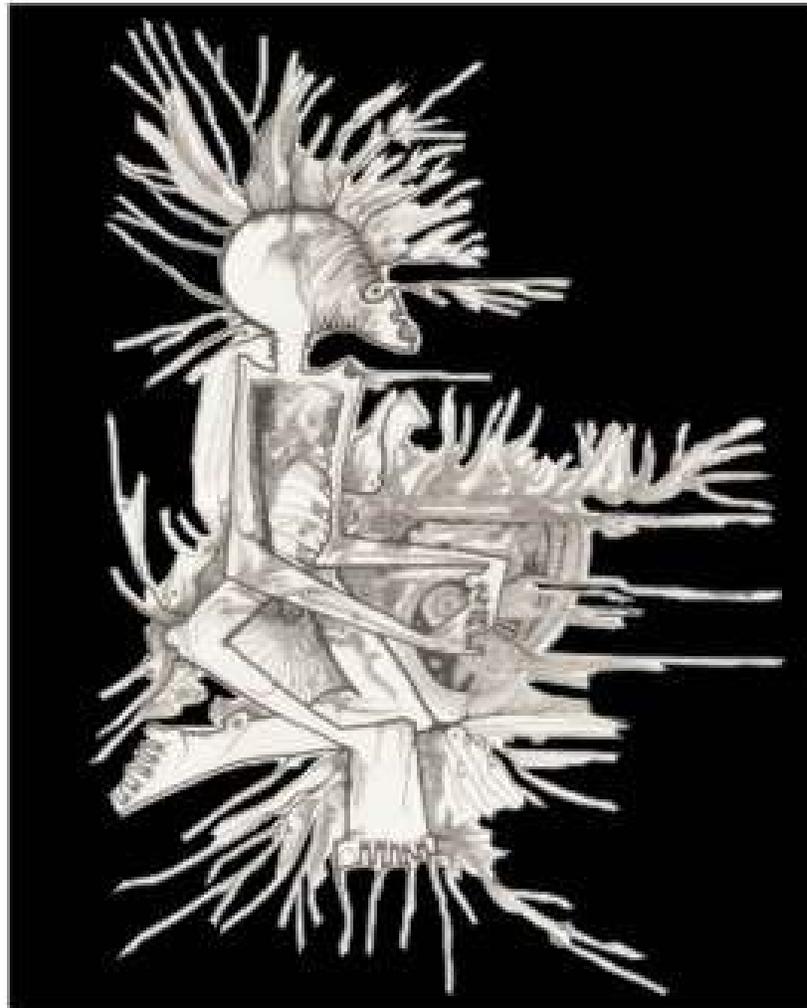


FROM CAVES OF ROTTEN TEETH

A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES



A. IGONI BARRETT

A
Daylight Fiction Publication

FROM CAVES OF ROTTEN TEETH

A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

BY

A. IGONI BARRETT

Published in Nigeria in 2005 by
Daylight Media Services Ltd.

Copyright © A. Igoni Barrett, 2005

Daylight Media Services Ltd.
daylightmedia@yahoo.com
+234-803-724-4744

All Rights Reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced
without the prior consent of the publisher.

Author photograph © Lindsay Barrett
Cover incorporates a painting from the
collection 'Douens' by Leroy Clarke

ISBN 978-019-359-6

A man said to the Universe:
'Sir, I exist!'
'However,' replied the Universe,
'The fact has not created in me
A sense of obligation.'
—Steven Crane

What is lost
cannot be found in the eye,
it is a memory of death;
it will not die.
—Lindsay Barrett (A Memory of Rivers)

. . . hear words stripped of their soul
hanging like bats
from caves of rotten teeth...
—Leroy Clarke

For my mother, Eretoru, for the Love and the Unstinting Support,

and

For my brother, Boma, for being all the things which I am not

CONTENTS

I	PLUCK TODAY TOMORROW'S WILTED FLOWER	6
II	POT-POURRI	13
III	A LOSS	19
IV	IN THE HEAT	23
V	THE TEMPEST	31
VI	THE FATHER, THE SON, THE PASTOR AND THE HOLY SPIRIT	37
VII	A TYPICAL DAY	58
VIII	DANCE DOWN A ROAD THAT LEADS NOWHERE	64
IX	THE TWILIGHT ZONE	71
X	THE PHOENIX	80
XI	DOMINATION	88
XII	THE MONSTER WITHIN	106
XIII	THEY WOULD BE SWINE	115
XIV	UNCOMFORTABLE WORDS	131

I

PLUCK TODAY TOMORROW'S WILTED FLOWER

She woke with a start, feeling heavy in head and limb, her eyes wide-open but unseeing, her ears filled with the roar of a heart hopelessly choked with fear: it was her father's hands nudging her awake.

'Time, my precious - time to go.'

She rose, but was almost laid back down as a wave of vertigo hit her. Then it passed. Moving blindly towards the splashes of her father's preparations for *fajr* prayer, she stepped on the fleshy bulk that was her mother's arm, and a moment later drew a yelp followed by a tearful imprecation from her kid brother as her foot connected with his groin. She wasn't feeling well today but of course she couldn't stay home: she hadn't missed a single day since she began to work with her father nearly four years ago.

The tiny room in which the family of four cooked, worshipped and slept was in complete darkness, and it was to this unfamiliar gloom that she had arisen for the past three days since her mother, heavily pregnant and peevish, had complained that the fumes of the kerosene lamp sent bad spirits into her dreams and its light awakened her before she could return their heart-breaking curses. She stumbled, again, this time with the clatter of ironware beating their displeasure upon the earthen floor, and though she felt her father's rebuking eyes on her it was her mother's sleepy voice that rose from the darkness, dispelling whatever lingering doubts the hollow clangour of the pots may have left as to the state of their insides. Hunger, that stalking beast crouched beneath the horizon of conscious thought, showed for an instant the glint of its pitiless eyes.

Through gaps in the caulking of the room's log walls the blush-pink skies of another working day peeped in at her as she sank to her haunches beside her father. Lifting her plastic kettle she absent-mindedly began her ablution, her attention taken up by the sounds of her favourite time of day. The melancholic whistle of a chugging train trailed off in the far distance. Cars coughed and grumbled awake, their horn-blares cross in the pre-dawn silence. The whisk of working brooms, mesmeric in their regularity; the slap and whirr of pigeon wings; the careless slam of a wind-caught door; the rhythmic thumps of hurried pestles; the smell of rising dust and curling wood smoke and boiling water and the warm sad waft of abandoned shit; the lonely lilt of a mother's voice raised in melodious devotion: one and all they signaled the daily miracle of Man's resurrection.

From somewhere close the unrelenting trills of two jays locked in operatic battle floated into the room, their pauses for breath more exasperating for the knowledge that they would start up again. After enduring a chicken's lifetime of their studied garrulity she finally had enough, and pressing both hands tightly against her ears she slowly counted to six - her age and lucky number - knowing that the birds would be gone when she unstopped them. She was not disappointed. She had just resumed washing her feet when her mother muttered complainingly in her sleep and with imperial munificence broke wind. She clapped a hand over her mouth in empathetic remorse - her mother was of late doing a lot of that, and though her father had since explained that it was her unborn brother's affinity for soccer that lay behind this habit, when it came it still shocked her. The smell, when it finally found her cringing in the corner, was so obnoxious with its attentions that she couldn't stop herself from retching; even her father seemed a trifle displeased as he rose and threw open the room's only window. The aggravating persistence of the pong called to mind her earlier indisposition and precipitated another dizzying spell, this time accompanied by nausea. With youthful alacrity she forsook all and any former thoughts of martyrdom: there was enough time in all the tomorrows of her life to with safety play at adult games. She turned to her father to lay bare her woes but he looked at her with a knowing smile, and motioned with his head that she should pray.

A cup of tepid water, with a used tea bag briskly swirled in it, was all she was provided with to pick from her teeth before she and her father set off. They would be joined by her mother and kid brother much later in the day. Her mother had, with the

slow advancement of her pregnancy, gotten with each passing day more temperamental, and the detrimental effect this had on her daily returns made her even more ill-tempered and useless, till in the end her husband had to submit to commonsense, and now only made her work at sundown when the pickings were more and the heat less.

The cold morning breeze that played through her long hair invigorated her spirits, but it also crept into her calico chemise and, soon enough, teased her into wasting her breakfast by the wall of an empty schoolyard. As she leaped over the steaming puddle and ran towards her father's receding figure, she skipped in the air several times for the exhilaration of total freedom. Then she caught up with her father and took his hand – for an instant he glanced down from the distance of his thoughts. He was wearing his red turban, the one that she liked best because it contrasted so nicely with his yellow skin. She had both his complexion and small straight nose but her mother's brown eyes, and both parents agreed that her wavy black hair was a trait neither could explain. It was her pride and joy, and she would remember to pluck a red hibiscus for it from the fence of the big white house whose noisy dogs made such terrible faces at her each morning.

They arrived at the motor-park. Her father, as always, wished her luck, and then he headed for the gigantic almond tree under whose time-gnarled branches all the other patriarchs convened. There, protected all day long from the sun's traveling gaze and the heat of bustle, they rubbed their indolent minds together while quaffing iced tea purchased with their children's takings from sly-eyed, slink-hipped hawkers, with whom they exchanged bawdy banter, and spat contemptuously on their foot-prints once their

backs were turned. Time, that dogged bystander, only saw them rise from their cross-legged perch when their wives and daughters seemed in real danger of having their heads turned by the amorous advances of park touts and lorry drivers.

Work began for her and the other children when the first bus rolled into the park from a night spent on the road, and unloaded its sleep-hungry human cargo. Through the press of bodies stretching out cramped muscles, of frantic passengers searching with darting eye for missing luggage, of stop-gap romantics nostalgically exchanging mobile numbers they intended never to use, adroitly weaved the urchins, lending a hand here, relieving a pocket there, and at all times chanting their mendicant mantra.

The first person she approached, a man, took one look at the flower in her hair and without breaking stride snapped something about using the gifts one was given. The second avoided her like she had the plague, breaking into a lope when she persisted. And the third, a coiffured young woman in a steel-grey business suit purchasing some items from a kiosk, remained promisingly silent as she rattled off her litany until, in a bid to ingratiate herself before the change forever disappeared down the handbag's open mouth, she called that stranger 'mummy'; whereupon yon tower of taciturnity whirled with the quickness of a cornered cobra upon the bewildered child, and grasping her by the ear, spat full in her face. By her eighth failed solicitation she was desperate enough to grab hold of the hand of the next unwilling pedestrian, her despair stark in eye and voice. She was flung off like the waif she was, and bruised her knee upon the asphalt.

Several hours later and she had nothing to show for her efforts but a wilted flower. The beast that was hunger had finally sprung, and as her starveling's body rocked from its savage mauling the full weight of her waking weakness swept down on her bowed head. The sun had by this time bared its face, and to get respite from the burn of its spiteful gaze she had sunk to her haunches in the long shadow cast by the open boot-door of one of the loading buses. She picked absently at a green-and-red sticker on the bus' rear bumper even as the flies settled greedily unto the angry-red of her scraped knee; she watched with a detached fascination as they devoured her, too weak to chase them away. She had been silent awhile, as her throat felt like her sputa had hardened into thousands of tiny stalactite needles. She puckered her lips, allowing a froth of spittle issue from them, and, under its own weight, drop in slow motion to the red dust at her feet. And as with a finger she tested for sharpness the glinting wisp that bound her to the parched earth, a heavy footfall roused the dust around her, and came to rest by her side. She was too weak to bother.

'You dirty child, stop it. Are you sick?'

The man standing over her was a full-bearded giant with a boom in which boulders could be heard cascading, but whose eyes, when she met them, shone with a light that awoke in her breast a flutter of what she recognized with a shock as self-pity. This was an emotion strange to her narrow scope, and though she found its bittersweet pang gratifying, her instincts warned against indulging in it. So she shook her head to dispel its blasphemy, and in monotone launched into her recitation.

'Please sir help me abeg I have not eaten please dash me . . . '

‘Enough, enough. But you look as if you could collapse at any moment,’ the man-mountain said, mostly to himself. And then, glancing around, he added, ‘What do you want?’

‘Money,’ she piped, some light returning to her doleful eyes as she struggled to her feet.

‘Yes yes, money of course,’ the man growled impatiently. ‘But food first.’ And with this said he thundered at the food-vendors circling the unmoving bus like eternally patient vultures, only to scramble and scurry like frenzied rats at his portentous summons.

And at that moment of her greatest triumph a dizziness swooped that threatened to end all and she was silently falling, falling, the ground rushing up to meet her; but her benefactor stooped and with one mighty arm caught and swept her up to his chest, her arms thankfully enclasp his neck. With the rumble of his haggling voice beating against her torso a warmth as sweet as sleep stole over her. Looking over his paternal shoulder she met her father’s proud eyes. Today, they both knew, had been provided for. She lowered her eyes, then her head. But there were always tomorrows. Always.

II

POT-POURRI

There was only one place to find Mrs. Uju (Augustina Lilyrose Patience Odenigbo ‘Mama Uzor’) Orjinta at five o’clock – *post meridian* – on a Wednesday, and that was plumb in front of her TV set. Come rain or shine, or, more likely, power failure or military putsch, Uju Orjinta never missed ‘Pot-pourri’. It was her favourite programme, ever. Though unaware of it, this was no small coup for ‘Pot-pourri’ – Uju Orjinta never gave her loyalties lightly.

‘Pot-pourri’ was a weekly half-hour live feature on African cuisine, and it was shot on the grounds of the hotel or restaurant whose chef was the guest for that episode. Uju Orjinta loved cooking – but she loved eating even more. She devoured everything that met one of her three criteria for toothsome food: starchy, greasy or

crunchy. Her all-time favourite delicacy however was fried fish. She consumed it as a whole meal or in combination; she nibbled it as a snack, or as an appetizer; she even used it as an analgesic. As a consequence of this craving Uju Orjinta reeked of the stuff (or so her husband complained).

Five Styrofoam packs of fried fish and a thermos flask of ice-cold beer held themselves in the ready on Uju Orjinta's lap as the seconds counted down to H-hour. She picked up the woven-raffia fan that lay beside her on the sofa, and, adjusting herself with a dolorous sigh, she began to beat the air before her face. The sitting room was oppressively hot, but she couldn't turn on the air conditioner as its current load was too heavy for the generator. Neither could she open the windows: the deafening grumble and the fumes of the generator would interfere with her enjoyment of 'Pot-pourri'. And that she couldn't have.

Uju Orjinta stilled her working hand as soon as the TV screen beamed forth the red light of 'Pot-pourri's' opening credits. She tore open a pack and grasped one of the grease-crusted fishes by the tail. The screen changed colour again, and the presenter, the bubbly, delightful Joyce, walked on camera. Uju Orjinta dug hungrily into the parade-stiff carcass and set about opening the flask of beer.

It was Joyce, apart from the sheer luxuriousness of the cooking, that kept Uju Orjinta coming back for more. She felt like she knew her, like she was a friend or a sister, a soul mate. Never mind that Joyce was a loquacious, plucked-chicken-complexioned woman with a penchant for hoop earrings and bulbous neck-beads. There was no denying these differences, but it was their similarities that Uju Orjinta

preferred to focus on. Of these the most conspicuous was Joyce's size, which filled the screen with rosy folds and straining bulges. Then there was her endearing, and unashamed, gourmandise. This shared passion of course, more than anything else, was the compost from which the attraction sprouted.

The guest chef today is Francois . . . Joyce said, and the camera cut to a tall white man in an equatorially flowered shirt. He stood behind a table laden with Pyrex bowls, steel cutlery, aluminium pots and pans, china jugs, spice bottles, a chopping board, a sherry decanter, a four-ring gas burner and caramel-hued baskets bursting with the ingredients for the day's cooking. He looked ill-at-ease. He was a Frenchman: Uju Orjinta could tell by the way he pursed his lips and clasped strings of air between forefinger and thumb as he endlessly inspected his fingernails. And then there was his name.

Our main course today is called . . . Joyce announced as she moved into the frame with the Frenchman, dwarfing him, then held the microphone up to his mouth for him to complete the sentence. It was a signature manoeuvre. The screen flickered right on cue as the name of the meal and its recipe appeared in caption, which was as well as Uju Orjinta hadn't caught the Frenchman's babble. Joyce thought of everything, Uju Orjinta exulted, and then settled back to let herself be titillated.

Heat the palm oil – not long . . . then the chopped onions and the purée, and stir . . . and then this, the cane rat flesh goes in, and the stockfish – deboned 'member? – you shred. And the crawfish, and the dadawa, and then – ooh, smell that, oui? – soupçon garlic . . .' Joyce looked on with uncontainable glee, her throat working lubriciously, as the pot began to

splutter and belch beneath the chef's magic fingers. Uju Orjinta, guzzling beer to calm a palpitating heart, writhed on her sitting room sofa in vicarious ecstasy.

Leave to cook. We do the yam. For four persons you need . . .

To give herself some respite Uju Orjinta tore her eyes away from the cornucopian table. She turned her attention to the right end of the screen, where, in the background, the wrought-iron furniture of a garden restaurant was in view. There were few diners.

Pounding the yam is . . . Joyce said, guffawing at the camera. When Uju Orjinta turned her eyes back to the restaurant she noticed that two newcomers had taken the table closest to the screen. It was a young lady and an older man. The lady's face was in plain view, scrubbed clean and girlie-looking, while the man's, as his heavy form leaned forward to whisper importunities in her ear, was hidden by a vase of carnations. Old goat, Uju Orjinta thought, noting with a vestigial twinge of envy the embarrassed laugh of a woman courted. Then a waiter appeared from the wings to take the lovebirds' order. The man leaned back in his chair, his fingers interlocking over his paunch. The lady turned away, her face a mask of boredom. When the waiter eventually bowed and withdrew, taking the vase of flowers with him, the man, looking smug, resumed his soft-soaping from where he had left off. Uju Orjinta thought there was something familiar about the man's face. Then recognition struck, like a boot in the belly.

'Oh!' Uju Orjinta gasped, clutching at her neck. 'You!' She flopped back on the sofa, scattering empty Styrofoam packs.

Mr. Orjinta, though unaware of it, was in soup - Uju Orjinta never gave her loyalties lightly.

After long seconds of bug-eyed gawking and spluttered curses that left her chin shiny with saliva, Uju Orjinta roused herself with an effort and reached for the TV's remote control. She jabbed at the *off* button like it was Mr. Orjinta's groin.

'Bola!' she bellowed, setting the sofa trembling.

There came the sound of running feet and the housemaid burst into the room, wringing her hands.

'My phone,' Uju Orjinta ordered, pointing to where her handbag lay two chairs away.

The housemaid delivered the cell phone and, seeing the malevolent glimmer in her madam's eye, scurried away before the thought coagulated into action.

Uju Orjinta switched the TV back on. Mr. Orjinta and his floozy, far from being figments of the TV's imagination, were still at it. Their meal had arrived. 'When last did the brute take me out to dinner?' Uju Orjinta fumed as the cell phone sang the tones of her husband's number. The call connected at first try - she could see him reaching into the folds of his *babanriga* even before the ringing sounded in her ear. Then, insult upon injury, he rejected the call. She immediately redialed. And again he rejected it. Again she redialed, heaving herself up in her seat. She saw him say something to his lady friend - an apology? - then...

'Yes?' that familiar voice suddenly boomed in her ear, startling her. 'What do you want?'

‘Where you?’ she demanded.

‘What is it to you?’

‘What kind. Question. That is. Papa Uzor?’

‘You want to fight, eh? Well I can’t, Mama Uzor, not now - I have better things to do with my time. Anyway, I’m at the office.’

She saw him flash a smile at his date, and she, the home breaker, smiled back. So that was how it was.

‘Are you. Coming. Home dinner?’

‘No, I’ll be in late. Any other thing?’

He reached over - in public, on national TV! - and wiped away a fugitive morsel from the hussy’s mouth. Uju Orjinta felt like a creature derided by the gods.

‘Yes. Something,’ Uju Orjinta said, her tone colourless, like vinegar. ‘Tell girlfriend. Fork. In Left. Knife. Right hand.’ And she cut the connection.

Till we come your way again next week with another thrilling episode of ‘Pot-pourri’, from me, Joyce, and the camera crew, its goodbye and good cooking.

And just before the Trinitron-clear picture of Joyce tucking into a heaped plate faded out, Uju Orjinta and her aghast spouse locked eyes.

III

A LOSS

The instant his hand touched his back pocket he knew that it had been gone all along. Gone, as if it had never existed.

The bus droned on regardless. For an uncomprehending instant he stared out through the grime-spattered windscreen before him, out at a clear blue sky.

As the enormity of his loss sank in torpor-tipped fangs, a sudden weariness settled unto his shoulders like the weight of a wet wool blanket. Time, that supposedly impartial looker-on to the banalities of this life, ground to a halt as he – already considering all possibilities – withdrew into the hotchpotch of flashes and snatches that constituted his memory. His mind, as he waded through its foggy catacombs, spared him not an instant of this rapidly unfolding nightmare.

Yes, that is what this is, a nightmare. My own exclusive horror story in 3D and colour. Let me remember: I brought it out at the motor-park to pay the fruit-vendor. I returned it. Did I? Yes I did; I remember reaching behind as she peeled the oranges for me. Then I walked over to the booking booth and made the inquiries and put down my name and brought it out again for my identity card. Then I walked to the bus stop and . . . stop. Missing out something, something before that. The beggar-girl! No, gave her the loose change in my pockets. Used up all my loose change – much good do-gooding has done me ha! Think goddamnit, think! I walked over to the bus stop. Nothing happened along the way. I – it doesn't matter. Yes it does, everything matters. I joined the crowd around the performing chimp and watched for a few minutes: fifteen I think. It was still there when I left. I think. All my money! Nothing happened until the first bus came – couldn't get on because of the rush. In the rush? No. But didn't realize I was missing a button until the second bus came and went. Boarded the third one, this one. Wait wait wait . . . wait! That fellow, the hard-faced one staring, staring as if in recognition, staring interested . . . That look in his eyes with hindsight was not admiring no. He was assessing me he was, checking out my value he was, my worth to his thieving life . . . All my money – it must have been him. All my money! That face; it was him. The bloody bastard. It was him. All my money, my identity cards, my house key, my baby picture, irreplaceable, my address book, my . . . What else? My condoms. The bloody . . .

'Son of a bitch!'

The bus suddenly fell deathly silent, even the rickety engine. In the cracked side-mirror he could see the disapproving glances the other passengers threw at the back of

an unrepentant head, but he ignored them all, indulging red-hot thoughts of revenge, regret, missed karate lessons. . .

With a sudden clamour of exultant horn-blares the hold-up cleared, and as the ancient Volkswagen motor sputtered back into a semblance of life, the bus-conductor hunched up from his awkward perch in the pane-less window of the bus' unlatched door. After savagely clearing his throat and with an elastic twist of his neck sending the weed-scented gob flying through the window behind him, he called out for the fares. Fares please, he intoned pugnaciously. *Fares . . . please don't make me beat it out of you; I might enjoy myself too much.*

He decided to go through his pockets once more to be completely and absolutely certain that it was completely and absolutely gone. *You never know, stranger things have happened. Maybe this is all a dream, a dream that I'll laugh at once I open my eyes, open my eyes...* He opened his eyes but did not laugh. *The only dream here is the dream that this is a dream.*

He reached for his back pocket yet again: he thrust in his forefinger, then his middle finger, and finally his whole hand. It wasn't nestling in any corner. Offering up an ardent prayer to any softhearted godhead willing to intervene, he quickly went through his other pockets – the two on his trousers and the one over his heart. Nothing there. He patted himself down, ignoring the curious glances cast his way by the driver as he went over his chest, his crotch, his legs, justifying his actions on the implausible grounds that it might have slipped into his clothes through a tear in his pocket. Finally, with nowhere left to look but in the face of an implacable reality, he

sank back into his seat in defeat. *Yes, it is gone. I hope you rot in hell for this, hard-face. I hope you choke to a slow and painful death on your tongue as you chomp on whatever my money has paid for. I hope my condoms burst on you with the wrong whore. I hope — oh shit! I pray you spend the rest of your miserable life regretting that you ever shone eyes at me.*

‘Your fare. Please.’

As he met the bus-conductor’s thunderous gaze over the headrest of the seat, he wondered from where to begin his story. But then, that is another story.

IV

IN THE HEAT

The day was incredibly hot, as had been every preceding day for as long as the long suffering cared to remember. The air that overhung the rusting rooftops crackled with the licking flames of an invisible conflagration, the heat waves billowing down upon the naked earth, submerging everything, even life itself.

In the unrelenting oppressiveness of the baking concrete streets the yellow dogs lost their mongrel minds, and leapt baying to their deaths in the receding depths of their masters' water wells. Redneck agamas, basking belly-flat against the steaming house walls, were shortly lulled into aestivating comas by the luxuriousness of their sunbaths. The sole surviving vegetation, their sulphureous leaves drooping in despair, slowly wept their life-blood away. Tonsured vultures dropped dead in droves from the clear blue

skies, the heat and the weight of their gorged bellies proving too much for their greedy hearts; their scraggy carcasses were immediately swooped down upon by their frugal peers and devoured, dandruff flakings and all. And then all over the city the red dust rose in choking clouds, drawn from a scorched earth by the sun's maleficent glare.

It is on a day indistinguishable from this that we are introduced to Boniface Doa, a portly young man with a golliwog face and ears like a trophy-jug's handles. He lay spread-eagled and smouldering on a rumpled bed, his sweat-sheened body gloriously naked but for the snaking glint of a gold necklace. He had been driven into the bedroom some time ago by an intolerable sense of ennui, but whatever hope he had nursed of getting some sleep was rapidly melting away in the stifling heat. As the warmth of his breath bouncing off the sweat-soaked sheets was beginning to scald his cheeks, he turned over unto his back, folding his arms beneath his head. With eyes drowsily slit, he took in the dust particles drifting lazily in the shafts of shimmering sunlight that the louvre-glasses flung at an inclined angle into the shadowed room, the spots on the ceiling where they came to rest reflecting faint but faithful replicas of the rainbow spectrum. Silence shrouded the rest of the world, a silence so complete that Boniface Doa's straining ears were inundated by the sepulchral clamour of the wall clock's ticking, and the flip-flops of a lethargic heart. The heat was *à fond* responsible for this quiescence: even the birds and bees had flown for cover.

Boniface Doa sniffed to clear his nose. The air was heavy with the alcoholic reek of rotting fruit, the smell rising in waves from the littered ground just beyond his window where the heavy-laden mango tree dropped her burden in sporadic avalanches.

Needless to say, the heat in no way allayed this heady onslaught and the total absence of wind ensured that Boniface Doa was not granted even a moment's respite.

Like the death-stiff crocodilian gaze-stalking frolicking butterflies, Boniface Doa lay perfectly motionless in the hope that sleep would settle unto his gaping jaws, never to flutter again. It was in this predacious state that he heard a door slam in the distance, followed moments later by the splash of running water. The sounds floated over from the Orjinta's, his next-door neighbours. Mrs. Orjinta he knew left the house bright and early every morning for her shop, and as he had exchanged pleasantries with her husband that morning as he drove off to work, Boniface Doa was almost certain that the housemaid was the only one home. Though the girl was barely two weeks into the berth he had already met her once: the six-day power failure from which half the city was still suffering had brought her to the water well in his compound. He had drawn six bucketfuls for her on the day – he was then grateful for any chore that would take his mind off the tedium of unending leisure, as now.

With the false promise of slumber finally abandoned as hopelessly irredeemable, the air in the room flung off its last restraints and settled unto Boniface Doa's skin like a hot balm. He turned unto one side and then the other in an effort to relieve his growing discomfort, but a chance glance downwards awoke him to the fact that his state was not one resolvable by toss and turn. He had been aware of the incipient stirrings but did not till now realise the extent of its fervour. He was already swinging one leg off the bed when he remembered that the last of his hair cream had been used up the day before. He fell back with a low groan, and lay helpless as his imagination was hijacked

by the pulsing as it grew in length and strength, until, unable to hold back any longer, he lowered his hand, cooing sounds bursting from pursed lips as he stroked and soothed the fervid malefactor. To no avail. He next thrust his hands into his armpits, and as he clamped down hard he thought: You are lying on a deliciously soft bed on a hotter than hot afternoon when out of the blue it strikes you – isn't it the greatest irony ever that the word 'FUCK' was bequeathed humanity by the priggish prudish puritans – For Unclean Carnal Knowledge that they hung around the pilloried necks of apprehended fornicators – but has since shed its puritanical cloak of chastisement to emerge a *mot juste* for an act that is sweet and pure... Boniface Doa retracted his moistened hands and abandoned himself to the sweet torture of impure fancies.

The sun rises in the east and sets in the west, but the incandescent orb now hovering overhead seemed in a supreme dilemma as to which path to burn through. To the south of its indecision black storm clouds gathered and fumed, and then spread across the celestial aspect like Mongol hordes. A gentle breeze wafted through the heat haze, stirring the leaves of the 'bitterleaf' plant that the hem of Boniface Doa's jellaba caught against as he crept towards the dividing wall between his house and the significant other. As his heart beat a brisk tattoo against the wall's rough surface he experienced a moment of returning reason; but then the damning thought of what lay beyond this last barrier swiftly overcame the spell, and the reel again began to run. Boniface Doa stood on tiptoe and peered over the wall.

The girl was half bent over and facing away from him, and she was wholly engrossed in the huge pile of laundry that lay on the ground before her. Boniface Doa

watched her quivering behind for an eternity of seconds with a sound in his ears as of rushing air, and the dull ache of deep craving in his belly. With a wordless acknowledgement of his increasing indebtedness to the maxim 'thought is detrimental to the deed', Boniface Doa grabbed the top of the wall and in one clear leap vaulted into the other compound. His landing however did not play according to script, and he came down on a bar of soap and just managed to keep his feet, wrenching his left ankle in the process. The girl, startled half out of her wits by this sudden appearance of Death in one of its many guises, was about to beat a noisy retreat when she caught sight of Boniface Doa's pain-contorted face, and checked her flight. Her gaze was however nasty with suspicion as she slowly backed away from him – from bitter experience she knew what his drop-in portended.

Hobbling forward painfully, Boniface Doa raised a hand in apology even as his unapologetically lascivious gaze swept over the girl's buxom figure. She looked older in build than her tally of years, and sturdy enough to dam a veldt buffalo. She was clad in a diaphanous thigh-length wrapper, the ends of which were gathered in a loose knot just above the swell of her breasts. She was barefooted, her toes curling into the dust in preparedness for flight. Boniface Doa drew to a halt a few feet from her warning glare, and spoke.

'My name is Boniface Doa. You remember me? The water . . . the other day? What is your name?'

The girl made no reply, and then Boniface Doa remembered that she spoke no English. He had overheard her mistress remark that she was from one of the

neighbouring *Francophone* countries. Responding to this development with a speed born of desperation, he bugled up and inspected whatever smatterings of French remained from his high school days, and eventually forged ahead with: 'Mon nom est Boniface Doa. Comment . . . comment tu . . . '

'Comment tu t'appelle,' the girl offered, a smile for the first time tugging at the corners of her mouth. And after a pause she added: 'Bola.'

Jumping at this first sign of thawing Boniface Doa unleashed a barrage of pidgin French, his hands flapping about in a caricature of sign language.

'Merci, mon chere Bola. Vous est tres beaute, oui! Vous est bon bon et magnifique, oui! Impressionment...'

He finally gave up, having run the gamut of his 'parleyvoos', and as the zany display had succeeded in its intended purpose of reducing the girl to laughter, he decided to go one better and grab the cow by the teats, literally.

It was, as these things go, a miscalculation: the girl shut her mouth with a snap and shoved him away, further twisting his swollen ankle and leaving him painfully aware of looming failure. But he couldn't fail, he couldn't afford to. Not after burning so many bridges. He, rejected by a mere housegirl – he would never live down the shame of it. Never!

The girl awaited his pleasure with arms tightly folded over an outraged bosom. Her face gave nothing away. Boniface Doa took a doubly tentative step forward, his face reflecting the pain that he would not let thwart his purpose. The girl took an

uncompromising step backwards, and Boniface Doa, his bladder churning with frustration, considered rushing at her. But for his foot.

‘Wait,’ he begged, his voice as soft as a fallen angel’s. ‘Please wait.’

He drew up to her, and then quickly sidestepped in an attempt to blindside her; but she whipped around with a ferocity that left his head spinning, and faced with her air of mocking challenge he ran out of pluck and ideas. But his desire remained, and burned brighter, fanned by the thick smell of hot sweat and musky woman-places that rose tauntingly from her cleavage.

‘I like you very much,’ he muttered, his ears ringing from the strength of his feeling. And he raised his hand to stroke her cheek, but with a snap of her neck she knocked it away. He drew closer, undeterred, his chest almost touching her draped breast-tips and his breath fanning her hair-line, and he tried to encircle her waist with his left arm; but she shoved him away. He twice repeated the same move, and was each time rebuffed. He changed tack, and tried to lift her truculent chin with his right hand, but she pushed that away too. The standoff that followed this last rejection was punctuated by a silence of bellows breathing, and the two antagonists glowered at each other, one defiantly, the other in petulant cajolery.

As the seconds crept away without any hope of his success Boniface Doa suddenly saw in the brown depths of the girl’s eyes a reflection that a moment before wasn’t there, and almost immediately his heart constricted in a silent eureka. He raised his hands up and behind his neck and unclasped the gold necklace. It was a love-gift from a forgotten sweetheart, but disregarding that trifle in the heat of the moment, he

extended the flashing circlet towards the girl's neck, her gaze dogging his every movement. She did not recoil from his touch and he quickly completed the transfer, letting his hands rest for a moment on her bare shoulders and then trail down to her bosom, where they nestled. He pressed his frame against her, melting into her softness, her heat – quivering, groping, caressing. She now and again let out soft gasps at his frenzied mauling but on the whole remained silent as his hands and mouth exacted remuneration. And as the heat reached fever pitch he fell with her to the parched earth; but he banged his swollen ankle in the fall and bellowed out in red-eyed agony, all passion draining from his body in an instant; and at that moment a wind-storm descended with a roll of thunder that juddered the earth, and drowned out his moans in a shower of dust and grit; and eons and eons but seconds later the heavens opened up and cried the heat away.

V

THE TEMPEST

It was the first rain of the year. Only, at first it wasn't rain but wailing wind that leaped into the sudden calm with a fury long withheld, then proceeded to, with gusts so brutal they rendered protestation futile, rip out the city's guts. First it wafted up discarded paper scraps and plastic bags and rags, and sent these jiggling skywards on its turbulent breath; then it whisked off wigs and whipped up skirts; then it paused on the reeking rotting garbage mountains and spun itself into view; then it stirred up a dust haze to hide this borrowed face from the heavens' gaze. And then for no reason apparent it suddenly lost its mind: with methodical vindictiveness it set upon a path of destruction never again witnessed as it toppled colonial statues, giant billboards and power masts, and stripped mighty trees bare, and smashed car windscreens with the

hurled bodies of screeching birds, and crumpled the whole west wing of our city's most venerable Catholic chapel, carting away – with marble arms outstretched – the weeping Mother of God. At the apocalyptic height of its fury, with thunder crashing, lightning flashing and rain sheets lashing, it tore the roofs off the defenceless shanties and reaching within, plucked from the arms of mothers their infants and bore them out to the foaming sea.

Really, there was one known case of an infant stolen by the storm. It was reported by the bereft mother to the crowd convened by her cries. Her name was Onari. She was a child herself, barely sixteen, unmarried, and alone.

Nobody believed her story but her tears were real.

She was five months pregnant when she moved from nowhere into our tenement. She was an instant hit with the male tenants, being young and pretty, and of that female type at once brazen and coy. Then, she was destitute, relying for daily subsistence on the good-neighbourliness of others.

It was something pathetic to see grown men hovering about that child, manfully vying for feigned attention. She wasn't the first expectant mother we had shared our tenement with, nor even then the only one. Yet it was 'Onari this' 'Onari that', 'Onari sit back and rest your back' – all day.

'Onari gimme a kiss to lemme know I will be missed.' This was Bayo, by way of farewell whenever he left Onari's side. He was her most persistent admirer, frittering the hours away in her company playing cards or ludo or the physiotherapist. He had a fiancé called Kelechi, who he had left hanging on the precipice of connubial bliss for so

long that her youth had grown tired of waiting and had abandoned her in his arms. She, perhaps with reason, looked upon everything on two legs as a threat to the attainment of her life's one aim. She brought along gifts of foodstuff for Onari whenever she visited.

As Onari's bulge grew, so did Bayo's infatuation, and the size of Kelechi's gift offerings - till Onari was living wholly off Kelechi's fears, and, by self-seeking design, stoking the fire in which her good fortune was smelted.

For instance, with Kelechi around Onari would burst into Bayo's room and burst out: 'Feel it, Bayo, touch it! Can you feel the kick? He's asking for his namesake you know. You have abandoned us.' Or, lying on the bed with Bayo beside her, and Kelechi banished to a chair and the role of spectator, she would hitch her gown to the top of her thighs and place her ankles on Bayo's beer-belly, and wheedle: 'My feet, Bayo. Only your hand does anything for my pains.' And helplessly Kelechi would return her arch smile, and grip her thigh insides bloody in silent anguish, watching all her efforts destroyed by a foot massage.

But Onari overplayed her hand. She was too pretty and too pregnant to be convincing as a coquette. The other men began to stay away, convinced that they had lost out to Bayo in the battle for her affections. Kelechi discontinued her plea offerings.

Bayo had Onari to himself. But Bayo was a loafer - his love couldn't make up the shortfall that another's jealousy had provided for. Faced with this truth, in a twinkling the fawning Onari turned termagant. She was pitiless. It wasn't long before Bayo scuttled back to Kelechi, a better man for the experience.

Vicious rumours maintain that it was the hunger pangs that brought on early labour. The first scream rent the air seven weeks early; the midwife was rushed in, the baby pushed out. It was a puny, prune-skinned thing that weighed less than a drenched feather, and it was a girl – thus Onari’s intention of owning a Bayo was finally defeated.

The infant – whom Onari refused to name, calling it ‘smallie’ whenever the occasion arose – was in spite of its size a howler on grand scale. The sounds that erupted from its tiny lungs had the tremolo and sustained pitch of a world-class soprano. The strength of its cry should have served sufficient warning, as, contrary to the whispers that were then making the rounds, the infant survived its first week. Then the second. This fortnight was however one of unremitting persecution for the inhabitants of our tenement, besieged as we were by the infant’s nagging shriek (which it practiced at all times of the night, but especially when sleep was getting the upper hand of the heat) and the tear-jerking reek that prowled through the building like a vengeful spectre whenever the brand-new bowels were evacuated.

Onari’s gaze fell colder and more distant on her infant with each dawn: as it grew stronger and more demanding. While she starved it sucked her dry.

For months the heat had lain over the city like blowflies over a burst carcass. The sun, godlike in its blinding whiteness, had unleashed its wrath on vulnerable heads, day after day after day in day out. Then one day the clouds gathered in hoi polloi revolt, and blackened the kingdom of heaven. The tempest that followed was epoch-ending.

The tenement shuddered beneath the wind's blows. Dust slipped into the rooms through cracks in the walls and under the locked doors, and swirled about in genie-like shapes. The rain rattled down like tungsten pellets. Then, through the roar, there was a loud, prolonged creaking, like the sound of faith breaking, and in rushed a maddened gust of wind - and the roof was away. Beneath the open sky, huddled against our fate like ducks in a thunderstorm, we awaited the tempest's pity.

There was a lull in the wind, deceitful in its intention and lasting an instant only - but long enough for her lament to be heard. Doors crashed open down the length of the tenement and as one we descended on her room. She was alone. Alone with her face turned up to the beating rain, alone with her hands clasped behind her head. Bayo asked the question that was frozen on every lip. Without giving an answer she unlocked her fingers fast as lightning and slapped herself in the face, palm open and fingers spread, one time, two times, three times, till Bayo grabbed hold of her hands.

'Where is smallie?' he asked again, for all of us.

'The roof, the wind - carried my baby ah ah ah,' she wailed, and tore her hands free from the loosened grip of a Bayo suddenly repelled. Her face was still lifted up to the cloudburst sky, her eyes roving. Tears, or rainwater, coursed down her cheeks.

The rain stopped the following morning. And we, quondam adulators, mustered ourselves into a search party and set out into the devastation. We searched everywhere for the baby, or its body, making enquiries and gathering supporters as we went. We waded through gorged gutters, poking amongst the swollen corpses of drowned quadrupeds for the tiny form. We rummaged through the garbage mountains

that the floodwaters had formed overnight with *rumpelstiltskinian* industry. We pounced on feasting curs and pried their jaws open to inspect their teeth's pickings. We found our roof, but not the baby.

Finally, we called off the search. It was with heavy hearts and crushing suspicions that we headed home. But Onari had flown the coop. Yes, she was gone, nowhere and forever – just like her baby.

VI

THE FATHER, THE SON, THE PASTOR AND THE HOLY SPIRIT

The woman that emerged from the pastor's office was, as her fervid wails through the intervening door had led me to expect, huge, fat and mustached. She strolled out as jauntily as her massive frame would allow and immediately the air in the room sprang up and began to weave noisome tales of fish-grease and unwashed recesses. Sucking deep, I struggled to compose my facial muscles – not because I was cowed by her girth, nor because she was at the moment making a beeline for me. She ground to a halt inches from disaster, the weight of her mammoth shadow crushing on my head and psyche.

'To see pastor?' she rumbled, looking down at me, and seeing my nod she added, 'you too?' shifting her gaze a fraction to take in the man seated beside me before

immediately swinging it back. 'The pastor will see you both together next.' And as I leaped to my feet, anxious to see the pastor alone despite this sibyl's message, she smacked an open palm against my chest, even more effectively stopping any movement with the blast of hyena's breath that hit me from her cavernous armpit, and she snapped, jowls trembling: 'You wait. Until. He calls. For you.' Then she turned and waddled out.

As I regained my seat I returned the stare of the man with whom I shared the bench. Unable to match the stranger for bashlessness, I soon lowered my eyes. The man's swollen right leg immediately took up the affront from where his hussy's glare had left off - it lay dead-heavy between bench and floor, gleaming sleek and contented like the belly of a gorged predator. I looked away, for politeness.

I was fighting not to return my gaze to the mesmeric proportions of that limb stretched out before me when I was unexpectedly aided in this effort by a flicker of movement from above the man's head. As this was the first sign of life that I had noticed from *that* quarter I had no qualms about raising my eyes to the inscrutable face of the boy standing astride the bench, his bony shoulders resting on the peeling wall parallel to his father's line of vision. Assuming the man was the father of the boy. But he was, I was sure he was – why else the disregard for the other's presence that they both evinced, an unconcern so resolutely maintained it couldn't be anything other than a sham. And, the jut of the youth's unlined forehead had in common with the man's time-hewn one a similarity that bespoke their being cast of the same mould.

The room in which I sat served as a waiting room for the pastor's office, and it was unfurnished except for the long wooden bench (which were actually two benches joined end to end and almost spanning the room's breadth) and a gilt-framed Ecce Homo adorning the wall-space above the pastor's office door. The bareness of the room lent itself to the amplification of sounds within the four walls, as every cough, every bored scratch and slap of flesh, every rasp of shuffled feet on the stone floor, floated up in the dusk-still air like moths condemned to putrefaction.

I had been stuck to my seat for more than an hour: my back was losing the battle of wills as a dense ball of pain slowly spread from the base of my spine, its throb more pugnacious as second by interminable second dragged by. Dusk, a gloomy grey tinged with saffron, was descending, and as had been its pattern since that incredible rainstorm of a week ago, it came enwrapped in a pall of cold air that snuck into my shoes and made free with my trapped feet. I sighed, to relieve the boredom.

The next time I looked up I found the boy in the same position he'd been in when last I had glanced his way. In the gathering gloom the angularities of his frame had been smoothed over, and any casual observer then present could easily mistake him for a gaunt young man. But his age I put at fourteen, or not much older, convinced in this estimation by the knowledge that the hormonal havoc wreaked by pubescence had in his body not yet attained its heights of impish tinkering.

The bench beneath me creaked and swayed as the man, coughing like a he-goat choking on its cud, carefully hefted his tree-trunk of a leg into a position less uncomfortable, his features twisted in a grimace that told that comfort was nowhere

near him. He licked his lips, his tongue-tip furtively flicking. Gossamer-winged nymphs of indeterminate specie, summoned from their underground lairs by the scent of night approaching, fluttered in the air before my face, their wing-tips caressing with touches as light as stolen kisses. Perhaps it was at one of these that the man struck, and with the sound of a whip-crack slapped himself in the face. He rubbed at his cheek with the guilty hand, the rasp of his beard stubble loud in the silence. Then without warning he spoke.

‘Confess before we go in.’

His voice, like his face, was notched by desolation. I remained silent. In the darkness the boy too did not speak.

‘I am talking to you,’ the man pursued, looking straight ahead. ‘Confess now, before we go in.’

These words, delivered in an inflectionless tone, provoked no response. I stole a glance in the boy’s direction, trying to make out his outline in the darkness. I gave up - he might never have existed.

‘Still refuse to speak? We’ll see . . . you bastard son of Satan.’

Strong words, but softly spoken. And still no reply from the intended collocutor. Drawn into the gravid silence that followed these unexpected last words, I waited, the distant sounds of nighttime traffic a background against which the silence of the room was starkly etched. Suddenly the thought, laughable in its implausibility, flashed across my mind: it was I who was being addressed. Then, convinced that I was

the focus of a pair of malignant eyes, I shot a look at the man, but was again only presented his profile.

Suddenly I was fed up with everything – the endless waiting, the devoted queerness of my faceless companions, the dark, most of all the dark. I rose from my seat, biting down the cry of pain that rose with me as the blood tumbled into my cold dead foot. With slow steps made slower still by haste, I shuffled to the light switch by the pastor's office door and flicked it, bracing myself for a blinding rush of light. Nothing happened, and the darkness around me settled in more snugly. I flicked the switch again, several times, alternating the weight in the ball of my thumb as I pressed down, then up, on and off, off and on, all the while musing on the innate musicality of flicking a light switch. A violent slash of light suddenly split the darkness beside me, and burst into the room in a widening arc that surged up the walls and ceiling. The pastor's haloed head appeared in the open doorway, his voice booming apologies. I leaped into the office, jostling the pastor aside in my haste, and without a backward glance I swung the door shut on the hobbling apparition I knew was bearing down on me.

*

I forgot all about the pair upon my leave-taking of the premises. Forgot about them that is, until the following Sunday when, from my hard-won position in the third pew of the crammed church hall, I caught sight for an instant of a face that stirred memories not entirely turned to ash. Confirmation came as the man, implacably aged by daylight, limped by, his right hand locked unto the chiropteran shoulder of his son

in step beside him. They were part of a long line of congregants winding their way, like sheep up a mountain-path, towards the dais, where the pastor, his face gleaming, impetuously awaited them. His hands killed the intervening seconds by flipping back his shirtsleeves.

I had been looking forward to this Sunday's program for a long time. This was because it was the day of the special 'deliverance' session that had months before been launched - with accompanying media fanfare - under the title:

'Spiritual Warfare on the Root Causes of Financial Unfruitfulness.

Day 1: Breaking the Yoke of Ancestral Curses.'

This title was, needless to say, a crowd-puller. The pastor's reputation as a dependable miracle-worker was also a major contributor to the vast numbers that trudged a dust-bowl to the doors of the church. These twin elements (and the fact that the pastor's base discipleship was already quite large) were why the Sun of Righteousness rose on this Sunday morning to find this house of God filled to the rafters. The heaving throng that, unable to find seating places within, spilled out from between the mahogany doors unto the extensive grounds and even beyond (those congregated on the wrong side of the gate commandeering the highway on whose verge the church was perched): they were by no means left out of the picture. Several huge closed-circuit television screens evangelized to them, and on to everyone else within a two-mile radius. Whenever the pastor raised his mighty voice in praise the retort, I was

sure, sent both the Muslims and the pointers on the hopelessly antiquated meters of the seismological institute across town, jumping with fright.

The composition of the crowd gathered this Sunday morning was as motley as one could find in any city ambushed by time. Balding grandmothers leaned on the sturdy shoulders of mint-breathed youngsters hoping to pass their O' levels without the intervening tedium of study. Barren women, too deeply immersed in penury to seek medical counsel, pushed against flashily turned out fraudsters who, with no compunction whatsoever, offered up prayers (buffered by hefty tithes of their spoil) that their felonious ventures be blessed with the prosperity of Solomon. Political kingpins, their flowing *agbada* robes still bespattered from the bloodbaths that preceded their latest electoral whitewash, accepted offertory bowls from the heart-broken mothers of student activists on whose grave-mounds the weeds had not even begun to sprout. The old and the young, the rich and the poor, the born-to-rule and the perennially disenfranchised: all together under one roof for one day, united in need and belief, one people, our hitherto irreconcilable differences in ethnicity, social class and denominational fealty cast overboard into the waters of Lethe. For one glorious day we would happily immolate ourselves to the blind Moloch of Faith.

As the roof of Hell shuddered beneath the hammer-blows of praise chanting, I found that my mouth too was open. The volunteers for the 'laying-on-of-hands' had by this time all mounted the dais, where, exposed to a myriad of gazes all gleaming with *schadenfreude*, they stood huddled like destitute hatchlings. As I watched, the ushers – three burly men and three women – briskly ordered them into three rows of roughly

equal length. The ushers were attired in canary-yellow on pea-green. The pastor however was all draped in white: white calf-leather ankle-length boots, ornately tooled; a dazzling white silk tie; white gabardine trousers and a crisp white shirt whose folded sleeves revealed the sparkle of a platinum-and-stone timepiece. In a fit of choreographed passion he had flung off his jacket, and it still lay where it had fallen on the marble floor of the dais, whitely bundled.

Also part of the dais' set pieces, and flanking the pastor on either side, were two funereal-suited assistants. They stood with legs akimbo and hands behind their backs, following the master's every thought ripple with burning eyes and jaw lines set like granite. And, at the rear of the dais, seated as always in their throne-backed armchairs arranged in line abreast, was the Committee of Elders. They were twelve in number, some advanced in years, others young achievers, and together they made up the upper echelons of the church's administrative hierarchy. Amongst this august coterie sat the pastor's consort; and the financial secretary, the choir director and the three wealthiest members of the church. They generally kept well out of the thick of things, as staid as any body of senators, and only made themselves useful when their silver tongues were called upon to buttress the pastor's homilies with cited passages from the Good Book.

The man and his poker-faced son had somehow found themselves again at the tail end of a waiting line. They seemed unchanged from our first meeting in all but their enhanced shabbiness. That this state, starkly evident in the worn patches on the sagging seat of the father's trousers, and the sun-bleached shoulders of the disintegrating T-shirt that the son wore, could have previously escaped my notice, I put down to the

dim lighting of our first encounter. The light that now exposed their shame could however not be accused of the same, as it was supplied by four powerful floodlights – two hanging from the roof girders above the apex of the semi-circular arc of the dais, and the other two over each corner. They beamed down celestial whitely, and beat with uncompromising harshness upon the heads and shoulders of everybody on the dais.

The woman to whom it fell to inaugurate proceedings was led, trapped in the practiced arm-locks of the assistants, up to the pastor, and there awaited her fate with her head bowed. In the hush of expectancy that overhung the hall the sound of a butterfly's heart breaking for love would have been thunderous. The pastor, his lips curling over clenched teeth in prayers whose auspiciousness only those closest to him could vouch for, lifted his right hand with deliberate slowness and slapped it unto the woman's forehead. As his splayed fingers gripped her temples the ball of his palm rudely displaced her nose. He maintained this hold for all of five seconds; then the assistants let go of her arms, and her legs began to sway, and when the pastor released her she collapsed backwards into the waiting hands of the female ushers, as limp as a beaten scarecrow. The pastor pirouetted and took two bounding steps towards the all-glass lectern on which the microphone lay. He picked it up with one hand and raised the other in the air.

'Praise the Lord!' he boomed, making a fist and shaking it.

'Hallelujah!' the multitude screamed back at him, clapping wildly.

'Hallelujah?'

'Amen!'

‘God is good.’

‘All the time!’

Whirling around he brought his arm down like the hammer of God and aimed a Jeremaic forefinger at the quaking mass before him, then ‘Bring them forward!’ he thundered, ‘God is here . . . the power of God is upon me!’ And all around the hall we heaved and screamed and hooted our appreciation.

A woman dressed to kill in scarlet, with matching hat and stilettos that splashed blood at every step, was escorted forward. As the pastor laid his hand upon her head her panache deserted her, and falling, she gave a squeal that sent the bodies which thronged the chapel’s open doorway parting like the Red sea, as they strove to evade inhabitation by the demons lately evicted.

A child, a girl of eight or nine, was detached from her mother’s side and led up. She left the line with a brave smile plastered on, but by the time she reached the pastor she was a nervous wreck. As she waited she trembled, in convulsive waves, from head to foot, her wrists beating the air in fright and supplication. And she blubbered. The pastor deftly defused the situation: he placed his hand on her forehead and she tumbled to the floor, suddenly silent.

In the chancel the Mellow Melodeons, ably supported by the church band, were up on their feet in devotional fervour. They were soon joined in voice by the whole congregation, then quickly surpassed in volume and feeling. The singing styles in employ by the laity were however a far cry from the bel canto of the choir: some screamed the songs even as their neighbours wept them, many extemporized the lyrics

as it suited their needs, several yodeled the words, then they were ‘rapped’, in tough-guy cadence and faces, by a nearby gang of pimply teenagers brimming with reformatory zeal. A balding fellow three seats to my right, whose identically-dressed spouse was on her knees beside him acting out a line from the song on her lips, ‘James Browned’ the same verse over her – dance steps, vocal eruptions and all. And he wasn’t by any means the only person on the floor cutting dance steps; so was I, as were the Mellow Melodeons, their lilac robes billowing about them as they whirled like dervishes. All around the hall were enacted scenes reminiscent of a Bacchic revel, except for the dais, where the Holy Spirit was still engaged in its sombre work.

The singing wore on and time lost its momentum, then voices began to hoarsen and muscles stiffen in protest, and then, as the pastor was more than halfway through the crowd on the dais, by unspoken consent the rejoicing was cast aside for the crucial business of divine solicitation. The silence that came with prayer was however short-lived: a loud and resonant humming, rent now and again by impassioned shrieks of command, filled the air - the innermost yearnings of countless bared souls, tumbling in a wind-rush heavenwards, bounced off the aluminium roof of the church. But soon these words that spilt raw faith whipped the spirit into frenzy, and we the congregants, suddenly possessed of an abiding conviction, cackled with joy at—, and trembled for astonishment at—, and danced for thankfulness at—. Some others, thwarted at every turn in life by no mortal fault of theirs, with sailors’ curses upon their lips punched and clawed at the evoked faces of their misfortunes, and damned to the hottest corner of hellfire all their enemies known and unborn. Reinforcing the impression of chaos

unloosed was the racket of romping children. These hobgoblins, for the moment free after bitter hours of forced inactivity, unleashed a diabolical wave of havoc upon the hall as they crawled and cart wheeled and careened through the tetris-maze of narrow aisles, stomping on feet and crashing into the unprotected crotches of strangers unable to throttle them, and all the while noisily settling amongst themselves grievances older than they could remember.

The church band, left to their own devices after the praise singing was abandoned, had turned their musical attentions to the goings-on upon the dais. They now contributed to the general tumult with the drum rolls that accompanied the volunteers forward. As each one approached the pastor and he raised his untiring arm, the beat quickened, reaching a crescendo at the moment of contact – then a silence of stilled hands fell. But after the fall all hell broke loose as that band gave vent to a ten-second peal of metal rock so cacophonous it would turn green the face of Marilyn Manson. And as the cymbal clashes and drum smashes and keyboard dashes and electric whines and wind blasts all came to a sudden stop, another volunteer was led forward and the unholy symphony began all over, and over, again.

The man and his son, and six others, were still up on their feet awaiting their turn, with the rest of the volunteers clustered to one side of the dais, either flat on their backs and still lost to the world, or else hunched down in various degrees of dazed wonderment. With a hand still on his son's shoulder stood the man, his weight on his good leg, while from bunched up trouser hung that gleaming python of a limb, as useless to him as a perfidious wife. The leg, now visible as the press of bodies around

him had cleared, was more swollen than I remembered: the slick-smooth skin was stretched over the bloated flesh beneath, and had assumed the greenish tincture of a reptile's festering carcass, with deep-purple splotches where the knee and ankle bones should have jutted under the skin. The man stood in oblivion of the glare of white light and curious gazes, thirstily flicking a pink tongue over his lips. Sweat beads rolled in fat glistening drops down his brow, undisturbed in their descent until they vanished into the grizzled fuzz that covered his cheek and neck.

A woman with forearms like a spinach enthusiast's was led forward, and as she fell to her knees and carefully keeled over, the assistants, faced with the end, started eagerly towards the man and his son. They were however waved back by the pastor as he strode towards the glass lectern, wiping his streaming face with a white towel.

'Praise the Lord,' the pastor breathed into the microphone, still wiping his face.

'Hallelujah!' the multitude replied.

'Hallelujah!'

'Amen!'

'Signs and wonders . . . new awakening . . . more to come!' the pastor declared, now mopping the back of his neck.

'Amen!'

'In the name of Jesus I loose the satanic bonds of ancestral domination that obstruct your financial, procreational, conjugal, educational, physical, spiritual, and *aaall-round generaaal* progress!'

'*Aaaamen!*'

‘Praise the Lord.’

‘Hallelujah!’

Holding the microphone in one hand and with the other thrust into his pocket, the pastor stepped out from behind the lectern and sauntered towards the man and his son. The skin around his eyes was creased in what seemed a friendly smile.

‘This is the father. And that,’ he said, indicating with a nod, ‘is the son. I met the father for the first time last week when he came to me with a problem. The problem is obvious, I assume?’

‘Yes,’ came the scattered response.

‘Who can tell the cause of the problem, the problem behind the problem so to speak? You,’ the pastor said, pointing, and by some joke of man or fate his finger fell on me. ‘Yes you – tell us the problem.’

I could feel, and see, all eyes on me as the whole world awaited my answer. The woman in the seat adjoining mine (a garrulous thing in a large yellow head-tie who had plagued me all morning with her garish perfume and boisterous prayers), concluding that I was slow to respond to the honour due to an ignorance of the answer, dug me in the ribs with a spinster-sharp elbow and whispered with theatrical loudness: ‘Is him leg. Is him leg that is the problem.’ Unable anymore to withstand the pain in my ribs I rose to my feet, my knees wobbling as I groped for calm through gathering mists of apprehension.

‘Is him . . . ’ I faltered, and then cleared my throat. ‘It’s probably his liver, sir. He is a heavy drinker I think – his eyes you see – and the vice has destroyed the liver – I

think. Yes.’ Then warming to the topic, I concluded with: ‘The body of Man is the Temple of God, but Jesus turned water into wine.’

‘Thank you brother,’ the pastor said, and as I sat down to my neighbour’s reproving glance he continued, ‘Any doctors in the Lord’s house?’

Several hands shot up around the hall, a number of which belonged to persons obviously more schooled in the mystical arts than in the intricacies of auscultation.

‘You,’ the pastor said, pointing to rotund, fair-skinned man in the front row.

The good doctor, his pompous tone hemming and hawing its way through a convoluted forest of medical terms understandable to none but the elect, delivered himself of a discursive lecture on the etiology and therapeutics of the most likely sources of the man’s ‘bucnemia’. He was about to embark on a more detailed recapitulation of the treatments and drugs available at his private practice, when the pastor interrupted him.

‘Have you gone to the hospital with your problem?’ he asked the man.

‘Yes,’ replied the man, licking his lips.

‘And what were you told was the problem?’

‘They couldn’t find it.’

‘They couldn’t find the problem,’ the pastor said, enunciating each word as he turned to draw us into the dialogue. ‘They couldn’t find a problem whose symptoms are manifest for all to see. The problem which our doctor here has already given several names for and the layman even has an opinion about.’ He turned back to the man. ‘Why, tell them, why couldn’t they find the problem?’

‘It was not with me at the clinic.’

‘Wasn’t with you . . . ? Are you implying that you know what the problem is?’

He turned to us again. ‘A problem which the best have wrapped their minds around and still come up short. And this man here . . . wait.’ Again he turned to the man. ‘Are you saying that you know the problem responsible for your swollen leg?’

‘Yes,’ replied the man, tip of tongue flicking between lips resolutely compressed.

‘How do you know what you know?’

‘Because, when my leg started to swell, and I visit the clinic, and the doctor told me that he did not know the problem, and I did not have money so I started to dry-fast, and I prayed to God for holy purpose and divine intervention – praise the Lord! – and then I pray that if not let the enemy’s plan he revealeth, and I dry-fasted and I exulted His great name – praise the Lord almighty! – and on the seventh day He opened my eye and I receive the revelation. Amen.’

‘Hearken the word, my brethren in Christ! On the seventh day of a dry fast! My brother – what is the problem?’

The tension in the hall was so thick that I was inhaling air in chunks. The woman beside me, considering her spurned advice as sufficient grounds for intimacy, had sunk her nails into my arm, and as the combined weight of our anticipation caused time to pause and peek over our shoulders, I felt the sharp bite of breaking skin. But ignoring the distracting pain I kept eye and ear glued to the unfolding drama.

‘This boy . . . my son. He is the problem.’

There was an explosion of released breaths, loud enough that the boy, for the first time since I had set eyes on him, winced for something other than the dips of his thoughts; and then everyone was chattering at once. The topic of heated discussion, his face as blank of expression as the devil's mind is of kindly thought, stood with lowered eyes before the suddenly-hostile crowd, his posture showing no signs of the repentant transgressor. With a malevolent glance in his direction the pastor broke his silence.

'The boy is a witch. In visions his halo is red. It has been revealed that, in the spirit realm, he sacrificed his father's life for power.'

A loud buzz of disapproval trailed this allegation, and the woman beside me, hissing like a trodden snake choking on its spleen, bent her head forward and spat between her feet.

'The day the man came to my office with the problem I commanded this boy to confess his sins, time and time again, but he refused to speak. I later discovered that not one word has passed his lips since when the father confronted him with evidence of his satanic deed. It is obvious that this witch has entered into a pact of silence with the devil – and though he may balk at breaking it, it shall today be broken in the *mighhhty* name of Jesus!'

'*Aaaamen!*' the multitude roared, hungry for infidel blood.

'Bring the witch-boy forward!' the pastor ordered, then consigned himself to silence by handing over the microphone. The two assistants bounded forward like crazed dogs off a snapped leash, and pounced on the unresisting boy. Dispossessed of his support the father promptly collapsed to the floor. The boy, his slim frame the

frailer between those two pillars of righteousness, was frog-marched to the pastor. The Mellow Melodeons, infused with new life, raised a war-chant with such gusto and gesturing as to forever render their name a misnomer. The church band, needing no further justification, leaped dysphoniously into the mêlée.

‘In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,’ the pastor intoned into the microphone held up to his face by an usher: ‘I command thee – out!’ Then he fastened his clawed hand – tendons straining against the skin – unto the boy’s forehead.

‘Break thou this pact O Jesu yes . . . kai khe tu tarih ros re pasa!’

The woman in the yellow headgear (until now shrieking that her new car tyres should never burst nor suffer any wear and tear ‘Yes Lord!’) threw over the stifles of lingua franca as soon as the pastor began speaking in tongues.

‘Neva eh fomod gni!’ the pastor spat out. ‘Khe tsih rieh tro fe kass . . . sensuo eth – girrof! De tu ces re perah – cih wyehtera dess elb!’

Satisfied with the success of the exorcism, the pastor let go of the boy’s head, and the assistants stepped back, unhooking their vice-grip on his waif’s arms. A softhearted usher, female, moved as if to catch the falling body, and then changed her mind in mid-motion, her arms stuck in a rictus of incredulity. For the boy did not fall. The pastor, his earlobes tickled by foreboding as he whirled to proclaim this latest drubbing of oft-beaten Lucifer, froze for an instant in a pose whose impact would outlast eternity. Then he collected himself, his features twisting into a gargoyle-mask of fury as he reached again for the boy’s head. Attaining his objective, he launched into a ten-

minute declamation of all the devil's appellations with befitting invectives, then a slightly less long recitation of God's names in every language he knew or was inspired of by the Holy Spirit. He ended with a direct command to the boy.

'Bow down, thou spawn of Satan!' he screamed in the boy's face, spraying spit. 'Bow down before the most high God!'

And still the boy did not fall. The praise singing, on the wane since this incredible unfolding of events on the dais, finally sputtered out. Baffled devotees down the expanse of hall and lawn began to exchange openly worried glances: this had never happened before.

'The boy is an unusual strong witch,' said the woman in the yellow head-tie, her voice lacking conviction. 'Especially for one young like that.'

Several members of the committee of elders had risen from their thrones and approached the pastor; they stood with bent heads in heated discussion. One of them then detached herself from the group – the pastor's wife – and pitter-pattered to the lectern. She returned bearing the pastor's bible and a bottle of olive oil. As his wife upturned half of the bottle's contents unto the boy's head, the pastor riffled through the bible's pages, and, after finding the relevant portion, placed the open book over the boy's forehead, grinding his face in with a hand clasped on the oil-soaked head. 'Out of this vessel flee, thou spirit of iniquity!' the pastor cried, his voice brimming with unction. 'In the mighty name of our Lord Jesus Christ and on the power of his Holy Scripture I command thee – out!'

The first effect of the boy's passive iconoclasm was manifested as the volunteers began to leave the dais in trickles. Those that remained behind rose from the cold floor and stood about with unease leaking from their ears, exchanging sheepish glances. The woman beside me without a word snatched up her bottle of still-untransformed redcurrant drink and stomped towards the aisle, her head-tie flapping indignantly. On the dais the ushers were dispiritedly huddled together, with the committee of elders forming a less flamboyant bunch several paces from them, and beside them, the pastor and his two assistants, conferring as thick as thieves with body movements that presented their contentions in black and white.

I was wondering what was next when the pastor decided, and the assistants executed. They moved in on the boy like a pair of razor-edged pincers, and grabbing him by the arms, forced him down to his knees. The shoulder seams of his tired shirt, unused to the strain of arms stretched aloft, gave with a ripping ripple effect that soon had the boy stripped to the waist. It was the sight of his tubercular torso in the harsh light that first chinked the pastor's armor. Then the boy raised his eyes up to the pastor's face and from the pit of his belly the tears they began to well, and overflowing they washed away the sphinx to reveal underneath the face of a child scrounged up in lonely misery. And the tears they gathered and they fell, drop after drop after unending crystal shimmering drop, relentless in their indubitable purity. They streaked down his face, rolling over baby-soft lips that trembled but still clamped down on unending injustices. They splashed unto his shoulders raw with blue-black welts, and coursed down his back and chest livid with criss-crossed impressions of homicidal intentions.

The harrowing sight of this abstractionist pattern on the wasted canvas brought a rush of tears to the shocked eyes of mothers present, and made me bite my lips in anger, and repent.

The assistants dropped the boy's arms with epiphanic promptitude, and then, sickened by their unknowing complicity, they gingerly fled the dais. The pastor, thus abandoned by his lackeys and unable alone to withstand the condemning sight of truth's avatar, dropped his eyes to the bible in his hand – but soon raised them again to the Committee of Elders. Their own eyes were however fixed on the confounded faces of the ushers. The pastor then directed his mute appeal at the congregation: but the trickles of yore had merged into streams, and the streams into rivers that now flowed foaming down the aisles, and gushed from the angrily-swinging mahogany doors. With nowhere left to turn to he lowered his eyes to the *fons et origo* of all his troubles, the father, sitting on the floor with his snake-fat leg outstretched before him, and a smirk on his lips. He met the pastor's pleading eyes with no trace of pity in his.

'I warned you he is the devil's own child,' he said, and flicked his hot-pink tongue over lips eternally parched.

VII

A TYPICAL DAY

A typical day for Ohi Janfa began something like this: he awoke from a deep and dreamless sleep at a few seconds short of eight, and lay with eyes shut over a mind restlessly blank until the alarm-clock by his head unleashed its tocsin, then he rose. He took the four, sometimes four and a half steps that steered him through the only path for the door unimpeded by cairns of medical textbooks, and on reaching it drew back with difficulty the two bolts stiff with bulk and age, and stepped from the room. He gulped down two breathfuls of the cleansing morning air and then paused on his doorstep for anything from five seconds to five minutes, stretching out cramped muscles and ridding his mouth of a night's store of saliva. The only organs of his however putting in any work were his eyes as they scoured the surrounding area.

His succeeding action was the first of his routine to go either one way or the other depending on the prevailing situation. If, during his calisthenics, Grace and her three siblings all burst from the door adjacent to his, their haste precipitated by the knowledge that they were already five minutes too late to escape a thrashing at the school gate; or if the teknonymous Iya Grace emerged from the self-same doorway, as usual clutching in her sailors' arms that huge cauldron whose pitch-black bottom had straddled some of the oddest fuel sources ever necessitated by dire poverty; or if Pa Titus the neighbourhood drunk threw open his window and stuck out his hoary head, and, with an invariably courteous 'M'warning t'yu', emptied the unabsorbed contents of his stomach unto the ground with such force as to polka-dot Ohi Janfa's legs with the now-cloudy but still flammable liquid – if any of these or other encounters took place, he would proffer and accept salutations, taking care not to exceed the five minute time limit. He would then trot past the seven doors that, in addition to his and the two before it, made up the length of the building. At the end of his block was a shed assembled from randomly perforated zinc sheets, hued a deep brown from rust and caked dirt, which squatted over the pit latrine that served the whole compound. He would throw open the squeaking door, squeeze himself in and slam it shut, and braving the thick cloud of flies that rose in murmurous welcome, proceed to empty his bladder, all the while holding his breath for the fear of a fatal asphyxiation. As his gush connected with the bottom of the pit his ears were reviled by the resulting splash or splatter, this consequent upon the use to which preceding occupants had put the latrine; then, when he was through, he barged out, *toties quoties*.

If when Ohi Janfa emerged from his room there was no one about, he would make short work of the arm-waving, and, crossing over to Pa Titus' window, relieve himself in the puddle formed underneath as a result of years of gastric upheavals unto that same spot. As only he and the neighbourhood alley-cats knew, the spread of this stink-pit had to no small degree been aided by him. In the almost four years of getting his own back over Pa Titus he had on several occasions come close to getting caught with his pants down, his closest brush with ignominy coming on that day when Chika, the girl from the room beside Iya Grace's, crept up on him just as he was tucking away and grabbed him by the waist. He was given such a fright that he leaped into the air like a shot hare, and on landing came down in the morass half of his own making. In the ensuing uproar it quickly became apparent that Chika, who was barely able to speak between guffaws, had not an inkling of the deed committed; she had instead suspected him of eavesdropping on Pa Titus' intoxicated mumblings. This he vehemently denied, and with true feeling too as the thought had never crossed his mind. Fired by a rush of relief he went on to take issue with Chika over her teasing accusations, creating such a row over it that they thereafter and forever ended the horseplay with which they had demonstrated their willingness for sexual relations. However, only days later, and with the ruins of his resolve around him, Ohi Janfa succumbed to the flutter in his belly and continued beneath Pa Titus' window as if he had never left off.

Another thread in the fabric of his daily pattern was the sanctity of his morning wash. Then, as the clock struck a quarter to nine, he would grab his school books and, emerging from his room, plunge into the back alleys that wound along with the

morning reek of gutters through the outhouses and outdoor kitchens of the chaotically-clustered tenement houses, with this pickpockets' route ending up on the trim lawns of the college hospital. Another five minutes would find him in the precincts of the amphitheatre-like lecture auditorium, wrangling over precious sitting places with other students as punctual as he. And from thenceforward he went through the rest of the day by rote.

Atypical days, though rare, did come. One such day was when, while on the way to class one morning, he ran into a former classmate and friend. Ifedior Idoko had been one of the top five students in his class. He and Ohi Janfa had become friends in their second year in medical school, when, just three days to an anatomy test that Ohi Janfa was not in the least prepared for, Ifedior Idoko had taken his dilemma to heart and had literally pried his skull open and crammed two weeks' worth of study into it. Ohi Janfa, against all odds, passed the test.

After that they had become like a leprechaun and its hoard, inseparable. Ohi Janfa found in his new friend the most considerate, kind-hearted and even-tempered of all fellows. In their third year, at Ohi Janfa's request, they moved in together. Ohi Janfa's grades, as expected, improved, while Ifedior Idoko's love life, hitherto nonexistent, received the boost that his room-mate schemed tirelessly to ensure.

Ohi Janfa's attempts at playing the cupid, though good intentioned, were ill-advised. He had misjudged the depth of his friend's ingenuousness. The lady-friend with whom he had arranged to rob Ifedior Idoko of his virginity (a one-time lover of his) had however comprehended at a glance the deep waters that frothed beneath that

serene visage. Thus, in fulfilling Ohi Janfa's demand, she forever enslaved Ifedior Idoko's heart.

The friendship did not survive that blow. Within weeks Ifedior Idoko had moved in with the love of his life, and, despite the counsel of a frantic friend, he soon agreed himself a father-to-be. He dropped out of school shortly thereafter.

And then, after nearly a year, Ohi Janfa had run into him. He looked gaunt – there were milk stains on the front of his shirt. He held a shopping bag in one hand, which he swung gently as he walked. When Ohi Janfa called out his name, he stopped in his tracks and peered shortsightedly at him, as if trying to remember; but Ohi Janfa could see that his thoughts were elsewhere.

'It's me – Ohi,' Ohi Janfa said, approaching with his hand extended.

'OHI!' Ifedior Idoko exclaimed, and disregarding the outstretched hand, grasped his friend in a bear-hug. They danced around each other like frisky puppies.

'Let me buy you a drink,' Ohi Janfa offered, 'we have so much to talk about. It's been a while, my friend.'

'I can't,' Ifedior Idoko declined, that faraway look that pleasure had driven away returning once more to haunt his eyes. 'I have to go home. I have a son.' Then, before Ohi Janfa could voice the congratulations that weighed on him like a fratricide, Ifedior Idoko, reaching into his bag, extracted a fold of paper from the pile that nestled therein and thrust it into Ohi Janfa's hands. It was a résumé – *her* résumé.

'Please, my friend, she need a job...do what you can. So nice, so nice...I *really* have to go,' Ifedior Idoko said, backing away at each word and with his hands clasped

before him in supplication. And then, as Ohi Janfa gawped at the résumé in his hands, her name emblazoned on it so that it could not be a mistake, Ifedior Idoko turned and tore off like a man chased by his own demons.

VIII

DANCE DOWN A ROAD THAT LEADS NOWHERE

It was fast approaching the witching hour: she was all alone on a long and lonely road which wound its way through a vista of susurrating pine trees, the leafage of their furthest rank-members presaging her trek far from over. The straitened stretch of sky before her was hued a moody blue-grey, with no lunar spotlight to disturb its moroseness, nor any wisp of cloud cover that she could discern; but, one feeble star-speck winked valiantly down at her, urging her fearful steps on. Through the trembling pine needles to her right came the glow of soundless lightning that flashed like stage effects, and though this light source in its own whimsical way relieved the night's deep gloom, its effect on her was contrary.

The tap of her footsteps on asphalt kept her eyes busy seeking her pursuer. The night air was cool on her brow and smelled of leaf manure and dripping grass sap. The wind blew in ebbs and flows from behind her, as if – slight though its push was – it aspired to speed her on. Above her head the souging boughs proclaimed their disapproval: a young lady out alone on a road such as this and on a night not in the best of humours – what on earth was she thinking? Of rapists and murderers and rape-murders all on roads half as desolate as this was her mind full, and yet there was no turning back – the treacherous mists of anger had borne her too far up this path before prudence reasserted itself too late, too late . . . The wind in the branches sighed along with her.

A shadow flitted to her right and then something mouldy beat the air before her face. As her hands shot up in reflexive defence the bat's disproportionate shape zigzagged for the darkness beyond the treetops. When her eyes descended they immediately fell upon the male figure leaning against a shadowed tree trunk, watching her. She started, a clutch of clucking hens flapping wildly within her breast – what would she say what would she do . . . Nothing, as it turned out, her straining eyes confirming that the form was indeed that of a fallen signpost that some thoughtful passerby had propped up against the tree. A shaking hand holding down the savage leaps of her heart, she hurried on.

A dozen steps on she came upon a culvert that cut across the road. Through the apertures in the concrete slabs that sealed it she perceived only blackness beneath her, but the cheerful trickle of brisk-flowing water floated up to her ears loud and clear. As

she placed a foot upon one of the slabs it wobbled and then dipped suddenly beneath her weight, causing her to scramble to avoid falling through. Her heart began again. With her second step back on solid ground her left instep struck a cold object lying on the road, stopping her dead in her tracks. She however relaxed a moment later as the empty beer can rolled down the lake-smooth asphalt and then, with pantomimic slowness, tumbled off unto the grassy shoulder. And by the time the racket had died down the silence too was dead, as, from all directions and all at once, her ears were inundated with the sinister sounds of noctivagant life.

From the night beyond the trees drifted the long-drawn hoots of despondent owls. From the high-grassed verges sparkling galactically with fireflies shrilled the sex-starved crickets. From the puddles that still dotted the roadside from the tempest of the week before, floated the forlorn croaks of toad-cows whose spawn were in danger of turning to plant food. And from behind her erupted a violent rustling of undergrowth that sent her whirling around in a half-leap and with a bitten-off scream; but it was followed scarcely a heartbeat later by the ill-tempered squeaks of squabbling shrews. As she watched, one of the combatants clambered unto the road and, paying no mind to her backward stumble, waddled off to the other side. Seconds after the coniform shape had melted into the shadows the first waft of its sickening musk hit her full in the face, and needing no further prompting, she turned and continued with her journey.

As her fears receded the thoughts came burning again. The blind anger that had sent her tearing from his room was now only a tight ball in her belly. She had entered the relationship with eyes wide shut and standing on bended knee, and it was only a

matter of time before what had to happen, happened. Like all the others before he had come with the love-light in his eyes and an easy deluge of sweet words, lies that she had been only too willing to believe. She had been convinced that this time it would be different, different because, for one, she would nurture it like she had done no other. It would work because she had made her choice and she would make it work. But then as always the light in his eyes had slowly begun to fade, and then the protestations of love had become more forced than felt, and finally, the endless quarrels at the drop of a hat had overtaken even lovemaking as the most favoured of their shared experiences. It had turned out the same as all before despite her best efforts, only, this time she had hung around till the ugly end. And that this was the end there was no doubt. He had always been careful about his dalliances – not careful enough to fool her of course, but careful enough that she could allow him the benefit of the doubt. But not this time. To let her walk in on him as he was breaking her heart – it was unforgivable. Whether careless or crude it was still unforgivable. Especially after the effort she had put in. But for the time and effort she would never stop walking. But that was what he wanted. That was what he wanted. That was the grand plan – but it had failed, horribly. She was stronger than that. She was stronger than what he had never seen. He might think he held the strings, but this marionette danced only to her own tune. He wouldn't get rid of her that easily.

She wiped a tear away from her eye and stared unseeingly into the distance. The road stretched out before her, cloaked in darkness and leading nowhere. She had to go back. But of course! She had to go back – to him.

She would go back to him. She would go back tomorrow and play the victim that her role demanded of her. She would weep and be comforted. She would accept his apologies and force the promises from him, broken before they passed the lips – and then she would forgive him. She would prove wrong all those who expected the relationship to founder, he most of all. She was not the forgiving type but no matter, she would learn – it was for a worthy cause. And any more tricks he had up his breeches she would ignore, and when impossible, forgive, all for a worthy cause. It would be hard she knew, but he was the devil that she knew, and she would much rather marry a rascal than grow a mustache in her father's house. This rascal. She would succeed where she had failed before. She would remain focused: it was he that she wanted and not his sullied love; that was as useless to her as it was to the girl she had caught him with. She would make it work. She would swallow her pride and her anger and return to him tomorrow – a changed person. She would make it work.

A sudden change in wind direction brought her to a halt as her nose picked up a smell that she knew but couldn't place. She stood tenterhook-still in the middle of the road, her face up in the air and her nostrils twitching, a striking tableau vivant of the wary gazelle before the leopard-pounce. She was sure she knew the smell but still the memory evaded her, hovering tantalizingly close, exasperatingly unreachable. She finally gave it up for lost and began walking again, but she had hadn't taken four steps when the wind picked up once more and this time brought her a stronger whiff. Then suddenly she knew. Danger. Marijuana. Before she had time to consider her options they were blowing in the wind, their place taken up by the three tall figures that

detached themselves from the shadows and sauntered unto the road five-odd metres ahead of her. Fear dropped with a vulgar plonk into her belly, its dead weight rooting her to the spot. The wind, its job done, died down. A dog howled in the distance.

The three men spread out – one to each side of the road and the third in the middle – and slowly advance. The man on the left takes a whistling draw at his joint and, exhaling the obscuring smoke from nostril and ear, tosses the butt at her. It falls at her feet still burning, the glowing tip sending thin curlicues of fragrant smoke crawling up her legs. The man in the middle mutters something and the other two chuckle deep in their throats, and moments later, he being the nearer of the three, he raises his hand to grasp her, or to stroke her cheek, or even to take a swipe at the blood-thirsty mosquitoes now using her still frame for a maypole who knows; but she suddenly explodes into action. She feints to the right, and then to the left, and then raising her fluttering hands high above her head she begins to spin on toe-tips, slowly at first and then faster and faster until she is only a blur in the dark. Then she abruptly, impossibly, breaks out of the spin and drops down to her knees, her arms falling sideways at the same time, and from this position she begins to undulate her body, supple beyond imagination, again slowly at first and then faster with the passing seconds – hip, belly, breast and neck – like a hooked eel fighting for breath, her arms doing the same on a different plane. And then without warning or means seemingly mortal she shoots straight up into the air from her knees and in the same instant lets rip with such a banshee wail that it raises goose bumps on the backs of the puddling toads and shatters the hind-limbs of the dumbfounded crickets and brings the tree-tops

to life as the owls and bats flee for tree hollow and sky and the would-be assailants for
dear life. . .

IX

THE TWILIGHT ZONE

It was that time of the dying day when an inopportune blink could open unto total darkness.

In the motor-park, floating just beneath the babble of Homeric braggarts, and the incidental clamour of wheezy engines and blaring stereos, and the heart-wrung refrain of ululating beggars, was the premonitory clanging of shop doors and windows whose brave fortifications were understood to be, given the *ambiance*, more burglar-delaying than burglar-proof. As the night darkly threatened with as yet untold horrors the anxious traders barred up and hurried from the park, furtively clutching themselves where a whole day's hard labour was hid. Hardly had these pusillanimous characters slunk out of whispering distance than the park touts and career hoodlums converged

upon the abandoned shop-fronts, transforming them in a twinkling into the gambling dens and dope depots for which the motor-park was justly famous, and then with the pimps among this business-savvy lot finger-whistling their battered merchandise from the shadows where they lurked to under the advertising glare of the shops' security lighting. The ousted merchants, as always, noted with a sinking heart this desecration, and tearfully slated their shops for a demonic cleansing on the morrow.

Away from the stale-piss stink of the motor-park, the city roads and sidewalks were choked with the end-of-day traffic of cars – belching, exhaust-cloaked – and pedestrians. The greater wave of the departing shopkeepers, opting for the lesser evil, suppressed their misgivings and bore into the shuffling, tight-lipped throng that endlessly populated the obscured sidewalk. Others bided their time at teeming bus stops until the opportunity chugged their way, and then they gathered the shreds of their courage about them, and leaped like tipsy gymnasts unto the doorsteps of viciously crammed buses, where, with elbow-jabs and head butts dispensed as necessary, they thereafter clung on for dear life. An imprudent few took their lives into their hands and flagged down the *okada* riders frenetically zigzagging like bands of scalp-waving Apache, and then handed their lives over to these humanoid demons by climbing aboard for those carousel rides almost guaranteed to leave one crippled for life.

Bumper to bumper and door to door for as far as the eye could see, the cars, and still the *okadas* found space, and wove in and out of the packed lanes and crowded sidewalks like swarms of enraged crickets, three terrified hostages often as not riding pillion, customised lorry-horns a-blaring, fake designer shade-wearing unhelmeted sans

license kamikaze riders steering one-fingered, vowing decapitation to all and sundry heads intruding on a self-given right of way. When, as it often did happen, these universally abhorred opportunists came face to face with a courted destiny, and tumbled over thrust-open car doors, or more usually, collided headlight-on from mutual pigheadedness, they – obeying to the letter the unwritten code of their *métier* – guided their falling steeds with such diligence and skill that it was practically assured that a disproportionate measure of the resulting medical woes would fall squarely on the shoulders of their unfortunate passengers. As a rule, the motorbike emerged best off from such encounters.

Bedlam reigned on the motorways. The commuters, jettisoning communal interest in blind pursuit of individual grace, inadvertently authored commotion, and in the end, did not commute. Through open windows irate motorists handed out death threats like ‘Hell is hot’ pamphlets, and in the lull between these eruptions the serving junta was roundly excoriated. Bad city planning! Deplorable roads! Broken down traffic lights, imagine! The traffic wardens had hours since retired for the day: at sundown the urge of bus drivers to over-run their oppressors was often not restrained. The said bus drivers, safe in the knowledge that no consumption of the almighty motor fuel was involved in the process, leaned on their horns with unholy glee, and at any ill-considered challenge from willful motor car drivers, often female, shoved their heads out of their shattered windscreens and sunroofs to reel off the serial number of their road-tax receipts. Otherwise, they sent their conductors to beat up the offending lady.

The ubiquitous hawkers, head, chest and shoulder-displaying goods that ran the gamut of the hopelessly mundane to the criminally fantastic (from canned drinks and used G-strings to the supposed jawbone of His Holiness John Paul II), saw gain in others' adversity, and milked the hold-up for all it was worth.

The sidewalks at night were a pickpocket's El Dorado. The pedestrians, their idiosyncrasies dissolved in the sour broth that was the collective ethos, fought and shoved against each other with gratuitous abandon. Their exertions however were as toddlers' tantrums, as all individual movement was soaked up by the human logjam that locomotioned only in periodic surges, like the spasms of a gore-gorged leach. The living, breathing agglomeration, packed tight from kerb to kerb, displaced, with the inexorability of an evolutionary episode, the leprous aged from their beggar communes on the sidewalk. The be-turbaned, enrobed, aristocratic repose of these ghoul-skinned cripples thus challenged and put to rout, they scampered for the safety of stagnant gutters, whilst others, forced to brave the painless, true, but potentially fatal crush of unsympathetic wheels, hobbled between the hurtling motorbikes and lunging car-bumpers with the dexterity of Olympic kayakists. Now and again a thud and a sobbing sigh was heard - and then silence; and then if it wasn't some ownerless dog the limp body of one of these cicatrized grandparents was disgustedly rolled off into the gutter.

Every street corner and road junction was an excuse for a flea market. There, cheek by jowl, standing, sitting, crouching, and promoting their wares with tinkling bells and flagrant falsehoods, sweating, cursing, wheedling— Everybody sold Everything. Next to the yellow press and blue film vendors lay confectioners' goodies; Christian

folios and Vedic texts stood side by side with Koranic surahs; rat poison was displayed beside the sun-shrivelled carcasses of whole habitats' frog populations. On the party-coloured streak of blankets that declared these open-air malls, lean-jowled headmasters sold off their school's monthly allocation of board-chalk, and cashiered bank managers, narrating their life stories in the breath-pauses from fevered auctioneering, bartered off their redundant wardrobes. Whale-women, sitting like bordello madams before blazing wood-fires, fried fish, and yam, and bean-cakes, and their sweat, in gargantuan cauldrons that sputtered and spat in their deadpan faces.

Beneath dead streetlights lounged agents for the largest and most respectable drugstores in the city, plying incognito. They at first rejected and then resignedly assumed the mantle of the diagnostician that their hypochondriac customers forced upon them, and then turned a whopping profit from their employers' losses handing out carefully-defaced pillbox after pillbox of those placebos of the parsimonious. However, the herbal medicine practitioners saw the briskest trade in these hypermarkets. These men – for they were invariably men, and prosperously paunched, and sonorous-voiced; these men, divulging to a palm-cuddled microphone the macabrely melodic names of every venereal disease that the human animal was ever cursed to suffer, spread out on the bonnets of their megaphone-eared jalopies the most explicit snapshots of afflicted genitalia. Then, with the conjurer's practiced flourish, they presented the pickled roots and crushed bark that they swore could out-perform one thousand years of medical science. And the silent suffering, detaching themselves from the spellbound wall of gathered faces, sidled up to these soapbox messiahs and

declared to a waiting world the nature of their nocturnal pursuits by emptying out their wallets.

At the confluence of two busy roads – a veritable silt valley for fly-by-night commerce – sat one Mrs. Akoy, egg retailer. Her stock was comprised in the main of chicken eggs, and of these she displayed an understandable propensity for the jumbo, factory-fabricated type. But, in the papier-mâché crates stacked before her like ill-gotten wealth, were also available, fresh and boiled, duck eggs, and turkey eggs, and pigeon eggs, and those especially hard-shelled eggs of the guinea fowl. The specimens of this last were more important to the success of her enterprise than their liliputian proportions gave one to understand. Every afternoon at the close of the school day, the children, descending on Mrs. Akoy like a pack of vengeful monkeys, put their gambling skills to the test by knocking one against the other the carefully selected tips of these hard-boiled eggs. And while at the termination of this predetermined game of chance she raked in all the money, the overall winner for his glory got only a bellyful of foul air.

Night, thick and heavy and suffocating, had fallen like a spell over the city, and Mrs. Akoy had not made a single sale in over an hour of uneasy waiting. With an aging woman's tired eyes, straining against the sudden darknesses of sweeping headlights, she anxiously scoured the steady, chaotic stream of remote faces. Her usual closing time had come and, finding her unready, gone. It was a moonless night, starless, ill-starred – details whose insignificance were rapidly assuming overwhelming proportions in this mother's mind. Her baby, her youngest, her daughter, Daisy, should have since

returned from her assigned run. It was a route that she had worked several times and thus knew well, and she had been given only four dozen eggs to sell. Mrs. Akoy worried. A mist, without warning, descended, and then slowly began to curdle into smog. Mrs. Akoy stared with renewed purpose into the never-moving, never-stopping crowd of jostling pedestrians, willing her daughter's face to appear, searching for the tell-tale bobbing of a chest-high head-tray. Several were sent through the swirling mist just to torment her.

Placing all her eggs in one large raffia basket, and hauling the empty crates off to the nearby house where she paid a weekly stipend for their nightly board, Mrs. Akoy packed up in readiness for departure. She swept up the broken eggshells that littered her corner and dumped them in the roadside drainage for the rains to worry about. And then, having no choice, she settled down again to wait, straddling her treasure basket like a broody hen. For Daisy had still not turned up. But where was the child, thought Mrs. Akoy, suppressing an urge to jump back up and call the attention of other mothers to her plight.

She was a good mother. In addition to a cock-crow job as an office cleaner, and the confections she prepared each morning to utilize her cracked eggs and raise some extra income at the workplace, she sat at this corner, day in day out, in the sun and the dust and the rain, just so that her children would receive an education. She did not complain, nor consider her toil any more special than a mother's. But God forbid that her children do the same for theirs. It was that she was most working against. And yet - it was a thing of great sadness for her that her youngest had to hawk to help, but that

was the nature of things. That was the true face of poverty, ugly but unassailable. That her child should return from the day's schooling and, with only a short rest to eat, take up the hawker's tray: it was the last thing she wished for any of her own. She would gladly double the length of a day just to spare her child the burden. However, that was no better than a wishing game. The only thing she had any control over was her children's education, her love – and motor roads. Right was right, and wrong was wrong, and the motor roads were the wrong place for a child. Her child. Let the other mothers gamble with their children's lives, and let them poke fun at her fears; the motor roads were still taboo. But where was the child? A child out alone at this hour, and with money on her...bad luck bury yourself! Trouble run when you see my daughter's shadow! Where would she begin to search? What neighbourhood, what street? Mrs. Akoy wrung her hands, and squinted at passing faces. And she swore to welcome the errant child with a slap she wouldn't soon forget. But where was the child?

The child, Daisy, had stopped in an open field far from the rebuke of her mother's eyes, to play hopscotch, with friends, knowing that she would make up for the time thus lost by accompanying her friends to the toll-gate on the interstate highway to quickly dispose of her wares. It was a stratagem that had worked many times before, and Daisy saw no reason why it wouldn't on that day. But, in the middle of the game someone stumbled, and laughed, and tottered, and crashed unto a trayful of eggs. It was a frightful mess.

By the time Daisy's eyes had run dry from their exertions, and the sobs had subsided enough for her to draw breath, she was all alone with the sad ruins of a happy day, and night had fallen darker than she had ever seen it before. She rose to her feet, and lifting the tray with its damning indictment, she headed blindly for somewhere, anywhere, to die. But, on a deserted street far from anywhere she had ever been, with high fences and barred gates hiding the houses from view, and the somniferous scent of 'queen of the night' heavy in the air, and a sudden mist that floated before one like shredded feathers, the loud plea of her sobbing drew a curious eye to an open peep-hole. Then the peep-hole was slammed shut, like a guillotine, and the gate it fenestrated was pushed open. A tall figure stirred in the darkness, and beckoned through the mist. Weeping again in deep gulps, the tears ready springing from replenished reserves, she went. A man, her father's age, asked from where and where to. She answered, telling a version of her story, her voice hoarse with sincerity. She was nine. The man, taken, twisted his features into a mask of understanding, barely discernable in the darkness, and holding open the gate, he bid her enter. Don't cry, little one. Dry your tears, pretty thing. He would buy up all her eggs, broken or not. Daisy had heard of such people who lived in such houses but she had never imagined that she would ever see one this rich. She entered, and the man swung the gate shut with a mist-muted clang.

She was never heard of again.

X

THE PHOENIX

Due north of the conflux of the great rivers Niger and Benue lies a plateau inhabited by many tribes and village kingdoms. For as far as the eye can travel unimpeded the green plains of this land roll on gently, so level in parts that the storm waters stand nonplussed for a slope to run off through. A cluster of hills span the eastern horizon of the fertile table-land, their distant peaks daily lost in morning mists until the sun's rubicund face emerges from their midst. Giant-sized outcrops of blue-black marble dot the landscape like broken eggshells. A sweet-smelling carpet of succulent-stemmed elephant grass dances slowly in the perpetual breeze of those rarefied heights. Furlongs separate the few trees that rise from the earth, each one shorter than a man and with near-leafless branches so intertwined that snakes dangle from them like macabre festoons, fatally ensnared. A thin trail from the far hills meanders through this

land – now a sludgy footpath, then the treacherous currents of the muddy River Mada. From its riverbed net-traps dredge up finned relics of the dinosaur age. The pastoral calm of this sprawling land is now and again splintered by the mating cries of wild guinea fowls. The mighty elephant once strode these plains, as did gorillas, ostriches and white missionaries: of them all what remains is bleached bone.

This was the land of Tartius Abrachius' birth, the Shangri-La that he loved with a savage passion – until he lost both arms to the swing of a machete that had coveted instead his life. He was lucky – he was the only survivor of a party of school children whose pearl-clear laughter was cut short in an ambush mounted by warriors of a neighboring tribe. This slaughter spelt the deathblow to a decades-old truce between centuries-old enemies. Reprisals followed, and were endlessly reciprocated, and then succeeded by powwows that served no purpose other than as interregna during which the belligerents – exchanging the sword for the scythe – gathered in their harvests. By the time the conflict had exhausted its fuel of angry young men, Tartius Abrachius was in the prime of manhood.

In spite of his handicap – which had lain heavy on him, and had nearly broken his spirit (both arms lopped off at the elbow!) – Tartius Abrachius had from the outset refused to resign himself to the sad fate of a beggarly existence, forever dependent on the pity of strangers. He had shrugged off the fears of family and friends and had chosen a trade. He had learnt it well, and with resourcefulness had compensated for his physical shortcomings. Tartius Abrachius was an itinerant tailor.

Two days after the termination of his tailoring apprenticeship Tartius Abrachius, again scorning the easy advice of kith and kin, abandoned the scene of his woe for the Big City. It wasn't an easy decision: the beauty of those verdant plains tugged at him like an umbilical cord, and almost turned endurable the memory of his loss.

Plying his trade in the Big City, Tartius Abrachius was at first a novelty, and attracted custom only on the strength of this fact. For, at the sight of the armless man with the headless horse-shape of a sewing machine riding on one shoulder, and the twill cap of his trade set on his head at an angle decidedly rakish – as if he had hands and they were thrust into his pockets; at the sight of this curious figure, Pygmy-short and as slim as a stoat, his features genial and untouched by his misfortune, the spring in his step disavowing worry; at the sight of Tartius Abrachius the housewives abandoned their chores and trooped out of their houses with armfuls of clothing that suddenly required the sartorial touch. And while he snipped and stitched away these busybodies hovered about, ostensibly for the gossip. He did not disappoint: he regaled them with tales blatantly traitorous to his own sex, and astounded their sense of wonder with the ease with which he executed the 'sleight of feet' involved in wielding scissors and threading needles.

Over time, seeing the quality of his work, and then coming to regard the moments spent in his company as respite from the trap of domestic monotony, he became a favorite amongst the housewives of the Okobaba and Makoko slums, and made a good living off their loneliness.

In the split-second before Tartius Abrachius was forever parted from his arms they had been outstretched – this following a mock throw-in to demonstrate the finer points of getting one’s weight behind a hurled soccer ball. He was a soccer-fiend. At an age when his coevals were aspiring no higher than to become cartoon characters, he had decided upon his future profession. And, at a precocious twelve years of age, he had put the finishing touches to a work-plan for achieving his goals. But that was the year that Destiny intervened, and as no contingency plan of Man can salvage a dream that the Fates have repudiated, he watched his ambition shrivel and die.

Second to none on Tartius Abrachius’ ill-fated blueprint for world domination was physical training, specifically running. Born as he was in a land whose span intoxicated the wild stallion in Man, running was an activity for which the opportunity and incentive was never lacking. And Tartius Abrachius could run. When he sucked in his breath and dove headlong at the world it was no exaggeration to aver that none in ten villages could touch his coat-tails. He ran like Atalanta reborn: with supreme focus, supreme confidence, and the effortlessness of a falling leaf. He was beautiful to watch, and he was beautiful everyday, his slim form cutting swathes through the sea of jade that caressed his legs with delicate slashes, and swayed in obeisance to his dedication.

Though on that fateful day unable to do anything for his arms, instantaneous to the blow his feet unfurled their wings and bore him away like a billet-bound bullet – thus saving his life. That, however, was the last time he ever ran.

Tartius Abrachius, with his sewing machine on his shoulder, and sauntering even in the

heat of midday, raised his hand to scratch his nose – and saw the stump. He wrinkled his nose and smiled wryly. Even after all this time he still wasn't accustomed to his lack of hands, and the situation was not helped any by the fact that he could feel them dangling at the end of nothingness: he could feel every muscle spasm and flex of a finger, and the weight of fingernails growing untrimmed, and the itch in his palm whenever money was expected. He jabbed at his nose with the stump and turned his thoughts to football.

His dream, years dead, had been transfigured from beyond the grave and now thrust itself once again upon his consciousness. The rolling away of the stone from the door of the sepulcher, so to speak, had begun with a football match he had stumbled upon. Mrs. Akoy, a friend and customer, had recently lost her youngest daughter, and it was while on the way to her house to offer his condolences that he came upon a grass oasis in that desert of brick and corrugated iron. There he experienced a vision: he beheld a group of disabled men engaged in the Beautiful Game. On sighting him they had let out whoops of brotherhood, and had invited his participation. He however declined on the day, seeing as the bereaved's house was within sight of the field. But, after verifying that they were indeed a club, and that some of their members played professionally, and that they convened on that field of dreams on the same day of every week, he promised to put in an appearance at their next meet. That was today.

Tartius Abrachius' feet trembled at the thought of kissing the round leather. It had been years: years of stagnation, years of no passion. And yet there were others like him out there playing the game, living his dream! He would reclaim it. Maybe not the

major leagues, the big clubs – but then again why not? Prosthetics – an addition to his diction since moving to the Big City. He had been saving up towards that new goal, though what he had managed to gather so far was still only a drop in the ocean. But no matter – the important thing was football. Maybe he would make the Paralympics, or, why not even the first armless man to play in La Liga. The Guinness Book of Records. A blessing in disguise. But the important thing was football. Tartius Abrachius' feet trembled.

'Thief! Olé! Hold him – please hold him! Olé!'

A shape hurtled past Tartius Abrachius. The woman who had raised alarm, the victim he presumed, was running towards him, her efforts hampered by overweight and a wrapper that kept coming undone. Her cries had however sent some pedestrians in hot pursuit of the culprit, with more joining the chase as they comprehended the situation. And then the woman, still screaming entreaties garnished with imprecations, fell flat on her face.

'I am not disabled – I just have no arms,' Tartius Abrachius whispered; and then flung aside his sewing machine and set out after the crowd that had formed on the thief's tail.

At his first step there was an explosion in his head – and then a strange calm settled. But, with no arms to steer with, he ran awkwardly, like a flightless bird. It was how he had run on that day, the last day he had run. His spirits began to flag; and as his calf-muscles bunched in preparedness for pulling up, he remembered his soccer game. He exploded forward.

With the wind in his face Tartius Abrachius recalled the wide-open fields of his childhood, and the velvet softness of the earth beneath the feet, and the perfume of crushed grass, and his ambitions – and he ran. His legs pistoned like their joy had suffered no hiatus, and tears squeezed from his eye corners and got sucked into the whoosh of his slipstream. He ran.

The crowd ahead had become a mob, but when the stragglers heard the rapid-fire slap of feet from behind them, and turned, and dove out of the way, and shouted, the mob parted to let Tartius Abrachius through. As he streaked through their center, like a bullet train through a tunnel, they let out a roar of approbation and followed him, the facile princeps. Tartius Abrachius, running like a banished demon, soon left their shouts behind. Pictures flashed through his head of him in La Liga, him tearing past the last defender, bearing down on the goalkeeper . . . Tartius Abrachius ran like his life depended on it.

The quarry, fewer paces ahead of Tartius Abrachius than the mob was behind him, threw a wild look over his shoulder and saw that Tartius Abrachius was irrevocably gaining. His face held a plea, but Tartius Abrachius, blind to it on account of the dream that hovered before his eyes, nebulously real, tucked in his chin and gobbled up the distance. The man, on his last legs, reached a road junction and dove into it. Tartius Abrachius ran. He turned the corner just in time to see the man veer into an alley. He ran like he had never run before – he ran to catch a dream. As he approached the alley entrance something on the ground caught his eye. But then he heard shouts bearing down from the road opposite the alley, and, so as not to be robbed of his prize,

increasing his speed with an effort that caught his chest in a vice grip, he ran headlong into the arms of a second mob.

‘Thief! Olé!’ the tapestry of inflamed faces chanted at Tartius Abrachius, and as he grinned in breathless bewilderment, unable to speak for the pain in his chest, they plonked two tyres over his head and, dousing him in petrol, set him alight.

‘Tailor!’ he screeched, before the flames engulfed him.

The first mob arrived just as the charred mass that was once Tartius Abrachius gave the last whirl of its dance of death, and collapsed to the ground, never to rise again. They joined their cheers to those they had met. Then the woman who had given the alarm appeared. Her stolen purse was thrust into her hands. They had found it at the spot where the thief was caught.

‘But that isn’t the thief,’ she said, looking about fearfully.

‘Na him – how you know – he no get face again!’ came the angry replies.

‘But this person doesn’t have hands. The thief had hands – how else did he grab my purse?’ the woman argued, with irrefutable logic.

The mob fell silent, staring at the smoldering corpse. Someone burst into a retching fit. Another remembered that he had left his shop untended. Then, in little pockets, the mob disintegrated, leaving behind Tartius Abrachius in the ashes of his dreams.

XI

DOMINATION

Ifedior Idoko, a long-limbed and pigeon-chested man of some thirty-odd years with eyes as sad as a drowsy bloodhound's, gathered his feet in readiness to rise from the floor, then changed his mind and instead leaned over and nuzzled Godiya's neck. His teeth chattered musically. Godiya turned her face towards him, her eyelids tight with contentment, her lips expectantly parted. He covered her mouth with his and lifted a trembling hand to her exposed breast, and stroked the infant's head. For long seconds the only sound in the room was the smack of sucking lips.

'I love you so much,' he mumbled into her mouth, and abruptly broke the kiss – but only so he could plant one on Malachi's head.

'I love you right back,' Godiya said, and yawned.

Ifedior Idoko rose. He shuffled over to the door of the room (which, in truth, was nothing more than a cubbyhole) and flung it open. It was a cold, damp, watercoloured morning, promising, unlike yesterday, to blossom into a wet day.

Today, unlike yesterday, Ifedior Idoko and Godiya had nowhere in particular to go. So, to maximize time, Ifedior Idoko grabbed his soap-dish and towel and headed for the corrugated iron cubicle that served the whole compound as a bathroom and urinal. He met the queue only twelve persons long.

‘Good Morning,’ he said, claiming a spot with his soap-dish.

‘Fee-fo-fi-fum,’ he thought he heard as he moved towards the well to draw his bath water.

While having his bath, his breath held, as usual, in the ammoniac reek of the bath stall, Ifedior Idoko spent an inordinate amount of time soaping his groin, thus eliciting angry howls from the ever-lengthening queue that impatiently awaited his exit. The soap suds in his ears made it easy for him to ignore their obscenities. Then someone said, with malicious loudness:

‘See palaver o! Any time e ride im woman e must keeps us waiting de whole morning. Wetin e dey wash comot sef I no even know.’

This gibe Ifedior Idoko found impossible to ignore: so, he ended his bath and lurched out into the cold.

While Godiya bustled about her toilette, Ifedior Idoko, fully dressed and perfumed in yesterday’s perspiration, held the fort against the rambunctious Malachi. It took a disrobing just to convince him that his father’s breast was as dry as it looked.

Then, to coax him into his nappies; and tease a shirt over his head; and oil and comb out his babyhood Mohawk – by the time Godiya was fresh for the day Ifedior Idoko was as limp as any man expertly provoked could get.

The first thought that entered Ifedior Idoko's mind when Godiya proclaimed 'I'm ready' was pity, for his feet. He had blisters the size of crocodile eggs on both big toes. But, as he watched Godiya stuff her handbag with the baby's articles, his self-pity was nudged aside by an overwhelming sense of guilt, which, when Godiya repeated her summons, made him heave a soundless sigh that reverberated through his soul. He gathered Malachi up.

'Looking sweet,' he said, hoping to please.

The day had broken its promise. The sun, which moments earlier had been only as bright as the face of a new widow, was now out in all its glory, and blazing like a cuckold's wrath. Ifedior Idoko slung Malachi cross-shoulder as Godiya secured the door behind them. Then, with a quick glance at the wrist to confirm that it was exactly two minutes and seven seconds short of nine o' clock, they set off in tandem, Godiya leading.

After they had walked for upwards of thirty minutes in a silence broken only by the vocal accompaniments to Malachi's mood swings, and had struck well into one of the city's commercial arteries, Godiya reached a decision.

'We'll do secondary schools today,' she said, throwing the words over her shoulder.

And presently they were standing before a barred gate. A dilapidated sign arched over it read:

MAKOKO GRAMMAR SCHOOL

EST. 1967

**MOTTO: KNOWLEDGE IS THE AXE IN THE FOREST OF
IGNORANCE**

(COURTESY OF THE SENIOR CLASS OF '72)

Through the gate, a latticework affair, several ramshackle buildings could be seen teetering on the edge of a sprawling field. The hubbub of idle pupils filled the air. Godiya created quite a racket with her knuckles before the gatekeeper, an old man bent as much from the bitterness of a pensionless veterancy as from the ravages of age, put in an appearance. After subjecting them to the joyless spectacle of his approach for longer than a mere reprimand deemed necessary, he finally arrived at the gate. Wheezing like a blacksmith's bellows, he peered into the faces of the trio with eyes over-brimming with tears.

'A bit young for secondary, isn't he?' he finally spoke, staring at Malachi. His voice was no louder than a phlegm-choked whisper.

'We aren't here for him. It's me,' Godiya explained.

'A bit *old* for secondary, aren't you?' the gatekeeper observed, swinging his reptilian gaze to somewhere beneath Godiya's chin.

'No no! I mean – not that! I am looking for a job.'

‘No vacancies,’ the gatekeeper said, the tears dropping as if at her folly.

‘But if I could just see the principal...’

‘Still no vacancies.’

‘But how can you be sure...’

But she was talking to a retreating back, its progress as stately as a tortoise’s.

‘Imagine!’

Ifedior Idoko’s attention, elsewhere during this exchange, fell back to earth with a jolt. Already the telltale signs were there: the constricting neck tendons, the spasm in the cheek – as recognizable as the travails etched in his palm. Moving quickly to defuse the situation, he leaned into Godiya from behind. He took care not to brush her hindquarters with his crotch and to keep Malachi’s probing fingers away from her hair; he planted a kiss on her neck.

‘Let’s go, Godiya,’ he begged, his voice purring.

‘But can you imagine the bloody fool!’ she exploded, turning to him.

‘Don’t waste your energy on him, my sweet,’ Ifedior Idoko cajoled, pinning Godiya’s body against the gate with his. ‘He doesn’t deserve it. Let’s just go.’

‘If not for you! If not because of you . . . ‘ and shoving his body away with one powerful heave of her hip, she turned to the gate, grabbed the grille and pressed her face against it, and yelled: ‘I would have given the old fossil a bloody piece of my mind!’

A scramble followed this proclamation, and the windows and doorways of Makoko Grammar School began to fill up with expectant faces. Ifedior Idoko was

however already moving away; and, after one last baleful glance at the gatekeeper's hunched figure, Godiya, to the disappointment of many, set off after him.

It was a full seventeen minutes and twenty-three seconds later that Godiya obtained sufficient mastery of her emotions to address her first words to Ifedior Idoko.

'I'm hungry,' she said.

As there was between the both of them monies amounting to exactly seventy-five naira, and, furthermore, as this sum was in Godiya's possession for safekeeping, it was understandable that Ifedior Idoko, due to the heat, and the pointlessness of comment, made no reply. Godiya, however, chose to read in his silence an affront.

'I said I am hungry, can't you hear?' she began, slowing down to let Ifedior Idoko draw level with her. 'Even if you have no consideration for me, there should at least be some pity on account of your child. I woke up twice last night to breastfeed him. I fed him again this morning. All this on the one meal I ate yesternight, the same quantity that you ate, even less. So, if *you* are not hungry I am not surprised – I am nourishing two bodies. Have some pity, Ifedior.' And with a catch in her voice she concluded with, 'At least have some pity.'

Her heaving breasts reiterated her demand for pity. Due to their proportions however (they were the size of watermelons, or mutated pawpaws, or nothing fruitfully describable), they were in Godiya the feature least inspiring of pity. As they bounced, passersby ogled her, the men envying Ifedior Idoko the noteworthiness to make those wonders dance so. But, tearing their spleen-tinted gazes away the women found comfort elsewhere; as, facially, alas, Godiya was as homely as a country cottage.

Ifedior Idoko, though likewise entranced by the spectacle before him (but not so much so as to lose sight of the issue behind it), turned the full force of his gravedigger's eyes on Godiya, and when he spoke, altered his voice accordingly.

'I'm sorry,' he said, ultra-softly. Then, with sudden access to a blistering conviction, he added: 'I *love* you, Godiya.'

'Well, don't you forget it,' Godiya said, her anger for the meanwhile assuaged.

They tramped in silence to the end of the road, and, turning off into a side street, soon arrived at a crossroads. The motorways and sidewalks were packed with automobiles and humans; everywhere was a street market. Still carrying Malachi, Ifedior Idoko quickened his steps until he had overtaken Godiya. Then, like a cowcatcher to her headway, he forged a path through the teeming mass. While thus hard at work he felt a pinch on his arm: he swung one eye to Godiya even as the other was trained on a man whom he suspected was either coming to knee him in the groin or to snatch Malachi from his arms. This danger was however averted when Godiya motioned with her head towards some food vendors directly alongside.

They purchased some bread, and then came to a halt before a tired-looking woman who sat hunched behind her laden egg crates like she was hiding from the world.

'Two chicken eggs and one guinea fowl egg,' Godiya said, holding out the money. But the woman's gaze, suddenly avaricious, was elsewhere. Following her line of sight, Ifedior Idoko's eyes lit upon Malachi's face. Without warning the woman began to cry. Ifedior Idoko looked at Malachi to see what he had done. Finding

nothing blameworthy, he decided that the woman had lost a child. But, looking from Malachi squirming in his arms to the woman shuddering from her grief, he changed his mind. She has never had a child, he thought; and, Godiya moving off in a huff, he followed.

It was at thirty-seven minutes and fifty-nine seconds past twelve that Godiya, leading once more, first sighted the prison walls of Baptist High School, Makoko. Moments later they were passing unchallenged through the open gate. It took them just three minutes and forty-one seconds to get their bearings, at the end of which they had ensconced themselves in the principal's waiting lounge.

After several minutes of parrying the secretary's inquiring glances, the door of the principal's office finally swung open to disgorge a crowd of chattering schoolgirls. As they skipped from the lounge the principal stuck his head out from the doorway, and, catching sight of the waiting couple, stared his full of *them*.

'Yes?' he enquired with a raise of his eyebrows.

'Visitors for you, sir. Not parents. Confidential matter,' said the secretary, unloading at a go all she had managed to glean.

'Are you together?' the principal asked, directing the question at Godiya's bust.

'Yes sir, we are,' she replied.

'Then hurry up, I don't have all day,' he said, and retracted his head.

Godiya, as usual, led the way. She strode up to the principal's desk and, at his prompting, sat down. It was only after Ifedior Idoko had shouldered the heavy metal door shut behind him, and turned to take a seat, that he realized that he had been

relegated to a dust-soaked sofa gracelessly decaying in the corner. As he lowered himself into the dust eddies that rose from the seat at his approach, he consoled himself with the reflection that the principal's having only one seat across from him was a development independent of their visit.

The principal was a middle-aged man with the paunch of a beer lover, and a face that gave him access to the warmest feelings of esprit de corps amongst cut-throats and child-rapists. And, topping this was a dome that gleamed like the path of a snow tractor, the tufts of hoary hair over his ears completing the impression.

The expanse of table-top that separated the principal from Godiya was a child's room jumble. It was littered with, amongst other paraphernalia of his profession, 'AIDS is Real' stamped boxes of condoms and fat textbooks crumbling in their plastic wrappers. On the wall behind the desk was a framed picture of the principal as a younger man, with a woman beside him whom he clasped like a wife, but who was large enough of girth to pass for a grandmother.

'What can I do for you?' the principal asked Godiya, forming a triangle with his forefingers and observing her through it.

'I need your help, sir,' Godiya said.

'How so?' he asked, and leaning back in his swivel-chair, he aimed his joined fingertips at Godiya's chest.

'I need a job, sir.'

There was a brief silence. Then the principal asked, 'As what?'

‘As a teacher, sir. I can teach biology and agricultural science . . . and even mathematics to the junior classes.’

‘What qualifications do you have?’

‘I have a first degree in Agronomy. I graduated with a first class honors from the University of...’

‘And him?’ the principal interrupted her, inclining his head in Ifedior Idoko’s direction.

‘He is the father of my child.’

There was a pause.

‘That’s all,’ she added.

‘I see.’

The principal spent some moments considering the offer, his eyes glued to Godiya’s chest. Finally, with a deep sigh, he spoke.

‘If I were to offer you a job, young lady . . .’

‘Oh sir!’ Godiya breathed, clutching at her bosom in a thrill of delight, ‘I would be so grateful, sir! Oh sir...’

‘IF I were to offer you a job,’ the principal continued, ignoring her outburst, ‘it would be only on a temporary basis – that is, subject to your performance, of course, but also subject to the verification of the appointment by the mission board. By the way, are you a Baptist?’

‘No, sir.’

‘It will help if you’re one.’

‘Yes sir, I understand sir.’

‘Good. Good. That’s that, then. Now,’ and at this he lowered his voice and clasped his sausage-thick fingers over his paunch, and gave his chair a little swivel, ‘are you ready for your interview, eh?’

A small dust storm rose about Ifedior Idoko; Godiya, however, did not bat an eyelid.

‘Yes I am, sir,’ came her reply.

Raising his voice several notches, the principal said: ‘The young man may leave us now.’ Under Godiya’s compelling gaze, and the principal’s disdainful one, Ifedior Idoko rose, trancelike, from his seat. Ignoring Malachi’s wails of protest, he slipped from the room.

II

Ifedior Idoko was saved from Malachi’s wrath by the secretary: she bore the shrieking child away to do what women do with babies – show him off. Temporarily relieved of their burden, his tired arms fell into his lap; his fingers played with the worn nap at his trouser knees. His eyes kept roving between the idleness of his hands and the shut door of the principal’s office. Under his breath, in singsong, he recited,

‘Into my heart

Into my heart

Come into my heart

Lord Jesus...’

Ifedior Idoko didn't *really* mind becoming a Baptist. Pity though – he had just begun to gain some recognition in their present church for the power of his invocatory prayers. He would have to start all over again: new prayer classes, new bible study groups, new pastors to impress. He had 'started all over' so many times in the past six months that he was beginning to get a little tired of. . . No, never. He would never tire of asking of the Lord. In His name all things were possible, all things. He could never get tired.

'In-to my heart

In-to my heart

Come in-to my heart

Lord Jee-zus...'

But, life was strange. To think that he had never been the 'Christian' type; in fact, once, in his salad days, he had proudly and loudly borne the title 'atheist'. Now that he understood what the word actually meant he had to admit that he had been more agnostic in his beliefs, or non-belief, than anything else. But that foolishness was all done with. He knew better now.

Please God, Ifedior Idoko prayed, if only Godiya will get this job . . . He was tired. They had been out on the road everyday for the past four days, plodding from one gate to the other, looking for work. At first they had written application letters, spending

more money on postage in a day than they did on feeding. In that way they had wasted three whole months, surviving from day to day on the pipedream of a reply. Of the more than six hundred letters that they had sent out, only two resulted in interview invitations.

The first interview that Godiya attended was for a bank job, and it was a breeze; she had scored the highest in the written test and had committed no unforgivable gaffes during the oral examination. But the slip came when she was asked about her sponsor. Naively, she had not slept with any of the members of the interview panel, and, failing that could not even produce a letter from anyone of note. She was refused the job on the spot.

The second interview was also for a job in a bank; there, however, the similarities ended. It was, if possible, an even worse experience than the first. She was ushered into a floodlit hall and placed in a line-up with ninety-six other applicants, all of them females of less than twenty-five years of age. She was subsequently inspected from heel to teeth by each and every member of the bank's board of directors. She did not stand a chance. At the end of the exercise the prettiest five were selected for instant employment.

When she returned, heartbroken, from that rejection, Ifedior Idoko decided to take matters into his own hands. He gave up his job in the carwash agency, and, carrying two hundred copies of her résumé in a shopping bag, he called on every friend, relative and passing acquaintance that he could think of. Finally, his eyes growing

haggard at the thought of returning empty-handed, he took to handing out the folds of paper to strangers on the street.

This effort failing, and their cash reserves rapidly falling, they decided that she should hit the streets. For the first two days she had gone out alone, with no results. Then, she had decided to carry along Malachi, hoping to generate pity amongst prospective employers. But only one day of trudging the streets with him was enough to convince her that she had bitten off more than she could chew. Thus, the now-jobless Ifedior Idoko was impressed into service as a baby handler.

Ifedior Idoko's eyes were once again on the grey metal of the principal's door. He tore them away with an effort. They promptly returned. He made a face at the door, rolling his eyes and sticking out his tongue until the sides of his mouth hurt from the strain.

'What are you doing?' Godiya asked, tugging at the undersides of her bra as she emerged from the open doorway. Ifedior Idoko shut his mouth with a snap, and tears of pain rushing into his eyes. He blinked them away, seeking Godiya's eyes. She met his gaze - he looked away first. The door shut with a clang behind her.

'What were you doing?' Godiya asked again. Then, looking around: 'Where is Malachi?'

'He's with the secretary,' Ifedior Idoko said, rising.

'You left him alone with a perfect stranger?' Godiya hissed, bearing down on Ifedior Idoko with a slap in her eyes. 'Can't I trust you alone with him for one moment?'

'I'm sorry . . . I'm sorry . . .'

They found Malachi in a nest of gossiping women. He was fast asleep. Godiya introduced herself as a colleague; and, after some chitchat, bore her child away.

III

They came across the charred corpse of a thief on the route that they took home. It had been lying on the road for several days at least: the maggots in the eyeholes and mouth frothed in a feeding frenzy. The stench it gave off made Godiya gag and hide her eyes; Ifedior Idoko however, telling himself that it was the least that could be expected of an erstwhile medical student, refused to look away. He observed that the body was missing its forearms; they had been chopped off for fetish purposes he assumed. The sight lingered long afterwards as a bad taste in the roof of his mouth.

They arrived home tired and hungry, but elated. Godiya, at least, wore her satisfaction on her face. She unlocked the room door and threw it open. A wave of oven-heat rushed out to welcome them.

'Twelve minutes and seventeen seconds past four,' Godiya announced, glancing at her wrist. Then, with a deep intake of air, she hollered: 'I have a job! I have a job! Praise the Lord, I have a job!'

Malachi whimpered in his sleep, and then opened his eyes and began to bawl. Flinging off her dress as she crossed the threshold, Godiya freed her breasts. She snatched Malachi from Ifedior Idoko's arms and guided his mouth, already dribbling, to a nipple. For long seconds the only sound in the room was the smack of sucking lips.

'My baby, my baby,' Godiya muttered, rocking Malachi in her arms. She dropped down to the bed.

Ifedior Idoko took the three steps that brought him directly before Godiya. She ignored him. He leaned over until his red-rimmed eyes were only inches from her averted face.

'What's that?' he asked, his voice hoarse.

'What?' Godiya said, without turning her head.

'That!' Ifedior Idoko demanded, pointing. Godiya made no reply. She continued rocking her suckling child, and leaned over to nuzzle his hair.

'Is that a bite on your breast, Godiya?'

'So what if it is,' Godiya asked in an even tone, and crinkled her nose at her baby.

There was a shocked silence. Then Ifedior Idoko broke it. 'You . . . you . . .' he stuttered, 'you're so . . . so . . .'

'Don't spit,' Godiya said, a sneer on her lips.

'But how . . . how can . . . after all that I've done for you? How can . . . '

'Just shut up, hear? Shut up. What have you done for me?'

Malachi, disturbed at his meal, began to cry. Godiya stuffed her swollen nipple back in his greedily working mouth.

'What have you done for me, I say? You got me pregnant! Am I supposed to be grateful for that? For chrissakes we have no money! Your family has abandoned you! So what have you done for me?'

'Godiya!' Ifedior Idoko exclaimed, blocking his ears with both hands.

A red mist rose before Ifedior Idoko's eyes. *You told me it was safe*, he screamed – but no words came to his rescue. *I dropped out of school so you could finish. I broke with my family to stand by you. Godiya!* He was suffused by a sudden sickness: he saw a life not his flash before his eyes, like a mirror vision.

Godiya made cooing sounds to her feeding child, her heaving chest betraying her emotion. Her mouth was set in a vindictive line.

Malachi's eyes were squeezed shut. His cheeks pumped in time with his right hand, while his left, opening and closing in a fist, felt its way to his mother's other breast. It grasped the nipple, fisting out the thick white liquid; then it trailed down to the teeth-marks, and caressed them . . .

Ifedior Idoko, wild-eyed and speechless, exploded into action. He seized Malachi by the offending arm and flung him aside. Before the scream of fury got past Godiya's windpipe he had caught hold of it, and began to throttle her, raising her slowly to her feet, then unto tiptoes, and then up off the floor. She beat against his arms and chest, her blows wild and ineffectual. Her eyes rolled back into her head and she gave out a bloody froth at the mouth. Then Malachi shattered the moment. He recovered from his surprise and, finding his breath, let rip with a squeal that sizzled his tonsils for life.

Ifedior Idoko let go of Godiya's throat. She collapsed in heap, retching for air. He fell back against the wall, folded his arms bandolier-like across his chest, and sank down to his haunches.

After what seemed an eternity Godiya finally recovered her breath. She lifted her face from a pool of saliva and called to Ifedior Idoko, her voice a croak. A blood vessel was burst in her right eye. Getting no response from the hunched form, she raised herself to her knees with an effort, and, ignoring Malachi, crawled across to Ifedior Idoko. She reached for his head and guided it to her bosom. He lay there without protest, his shoulders drawn, like a broken-winged sparrow, mouthing incoherent apologies as his lemur eyes swept over her face.

‘My baby, my baby,’ Godiya crooned, ‘my big *baaad* baby . . .’

XII

THE MONSTER WITHIN

Dalyop Gyang was twenty-three years old and his greatest wish was to be struck by a bolt of lightning and wake up to find himself transformed into the Incredible Hulk. And then, to go to war, or rather, have war come to him. He would utilize his superhuman powers only for the greatest good, saving entire cities, and pretty ladies. He would leap over armored tanks, crash attacking gunships by folding up their rotor blades, punch man-sized holes in the hulls of nuclear submarines, and, an anti-tank gun grasped by the barrel in each hand, batter his way through entire armies. He would be invincible.

He was an inch under six feet and as slim as a bamboo sapling. Even his own friends compared his gait to that of a newborn giraffe. When he felt threatened the

only thing that took on hues remotely green was his face as he fought the urge to throw up. He had a voice that eunuch minstrels would kill for. His facial hair, despite his many ministrations, had stubbornly refused to advance beyond the shadow-line that he had sported on his upper lip since the age of twelve. Dalyop Gyang felt his appearance to be distinctly unheroic.

However, so as not to leave all the hard work to chance, he once, upon a brain flash, saved up every penny that came his way for five long months, at the end of which time he expended the hoard on a set of premium barbells. He then embarked on a taxing regime of lifting and flexing that lasted as long as it took for him to realize that failure was the only possible outcome of his body-building endeavor. But the purchase was no loss as the barbells got converted to knuckledusters in his fantasies of an impending transformation.

~

Dalyop Gyang was the man of the house. It was a position that had been his for as long as he could remember. His father had died from a burst appendix when he was the same age as his son. He also left behind a daughter. Her name was Nenadi. She was two years younger than her brother and already in the university. Her mother delighted in holding her up as an example to be emulated – she had *her* feet firmly planted on the ground. Dalyop Gyang wondered how long her feet would remain that way if the Incredible Hulk grabbed her by the scruff of the neck and dashed out her brains against his biceps. Not very long, he thought – the Incredible Hulk moved with

the speed of light. But she was his sister and he would spare her that end. He wasn't like her. He was a bigger person.

Nenadi had a facial tic that left her face with an expression of disbelief – especially when it came to matters concerning her brother. This trait of hers, while not entirely her fault, had been the source of many a clash with Dalyop Gyang. He deplored the fact that her face had come to symbolize for him a mirror that never lied, and he hated the wearer for it.

Dalyop Gyang considered his kid sister the natural bane of his life. When they were younger she had been the helpless sprite who required the protection that he had never been able to deliver. And when she got older she became a challenge that he would never master. That knowledge did not however stop him from trying his hand at it, even to the extent of resorting to blows. Nenadi was no coward; she began to fight back when she realized that his ultimate intention was to change places with her. Anything short of that would not drain the abscess that resentment had formed in his belly.

The fiercest fight that the siblings ever had was also the one that most revealed each to the other. It lasted for so long that their mother threw up her hands in resignation and swore to her bishop that she would not live to see its resolution. During its tenure they did not speak to each other for such an extended period that, when they eventually did, they had both grown uncertain in the pronunciation of the other's name. It was also the last time that Dalyop Gyang ever raised his hand to Nenadi.

~

Dalyop Gyang's mother was sick. She was always sick but sometimes sicker than other times. 'Other times' were, these days, getting fewer and further between. There was always now a pastor or a doctor, or both, present at her bedside. The pastors laid their hands upon her head and proclaimed that what was needed to send the sickness away was prayer to shackle the devil's hand. The doctors folded their arms across their chests, and promised a cure could be had for twenty-four million naira. Twenty-four million naira! That was more money than Dalyop Gyang had ever imagined himself having anything to do with. But the Incredible Hulk . . . he could do it. Even his sister, with her so-called education and puffed up ways, could not earn that much money. Not in ten thousand years, and definitely not in the two years that the doctors bandied about like a deadline for Christmas shopping. If she could he would give in and admit that the Incredible Hulk was not real. But she couldn't. So he was.

~

When it wasn't the Incredible Hulk the only other playground into which Dalyop Gyang allowed his imagination wander was war. The very thought of war overwhelmed him with mouthwatering visions of unlimited freedoms, and the feats of valour that only he knew lay nascent in that ignominious frame by which the world judged him.

The only thing that came close to making Dalyop Gyang throw over his dream of becoming the Incredible Hulk was the more romantic figure of a captain of war. He, Dalyop the Conqueror, would lead his band of fearless warriors on none but the most impossible of missions, his worshipping sister and healthy mother, and his covey of captive damsels, all bidding him tearful farewells on the eve of battle. And he would every time emerge unscathed from the bowels of danger, except of course for the loss here and there of a soldier or two. His name would be known far and wide, traveling across the war-scarred country like a fire through a sun-baked savannah.

~

Then one day Dalyop Gyang awoke to find his wish granted: war had come to him. It came in the most innocuous of forms, giggling at its own inventiveness as it swept its staff of death across an unsuspecting humandscape.

The trouble began as a marital spat, that, as the spouses were of different tribes and had spliced the knot against the wishes of their respective communities, inevitably spiraled out of control. The two tribes took up arms against each other, trotting out past wrongs that however paled in comparison to the ferocity of the bloodletting.

When the call went out in his village for the head of each family to join the local militia, Dalyop Gyang abandoned his ailing mother's bedside with an alacrity that surprised all who had known him since birth. Though disappointed when he wasn't appointed to the captaincy of his squad, his dedication to duty and the earnestness with which he undertook night patrols soon endeared him to all to whom the war was a pet

project. The elders of his village, duly appreciative of his martial ardor, soon came to an agreement amongst themselves that he had been sorely underestimated. His father (they said), who in his short life had garnered a reputation as an unrepentant coward, had obviously passed on to his son only those traits that could be seen with the eye.

By the third week of fighting the overblown ‘matrimonial row’ had begun to spread its poison nationwide. Best friends turned on each other for no other reason than that their villages’ shared ancestral grounds. Husbands threw out their wives and fathers disowned their sons. Other tribes began to get sucked into the maelstrom, reaffirming ancient pacts and reawakening primordial grievances. Things fell apart.

As the cities turned to slaughter-houses a steady migration of indigenes began homeward, swelling the ranks of the contending forces and further exacerbating the conflict. A state of emergency was imposed on the affected province, and normal commerce ground to a halt. Schools were shut down – the Groves of Academe became fertile recruiting grounds for the warring groups.

~

Nenadi came home to find she had a hero for a brother. He was the talk of the village.

‘But what did he do?’ she asked everyone that praised her brother to her, only to receive for an answer averted gazes and embarrassed mumbling.

‘What did *that* one do?’ she finally asked her mother.

‘He shot down an enemy spy . . .’

‘He what?’ Nenadi exclaimed, and burst out in derisive laughter.

The event whose possibility Nenadi was so sure merited no greater tribute than her mirth had occurred on one of Dalyop Gyang’s nighttime tours of duty. The squad had on that day been patrolling one of the bush paths that led into the village. The men were more than usually jumpy; this was no doubt attributable to the fact that an attack had been launched on the village the preceding night. They had lost fourteen of their comrades-in-arms.

Dalyop Gyang was at the rear of the plodding column when a loud rustling was heard in the treetops. He immediately dropped to the ground. His colleagues however, convinced that they had walked into an ambush, took to their heels. A solitary gunshot rang out through the night.

When the squad returned with reinforcements to the spot where they had left their fallen comrade, they found a bundle of feathers lying on the ground. On closer inspection this was revealed to be the carcass of a vulture. And Dalyop Gyang, brave warrior that he was, was up in the tree branches seeking out other such adversaries.

When the slain vulture, slab-stiff and already reeking of its favourite repast, was presented at the village council the following morning, every one of the squad-members present swore on the tongue of the prophet Jeremiah that they had seen a man perched in the treetops. And Dalyop Gyang in turn swore that there had been more than one person present. The wisdom of the elders made small work of the conundrum: the enemy spies had changed into vultures and, but for the one unlucky enough to cross

paths with Dalyop Gyang's bravery, all flown away. Dalyop Gyang was commended; and to the doubting the question was put: what else can a vulture that flies at night be?

~

Dalyop Gyang's squad was on guard duty the night the enemy tribe decided to wipe his village off the face of the earth. As the first volley of shots split the gelid stillness of the night, Dalyop Gyang, the only one of his squad not curled up in deep, self-indulgent sleep, gave a scream that served as a warning both to himself and his unsuspecting colleagues. Then he dropped his gun and took to his heels. He was chased by the guttural sounds of slaughter all the way to his mother's house.

The house was as quiet as a sunken ship in the midst of a hurricane. Dalyop Gyang, wild-eyed and trembling, burst through the front door.

'Mama! Mama!' he called, clawing at the darkness. The only reply he got for his trouble was the sound of his own voice rebounding off the silence.

His mother's room door was open. She was still lying asleep on her bed, as if the end of the world was not at hand.

'Mama! Mama! Wake up!' Dalyop Gyang cried, bearing down on her. Then he ground to a halt, transfixed by the horrible accusation in her open eyes. The handle of a knife protruded from her chest.

Dalyop Gyang stood for frozen seconds, staring down at a sight which he recognized as one that would haunt him for the rest of his life. He felt a numbness seeping into his limbs from his heart. Soon the only sensation he was left with was that

of taste – his mouth was filled with the blood of dead iron. Pity overwhelmed him, pity for himself. His mother had died not knowing of the plans her son had made towards her recovery. The Incredible Hulk had failed her. He had failed her.

From the corner of his eye Dalyop Gyang noticed a movement. His head turned slowly. His sister, her nightgown hanging from her body in shreds, was flat on her back in one corner of the room. She was kicking and fighting and her mouth was stretched wide, but Dalyop Gyang could not hear any sound. And then a brute of a man rose from her body. He moved as if he had all the time in the world. A machete dangled from his right hand. Dalyop Gyang observed the man's approach with an almost clinical interest, though his eyes for some reason seemed unable to focus on the face that Death had assumed for the occasion. This is the time to change into the Incredible Hulk, he thought as he watched the upswing of the machete. This is the time to show them that the Incredible Hulk is real.

There was a rush of footsteps, and a sigh – and then the man, his arm still aloft, slowly toppled over. His head bounced off the ground with a thud. The knife handle that had a moment before been sticking from a mother's chest was now planted in the back of his neck. And, standing over the fallen body, in tatters of clothing, and calling out her brother's name in tones of infinite compassion, *was* the Incredible Hulk.

XIII

THEY WOULD BE SWINE

The bus, a fourteen-seater with a mangled rear bumper on which – in blood-red on bile-green – a sticker emphatically declared ‘No Food For Lazy Man’, screamed in sudden terror and swerved sharply, and, with the shriek of tearing metal, lost the smug bumper to a lumbering challenge from a mercilessly loaded lorry, skidded some yards and hit a bump with a whump, jackknifed into the air and, landing in slow motion in the bushes, blundered through a whipping curtain of kaleidoscopic greens and browns, then, after dislodging an awestruck squirrel from its safe perch on a palm tree, veered back unto the road, digging up a meteoritic chunk of asphalt with a frame-shuddering groan of pain as the undercarriage slammed into the embankment, then skidded again, throwing up a cloud of broken-chested black smoke, and thus

obfuscated, hit another waiting bump and spun out of control, ending up in a careen on two tyres that lasted shards of eternity until the burnt rubber-breathed god of death (taken with blind fury at the wrong name on every lip) spurned the offered sacrifice and took instead a Monitor lizard jaywalking at that unpropitious instant; then the bus righted itself and, with a relieved squeal of tyres, sped off. From first swerve to last the whole incident lasted under thirty seconds.

‘Jesu! Jesus! Jeezus!’ the scatter-haired women scatter-brainedly chanted, heaving in their seats and clutching at frantic bosoms as the scene of innumerable nightmares to come receded in the distance.

‘Driver, stop the bus let us see the damage,’ one man suggested, voicing an opinion shared by others too busy comforting distraught females to order their jumbled thoughts. The individual thus addressed however ignored this remark, his colourful life still flashing before his eyes.

‘The Mercedes passengers are all dead no doubt,’ remarked another, craning his neck out of a side window to catch one last glimpse of what might have been. The women, beginning to settle down, wailed with a renewed vigour at this unwelcome observation, and clung more tightly to the necks of indulgent strangers. Then the man, unaware of the effect of his easy words on those grounded in the present, retracted his wind-beaten head and said: ‘Shouldn’t we go back and see what we can do to help?’ and was immediately turned upon by the transformed viragos, his throat-stuck protestations submerged beneath a vitriolic outpouring of finger-poking curses on him and the next thirteen generations begot of his ill-starred loins. After this assault he kept his good

intentions in his belly where they could actually do some good. A peace of sorts presently settled, and the bus juddered on.

The bus, complete with rear bumper, had only an hour before been cooling its heels in the filthiest motor park ever to mar a city's face. For longer than it took a guru to lose his patience the last empty seat, fit only for one cheek of an anorexic bottom, had single-mindedly persisted in chasing all potential passengers away. Hungry-eyed beggar-girls, barely over the grief of losing their milk teeth, caressed with a grotesque coquetry the perspiring faces of the male passengers as they stuck their heads out of the bus' windows, seeking relief from the baking heat within. Hucksters descended on the motionless hulk like a flock of bad luck, jostling over the helpless passengers and shoving trays of merchandise in their faces. When these were rejected, they rebounded with conspiratorial whispers of choice contraband obtainable for a song. If this too failed to awaken the gleam on which they thrived they then admitted defeat, and offered to entertain the passengers with incredible feats of gymnastic skill, or, with a morose magnanimity, recommended their services – highly-prized but low-priced – as assassins with whom one could, so to speak, trust one's life. Only on determined refusal of this offer did they, with an oath, move on to the next window.

In between bouts of scuffling the park touts, basso profundos one and all, drove off more passengers than they attracted with their belligerent croaks that sought to entice, and the fearsome glares of simmering mania that exposed their diabolical intentions. They called and implored till the blood ran from their lips, and still no one saw enough merit in the empty seat to take them at their word. Then, suddenly, there

was a hush and a rush, and a grab for a bag, and before the bemused giant thus hustled could say 'I am not sitting THERE by God!' he was expertly pummeled and crumpled and then jammed into a space barely large enough for a manikin's bitch-boy. The bus' sliding door, after seven tries, was finally rammed shut on his expostulations.

More excruciating minutes of slow boil however elapsed for the sardined passengers as the park touts, mouths frothing from their flick-switch fury, encircled the bus driver. In addition to remuneration for a job that hadn't been given, they demanded the extortionate tips vital to the sustenance of their lethal smoking habits, in the same breath promising the driver a far messier end than he had as yet evaded in donkey's years of plying an interstate route infamous for its automobile pile-ups, if . . . He settled, they drew back, and as the bus roared into life and, with a celebratory flurry of horn bles, clambered unto the highway, they gratefully returned his hurled execrations.

The highway was a winding, bisected stretch of bleached blacktop slapped unto red soil. It was cracked and chasmed from age and neglect. A rude gash in unbroken nature, it was menaced on all sides by glowering forest. It had a reputation for mindless savagery, and, at night, bedraggled ghosts.

The bus slowed, miraculously negotiating the solid wall of screaming children that bore down on it bearing trays of diarrhoeic titbits, and stopped. Money switched masters and then the tollgate was past. The road poured beneath the bus' tyres, as smooth as choppy waters. Down the second carriageway cars approached and flashed past with sounds like flapping bed sheets. Burnt-out steel skeletons, weed-choked in the

bright sunlight, lined the roadside like belated exhortations. Lizards frolicked amongst rusting shards of twisted metal.

Two passengers with reassuring backs sat in the front of the bus beside the driver, theirs the responsibility of denying him any opportunity for sneaking a snooze at the wheel. The three bench seats behind these sentinels held four apiece, and Ohi Janfa, his scrotum just salvaged from the sphincter-slackening squeeze of merciless thighs, was perched on the edge of the second seat. His shoulder was jammed against the bus' door while one foot was lost in the internal meanderings of the de-upholstered door panel. The only pro he could see about this seat foisted upon him was his unimpeded access to the window on the door, and this he now pushed open just enough to let the prowling wind force its way in with a bloodcurdling howl and smack him in the face like he had ravaged its daughter. He hurriedly readjusted the opening, this less for himself than for the mountain of flesh beside him, reeking of fried fish, whose displeasure at having the wind waggle her double chin was expressed with a basilisk-glance that must have left her an early widow.

Settling in for a long trip that was already a pain in the behind, Ohi Janfa took stock of his situation. The journey on which he was embarked was a good four hours long, and his back, a quarter of an hour in, was already sending urgent messages to the effect that it could not much longer put up with the punishment. On his right side he was wedged against the bus' door, and on the left he was squashed by an even more immovable mass. It was her bulk that took up the space for which his back was now paying the real price, granted, going by the grimaces of the dwarfed men on the leeward

of her, not entirely alone. But this knowledge of a shared discomfort brought with it little succour. Something had to be done, and quick.

The bus hit a pothole – not for the first time – and swayed like a charging rhino, throwing the weight of the woman against Ohi Janfa, and him against the side of the bus. As he noted the complaining creak and resulting dent on the bus' panel, he felt a muscle in his abdomen tear.

'Madam, could you move a bit?' Ohi Janfa addressed the woman in a tone carefully respectful, turning his head at the same time to observe her reaction. He observed that her upper lip was heavily shadowed, that her arms were thrice his in thickness, that in place of her eyebrows she had penciled annoyance, and that she grew half again as wide with every inhalation. Of course she gave no answer – he hadn't expected one. But he also hadn't expected that the gauntlet would be picked up by one of his fellow sufferers.

'Move? Move where?' one of the men sitting beside the woman demanded, leaning forward to see around her.

'Yes, move where?' the second man supported. He was a rake-thin man in a blue *adire* shirt. His unkempt Vandyke had flecks of wisdom in it, and the whites of his eyes specks of blood. He was furthest away from the woman and thus had the least to complain about.

'Can you see any space?' he continued, not looking at Ohi Janfa but giving the impression of one who had long been watching and waiting. 'Where do you want her to

move to – on top my lap?’ Then he concluded with: ‘Don’t start any wahala o – we were perfectly okay before you came.’

‘But I can’t sit like this,’ Ohi Janfa said, his voice rising to a near-shout as he tried to wriggle his numbed hips. ‘It’s too tight.’

‘Go shout it on a mountain,’ said the man in adire, still watching without looking. His fingers clutched at a black holdall sitting on his drawn-up knees.

‘Think before you jump,’ the other man advised.

The woman, Rock of Gibraltar-like, gave no indication that she was cognizant of the exchanges flying around her bulk, and Ohi Janfa, irritation welling at the futility of his position, was about to again argue his case when he felt a soft tap on his shoulder. Surprised, he turned, awkwardly, his movement by necessity restricted to only his neck; and came nose to nose with the gummy chortle of a sniveling tot, held upright and gamboling on its mother’s knees.

‘*Yan yan yan prrrr,*’ said the happy baby, and with astounding quickness grabbed hold of Ohi Janfa’s nose with a dripping hand. It had the grip of a gibbon monkey.

‘Jus’ manage eh,’ the fondling’s mother offered solicitously, referring not to her child’s brutal attempts at rhinoplasty but to Ohi Janfa’s sitting complaints.

Ohi Janfa pried the chubby pincers loose and sniffed away the metallic taste in his sinuses. Then he felt an almost imperceptible check in the bus’ motion, and when he glanced out through the windscreen he saw the stacked tyres, battered oil drums and nail-studded planks that signaled a road-block. By the time the bus shuddered to a halt

the black-clad figures had emerged from their hiding places in the thick bushes, the rusty barrels of their shoulder-slung rifles aiming at the driver's head and chest.

'How far, OC?' said the driver, smiling broadly.

At first the policeman who had approached the driver's side gave no answer, his wooden features lent polish by the visor of his riot headgear, his eyes darting, searching the driver's face for clues of a crime as yet undisclosed. He found what he wanted.

'We never service trigger finger today o,' he growled, and as if to confirm that this statement was indeed intended as a joke, he shoved his left hand, gun-free, in through the open window and slapped the driver several times across the cheek, lightly. A crumpled note materialized and was thrust into the demanding palm, engulfed, felt for denomination and authenticity, and then, with the speed of a striking Scylla, withdrawn. The requisite transaction thus concluded, the officer of the law was now free to attend to his duties.

'Drive safely, you ingrate son of a titless bitch,' he warned the driver, then lowered his gun barrel and stepped back from the bus. 'OK – let them pass!'

'Thieves,' muttered the man seated in front of Ohi Janfa when the bus had moved a safe distance. 'Bloody thieves.' Nobody took the bait. They were already nodding off, lulled by the wash of the marauding wind.

Ohi Janfa twiddled his toes, and counted to twenty, and twenty, and twenty; he cast sidelong glances that would have shriveled flowers. He was in great pain. Every bump that the bus rolled over was for him a flash of mind-stretching agony. His neighbour had bucked the general trend – she was very much awake, her folds soaking

up the bus' jolts like a deflated balloon. She stared straight ahead, refusing to acknowledge the damage she was inflicting. The man on the other side of her had however succumbed to the infantile impulses awakened by the bus' rocking motion, and his head, hanging at a precarious angle over the headrest of the seat, rolled and joggled like a spastic's. His mouth was frozen in a rictus of surprise, and the gurgling sounds that emanated thereof convinced Ohi Janfa that his tongue was trying to murder him. A sad trail of saliva glistened on his unshaven chin, and collected in a wet patch on his collar.

The bus hit yet another pothole, shaking awake some of the dozing heads. A drone, fitfully di-tonal, started up from behind Ohi Janfa; then petered out. But it picked up again, gaining in volume, clarity – and then it became intrusive.

'... Believe me. One of my frien' see dem wit im koro koro eye.'

'I say na lie. E no possible.'

'I dey tell you say dem show dis tin on top TV. De pig dem confess wit dem own mout after polis troway dem fo prison.'

'You see am?'

'No. But my frien'... '

'Na lie!'

Thus debated two fellows seated beside the mother and her hyperactive baby. The fourth person on the seat, a man whom Ohi Janfa could just spy from the corner of his eye, turned his face away from the fleeing landscape and, in a tone that could only be described as ponderous, made his contribution to the topic on the *tapis*. 'It is true,'

he said, his words dropping like pebbles into a sea of attention. ‘What really happened was this...’

And then the incredible tale of three friends who went to a juju priest with the request that he make them wealthy men. This savant of the occult (himself living hand to mouth) assured the supplicants that it was the easiest thing in the world for him to do; but not for them. His first demand was a fee that was casually dropped but whose impact was enough to make all three men clutch at their groins with expressions of horror. Then he twisted in the blade by insisting that it be paid up front, this, he asserted, in case the venture should for some reason go wrong. Upon the expected cries of apprehension he hastened to assure them that nothing would go wrong – it never had with him. But still he demanded his fee.

That issue settled to his satisfaction, the three men were each bid to secure a half-litre of the blood of a son or mother. The others – the condiments as he called them – he would undertake to procure. Finally, and this the linchpin, he informed them that they would be transformed into swine, and would forage for no less than three days and three nights in the rubbish heaps of the nearest market-place. Only on fulfillment of this task were they to return to him to partake of a concoction which would revert them to manhood, and elect them to wealth. Without hesitation they agreed to everything.

Thus, after the stipulated time the swine returned to the juju priest’s shrine. There where they had on previous visits met silence on its best behaviour, they now beheld a gathered crowd of someone’s wives, all bemoaning their fate. For it elapsed

that, while returning that morning from the forest where he had gone to gather weeds for his clients' transmogrifying potion, the juju priest was knocked down by a car. He gave up the ghost moments before their arrival.

Upon realization of the stymie they were in, the swine did try, with grunts and squeals, to tell of their situation, but the humans were too caught up in their own grief to pay attention to the exertions of a group of queer beasts. Many kicks later and the pigs finally forced their way up to the portal of the shrine, and entered; but the mullah who was preparing the corpse for interment got infuriated at the sight of their jolly faces, and grabbing from the wall a rawhide whip that was reputed to make its victim cackle at every blow, he lashed all three until they wept for pure joy, and galloped as fast as their short legs could manage back to the market-place to drown their sorrows in a good wallow.

' . . . On the sixth day in the market their faces returned to the human form. After the initial panic they were chased down by a mob, and would have been beaten to death if the market authorities hadn't intervened and handed them over to the police. That was where they confessed the whole story. It was on TV.'

A chorus of 'tchks' and explosive sighs greeted the end of the man's narrative. Three of the four occupants on the bench seat before Ohi Janfa - all women - had, at the opening words of the tale, all turned their identical faces an impossible 180 degrees to gaze upon the narrator. Ohi Janfa wondered how they hadn't developed unbearable cricks in their necks from holding them twisted for so long. With their wide-awake eyes and long noses they looked like a dowager-party of owls.

‘Wonders will never end,’ one of them hooted with relish, her companions nodding in agreement.

‘Dis tory pass man o,’ commented one of the voices which had initiated the topic, with a smack of the lips for emphasis.

‘Idiot!’ exploded the driver, and the slipstream flung the word back in his face. He was referring to the Mercedes coupe that had just employed its superior horsepower and overtaken the bus.

The man in adire stirred, and gave the first sign that he had been listening. He said, ‘I don’t believe that story,’ and then cringed (without moving a single muscle) when the owls swung their sinister gazes upon him. But he continued, bravely: ‘We as a people should put such beliefs behind us . . .’ His words however dried up under the blaze of hostility.

For the moment forgetting his discomfort and thus the grudge he held against the man, Ohi Janfa was about to rise to his defence when the dust-swathed bushes flourishing in the thin soil between the highway’s two lanes trembled, and a lorry burst through and rammed the gliding coupe. The car immediately crumpled up, like a broken dream. The berserk lorry, blood-thirst unslaked, blundered towards the screaming busload, its fatal shadow looming with every frozen second – but at the last instant the bus swerved and escaped disaster by the tip of its rear bumper. An eternity of near misses swiftly followed before the bus shook off Death’s pursuit.

A frenzied beating of air confirmed to Ohi Janfa that screams were flying about, but trapped as his head was in the womblike clasp of his neighbour’s arms and bosom

he couldn't tell for a fact if he was still alive. Then her smell began to choke him. He tried to break free but she wouldn't let go. He pushed against her with all his might and suffered the mortification of feeling his efforts sink weakly into her flesh. Losing consciousness, he resorted to drastic means: with his teeth he took hold of the expansive softness against which his cheek lay, and chomped down. He received a blow to the side of the head that loosened his dentition and set off a gusher of a nosebleed, but he got free.

When Ohi Janfa regained himself enough to pay attention to what was going on around him, the storyteller was under attack from all the women in the bus. Ohi Janfa wondered why, thankful it wasn't him: from the tenor of their vituperations he concluded that they lay the blame for their near-death experience on the man's story. As the man, who sat fish-eyed and open-mouthed under the onslaught, remained silent, it eventually burned up all its fuel. A peace of sorts presently settled, and the bus juddered on.

*

Ohi Janfa felt the presence of the checkpoint long before he saw it. One of the figures manning the roadblock was waving a pistol, this signaling the presence of a senior officer. As he slowed down on approach the driver choked on a rush of oaths, but by the time the bus pulled to a stop he had managed to dig up a smile.

'How work, officer?' he said.

'How work yourself,' came the reply. 'Anything for me and the boys?'

His tone assumed there was, his eyes demanded. The driver again performed his conjurer's trick, and held out the usual amount. The officer let his eyes flick over the bill, and when they returned to the driver's face his own had assumed an expression of distaste. He let the money hang, begging.

'I said me and the boys. Or are you deaf? Or are you stupid? Where is the boys' own?'

The driver blustered, his tone wheedling but with an underpinning of steel. 'Oga officer', he said, dropping the mannequin's smile, 'I nearly get accident. Some people sef don die e no far from here. Dem jam my bumper commot. I go fix am. Jus' hol' dis one till I do return journey.'

The officer fixed him with a glare that saw the shit-stains on his drawers. 'Park,' he barked. 'Park the bus!'

As the driver put the bus in gear and steered it off the highway, the passengers began complaining. They blamed the driver for not handling the officer better. They blamed him for not handing over more money. They blamed him for not begging. They blamed him for nearly killing them, and for now delaying their journey. The policemen, displaying a generosity of spirit not customary with them, dismantled their barricade so that the snake-line of cars that had formed behind the bus could pass on without the mandatory 'handshake'. Then the black-draped avenging angels, all eleven of them, swooped on the bus.

'Your particulars,' the officer demanded, even as one of his men yanked open the bus' door, and another unscrewed the air valve on one of the tyres. When the

papers were produced without delay or groveling, the officer, flummoxed, grabbed at the sheaf like he was sorry it existed. He did not even put up a show of flipping through, as he knew that the documentation was in order. Fuming, he crumpled the lot into a ball and flung it at the driver. It was now open warfare.

‘Everybody get down!’ the officer screamed, his voice breaking from the intensity of his emotion. ‘I must search this whole bus!’ In his rage hopped from one foot to the other, waving his pistol in the air like a fencing sabre. His men, staring gape-mouthed at the figure he cut, would have burst into laughter if they had had a death wish – but they didn’t. So they instead attacked the bus, tightening their features into masks of rage and yelling ‘Get down! Get down!’ as they kicked and gun-butted the mirth out of its paneling.

Faced with a situation that promised nothing less than a lengthy adjournment of their journey, or worse, some of the passengers began to plead with the officer, whilst others employed their oratorical skills in soundly berating the driver. It availed nothing: the driver, still reeling from the loss of his rear bumper, seemed intent on settling a score with Death.

Though his voice was raised in support of the grumbled protests of the idealist sitting in front of him, Ohi Janfa was secretly grateful for the opportunity to escape the torture he had been under since boarding the bus; thus he was the first to disembark. The driver was the second, striding almost cavalierly into the bushes to take a leak. The other passengers were however not keen on the idea of standing on the side of a highway notorious for rampaging lorries – especially the man in adire.

‘Driver,’ the man called, his voice quavering slightly, ‘settle the officer so we can go.’

‘Yes, settle him. Don’t waste our time you know,’ supported his now-awakened sidekick.

‘Give him what he wants,’ the man in adire pressed, a note of desperation creeping into his voice as the passengers began disembarking en masse. ‘I will pay back whatever you spend.’

‘Eh?’ said his neighbour, regarding him with new respect. Then he too got off the bus. The man in adire was now the only one left in it.

‘Get down, Mr. Man,’ ordered one of the minions of the law, and when the man gave no sign of budging, he unslung his rifle and took careful aim. ‘Get down now!’

As the man gave up his seat, the officer, his pauper’s sensibility affronted by one willing to give up money without sufficient reason, ordered: ‘Search him first!’ At these words the man gave a loud cry – something between a wail and a sigh of relief – and collapsed like scythed grass. The clasp of his holdall broke as it hit the ground, and the mouth fell open. Something rolled out, bounced once on the rocky ground, and came to rest against Ohi Janfa’s foot. Ohi Janfa’s weight problem staggered backwards and, clutching at her neck, turned human: then pandemonium broke loose. Ohi Janfa glanced down. It was a head, a child’s head, a girl – and she was still smiling.

XIV

UNCOMFORTABLE WORDS

Thus every friendship closes in the quarrel which is a conflict of wills...

–Palinurus (Cyril Connolly)

Forgive me Father for I have sinned: I indulged in lewd thoughts of my father's new wife, and thus inflamed, I propositioned the neighbours' housegirl – but you timely intervened. I broke my promise about the ganja again. And I had an argument with my best friend over something I can't remember. He had somehow gotten the upper hand – which was incredible as we both know I always win these verbal skirmishes – and he was pressing the advantage, pushing me to the wall, going on and on and natter natter natter, never letting up, giving me no chance at all to get in a word which I would have allowed him had the stick been in the other hand; but no, not him,

he was too drunk on the thought of winning this one to be fair, he had to go on pushing, forgetting, conveniently, that we were supposed to be best friends and all. He did not even allow me the terminal option of back-tracking with honour, shoving my words back down my throat before they had even taken shape, methodically, that infuriating smirk painted on his face, smashing one after the other of all the points I'd put forward and still think merited some consideration before he blew them away like so much spittle in a speeding car's back-draught. He didn't give me a chance so I had to do something you see – you would have felt the same had you been in my shoes, the target that those trenchant taunts trailed. You remember how those eyes blinked and winked and nibbled at my heart, his voice buffeting from all sides, roaring in my ears like a locust invasion, rising and gloating and still rising and never losing stride, teeth glinting, yes, nostrils twitching from the tang of victory just round the corner, just round the next bend, the next word. I had to do something you see, I just had to. So I said: 'You have always been narrow-minded. Your heart is as shrivelled as Methuselah's prick – it asks no questions, and you let others give you all the answers. Our friendship never really began but now it is finally over – go!' Also, dear Lord, I cursed with your name nineteen times in three days. I know you understand that it was because of this goddamn pain in my foot. You are all-seeing, all-knowing, all-forgiving. Thank you Father for receiving this confession, and I know that once again the slate has been wiped clean. I will be a better man this week. The devil shall not prevail. Amen.

FINIS

For enquiries about how to download a free audio file of the story *The Phoenix* (recorded at the BBC studios and broadcast on the world service on 2 January, 2006), please contact:

aigonibarratt@yahoo.com

More of A. Igoni Barrett's work can be read in the following online magazines

www.cynicmag.com

www.laurahird.com

www.blackbiro.com

www.stickmanreview.com

www.fictionville.net

www.barfingfrog.com

www.raintiger.com

www.molyworld.net/laughterloaf

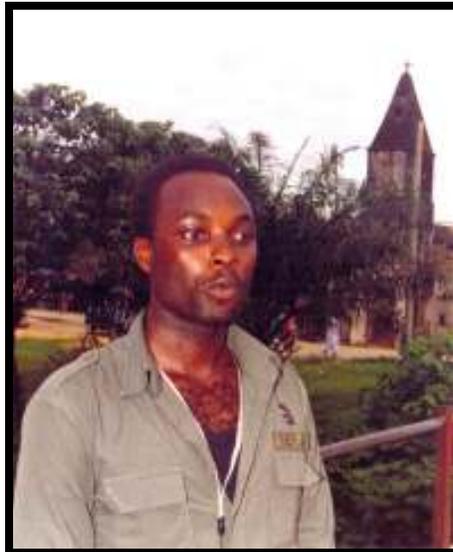
www.africanwriter.com

www.mississippicrow.com

Winner, 2005 BBC Short Story Competition

One of the best short stories I've ever read (is) the brilliant A. Igoni Barrett's story, 'The Phoenix' . . . Booker Prize look out when this man writes a novel! —**Laura Hird, Writer**

Barrett presents to his readers those points that confound their daily experiences . . . he opens a visual percept on his society through his many characters and places, creating an atmosphere on the pages of a book that is both an interesting and refreshing read —**Jumoke Verissimo, Guardian Life**



A. Igoni Barrett was a winner of the 2005 BBC World Service short story competition. His short fiction has been widely published on the web, and in literary magazines in Nigeria, the UK and the US. This is his first book.

