for a bit. Azu stepped back and almost dropped the box. “Oh my God—” and then he dropped the box. “Oh my God—”

She cried under the mango tree right where his Mazda, against which she leaned, was parked. Azu watched her cry, his arms hanging stiffly at his sides. The first question he asked as she dabbed the last of her tears was, “Do you write it now with a capital P?”

She laughed in reply. It was a rush of mirth deep from her belly. She laughed like she would never stop; thinking that she couldn’t remember when last she’d laughed this way. Then she told him the other things too. Of secondary school, of the darkness in her head that chased her out of University, of meeting Ibezim, of her mother’s cirrhosis and subsequent liver cancer, of the twins who would be six the following month (and one of whom was right handed and the other left handed), of the unemployed women at the Women’s Centre to whom she was paid to teach basket and cloth weaving six days a week, of the dreams she never stopped having; where they were alone like this, but under a humming whistling pine; drinking and eating with Miriam Makeba. Pepper told him everything and yet still felt like there was so much left unsaid. He listened with a huge smile on his dark elliptical face. He had grown wrinkles around his eyes and a fashionable salt and pepper goatee which bobbed as he spoke. His shoulders spanned a wider breadth and nestled below his chest was a soft paunch. The look of the young school teacher was gone and in its place was this regal specimen confident in its acceptance of passing age. He told her he taught at the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana, was married, and had no children. His wife was battling fibroids. He was in Nigeria for a seminar on post-colonial theory to be held by the University of Lagos the next day. He agreed to come see her afterwards. He would love to meet her husband and her twins.

But Pepper's eyes kept blinking back further tears, her fingers reaching up to stroke his shoulders, and then neck and his face, giggling when he flinched and took a step back as though a fly was in his face, for just at the same moment a fly had buzzed past them on its way to a ripening mango overhead. Her voice was low, soft, like the way she'd kept them in her dreams. She wanted to know all about his wife. How did they meet? Was she pretty? Was she young? Because she heard fibroids were for the old. Could she see the woman's picture? Azu was nodding through the questions, his smile never leaving his face as he rubbed the bridge of his nose. "We'll talk about that later," he said, "when I come tomorrow—"

Pepper slots in the video tape of 'Back Locker' and fast forwards to the scene of the prisoner and the guard. In the dark cell the prisoner is telling the guard to give up her shoes and belt. In the dark cell the prisoner is telling the guard to give up her key. In the dark cell the guard, bigger than the prisoner is crying for mercy. Pepper watches the prisoner tower over the kneeling guard in the cell which is tight as a wardrobe. She watches the guard, hands outstretched and lips trembling. In this cell as tight as a wardrobe, with no light or air, the prisoner had finally taken over power. Both women talk, the guard explaining that she was only doing her job. Pepper watches as the prisoner shoots once, twice, three times. Then the camera pans to a wide grassland where the prisoner runs into view, finally free. Now in the brightness of day the ex-captive throws away the gun and looks at her hands like she was seeing them for the first time. She says, "I could only feel these hands. I had almost forgotten how many fingers I had! And too hot to even piss." And there is silence. And the ex-captive begins to laugh. As she laughs the credits roll over her blissful face.

Pepper ejects the tape and locks it back in her dresser drawer. After his arrival she would be sure to watch the scene again with Azu. Only Azu could understand. But now Pepper looks at the

clock. It is three and no longer raining. She sits on the couch; the same one she knows will pull her dress up her thigh at the right time. The chicken and wine lie in a china tray behind her on the dining, ogling one another. Her hair is still knotted. She'll not undo them if she doesn't hear him at the door. She thinks. Three o'clock. The twins. Shouldn't she pick them from school first? She would be sure to hurry back. But what if she missed Azu on the way? Pepper bites her lip. She ought to have asked for his number, how could she have overlooked that? She taps her foot and watches the clock tick its way through ten minutes. She rises to her feet and grabs her car keys from the dining table. The keys slip, her hand is sweating badly. She snatches them back up. Once she had held a cloth weaving session with remedial students at the main auditorium of the University of Lagos. She guesses that this same auditorium would be the venue for Azu's seminar. If it turned out she guessed wrong she would ask around. She sits in the couch again and taps her feet till the clock goes thirty minutes past three. The twins could wait a bit. Her gaze lands on the wine and chicken. She sees herself at one end of the dining table, holding out a slab of meat to his eager mouth. Not food for two squalling children. She makes for the door. She would look for Azu. At the door she stops to beat the wood in sudden frenzy, teeth bared in anguish. Then she leans against it a while. It is ticking towards four o'clock. She slips on a sandal, not bothering to change the dress. He still needed to see her like this. She remembers the cotton balls of Cherie d'amour and darts back to her room to stick them into her brassiere. As she leaves the house she a smile comes over her face. Did Azu think she wouldn't figure out his plan? How he wants for her to seek him out as proof of how deep her desire ran? She breaks into a laugh as she shuts the door after her. This was getting interesting. She laughs all the way to her car and still laughing, she backs up the driveway and through the gates. She takes a left turn not to the road that leads to the compound with bright faces of teachers comforting her befuddled twins, but to the right turn that leads to the wide sprawling highways of choice and

assertiveness. Yes she is one lucky woman indeed, says the voice at the back of her head. Her man isn't too difficult to read, after all.