The Kolanuts are all Dead

Madam Udeaku does not want her mind to dwell on the single incident that oppresses her so she tries to concentrate on the usual morning sounds: different kinds of vehicles negotiating the bend near her house, children chattering loudly on their way to fetch water from the common tap, greetings shouted to and from neighbours and neighbours asking whether Nne Ukwu is up yet. Nne Ukwu is Madam Udeaku's sobriquet in the neighbourhood. The name Big Mother does not refer to her size but her status as an elder in the community. People of the neighbourhood like to see her before embarking on the day's venture. It is believed that her good life and old age have drawn her close to God and one can benefit from her spiritual bounties through friendly interaction. On her own part, Nne Ukwu likes to oblige people by keeping her house open and being hospitable to visitors, all of whom she regards as her "children."

She gets up slowly as if she is not interested in going through the day. She holds the sides of the bed, not because of physical fatigue, while she adjusts her eyes to the intruding rays seeping in through holes in the dark-blue curtains. Nne Ukwu loves the darkish hue which the blue curtains give her bedroom but the curtains are now old and have holes through which sharp rays invade the room like tiny torch-lights from different directions. She is irritated by the eavesdropping rays that disturb the gloomy shade of the room. She winks, then cups her eyes with one hand in order to adjust to the rays. She makes to hold the pole of the bed and misses. She turns to locate the pole and glimpses the walking-stick which her daughter gave her on Mothers' Day.

"I do not need that ugly stick," Nne Ukwu had told Chigo boldly showing her dislike for the walking aid.

"Sweet Mother," Chigo had replied winking mischievously as if her mother were just a friend or sister, "You know I can never give you anything that is ugly because I am beautiful just like
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my mother." This friendly joke did assuage Nne Ukwu's anger but she still strained her neck pouting at her daughter in an exaggerated display of pretended anger. "Okay!" Chigo said also acting seriously by thrusting out her lips in sullenness.

"If you don't like it, I'll take it back." As she said this, she closely watched her mother's reaction. Both of them being good at teasing each other.

"If you touch that walking-stick," Nne Ukwu had replied grabbing the walking-stick she had previously rejected in a show of feigned anger, "you will not know your mother again."

"Very good. If my mother beats me to the extent that I cannot recognise her again, then she will have a blind child." She had said closing her eyes in mimicry of blindness. She had stretched out her hands moving towards her mother and saying, "Where are you...Where are you, Mother. Your blind child wants to touch you." Nne Ukwu raised the walking-stick as if to hit Chigo who quickly ran back, laughing at the funny spectacle she had created. Her mother could not help joining in the infectious laughter which reminded her of Chigo's father.

That sisterly banter, between mother and daughter occurred two weeks ago when Chigo visited. The thought of Chigo's father has unwittingly brought a smile to Nne Ukwu's lips brightening her face and sweeping off the morning's feeling. She rediscovers her strength and springs up from the bed. As she does so, her eyes once again rest on the walking-stick eliciting a gust of her mouth in its direction to drive home the point about her rejection of her daughter's gift. For the moment, the violent rays of the sun no longer matter to her as she regards the offending element with scorn.

"Stupid girl," she finally says sticking out her mouth at the empty chair where her daughter had sat when she presented the carved ebony walking-stick to her.

"Why did she leave that stupid stick in my room when I had told her that I did not need it?"

She turns to leave the room and carefully avoids looking through the connecting door to the other room knowing as she does, that the usual morning indications which for her mark out that room are no longer there. No radio mutters the early morning news. No war songs recall the singer's militia days. The habitual greeting or offering of kolanut by a voice she has known for sixty of her seventy-five years that usually warms her heart.
is now a thing of the past. She stands still. Her lips widen. Her eyes become misty in nostalgia as she recollects good old times. She does not draw the curtains so she cannot realise that the tiny eyes of the beautiful rays, washing her room like the soothing showers of a hot day, are not confrontational. Instead of drawing the curtain and making friends with the affable morning rays, she evades reality. She coughs loudly as if to register her presence and remind the occupant of the room that it is time for them to share the morning kolanut. No response. Nne Ukwu coughs again. The mist in her eyes slowly finds its way down her cheeks. She enters the room still called Nna's room. Nobody has thought of renaming it since Nna's final departure.

Nne Ukwu opens the drawer in Nna's room and brings out the wooden saucer in which they usually put kolanut. She goes to the pot where kolanuts are kept. A green leaf fell from the pot as she brings out a kolanut. She picks it up and carefully puts it back. Since her husband's final departure, Nne Ukwu has religiously used green leaves to preserve the kolanuts hoping that his spirit would one day come for morning communion. She puts the kolanut in the saucer and sits on her usual chair leaving Nna's chair as if she expects him to join her. She sits expectantly allowing herself the indulgence of illusiveness.

"Our mother, Nne Ukwu, have you washed the day?" Somebody shouts greeting from outside.

"Yes-ol" She replies, recognising the voice as belonging to one of the women in the neighbourhood who habitually pays her homage every morning.

"Is it Mamma Ozoeena?" she asks in a sweet voice that reveals no trace of her mood.

"Yes, Mother, I am on my way to work. I said that I cannot leave without greeting you and getting your blessing today."

"You have done well, my child. May God guide you. But won't you wait for me to bring kola?"

"No mother, I am in a hurry. Thank you. I have already got what I want from your clinic this morning. When I return, I shall come for food of the body."

"So you are the first to get Nne Ukwu's blessing today!" a voice shouts. "Yes, why not?" Mamma Ozoeena replies.

"I was ready to leave for the market a long time ago and was
only waiting for any sign that she was up so as to get her blessing before any other person. And look at you who doesn't even live in this compound, you have come here to..."

Mamma Ozoeena carries the jest forward by cutting the speaker short in feigned anger as she replies. "Yes, I don't live in your compound but she is the mother of us all."

"And how many times have you come here to run errands for her?" The voice queries also stretching her jestful complaint.

"My son fetches water for her everyday."

"And is it only water that she drinks?"

"Stop this nonsense!" Nne Ukwu admonishes the women in an attempt to join in the jestful quarrel designed to force her out quickly. She unlocks the door and acts as an arbiter in a quarrel she knows is a joke.

"Are you two twin seeds in a palm kernel? Even if you are, each twin still has her own favours. One's gift never kills another's. The fact that a woman has collected a big chunk of firewood does not mean that the bush has no more firewood."

"Nne Ukwu, my knees are on the ground." Mamma Ugo says laughing in obvious enjoyment of the extended jest.

"Our knees are on the ground-o" echoes Mamma Ozoeena before accusing her opponent jokingly as if she regrets the end of the banter.

"See what your big eyes have caused."

"Who has greedy eyes? Is it me or you who leave your compound to come here and partake of ..."

Again Nne Ukwu comes in also enjoying her role as an adult admonishing erring children.

"Shut up! Shut your big mouth Mamma Ugo. Is there any day that I will not hear you argue and quarrel?"

"I am sorry, Mamma. This is not a quarrel-o. It is market talk. Just a joke to keep the day virile."

"So you practice your market jokes on me?" Mamma Ozoeena queries.

"If I don't practice market joke on my sister and neighbour, who will I practice them on?" She asks laughing and arranging the plaits on the other woman's head.

"You must bring me something from the market today-o for using me to rehearse market talk." Mamma Ozoeena replies still enjoying the banter even as she hurries to leave. "Let me be on
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my way-o. Or are you prepared to employ me?"

"With what do I pay you?" Mamma Ugo quickly asks.

"Enough of your jokes Mamma Ugo or she will be late for work. My daughter, go in peace." She says to Mamma Ozoeena who is leaving.

"What about me Mamma? I shall soon be on my way to the market-o."

"It will be well, my daughter." Nne Ukwu replies before quickly inquiring after her grandson. "Where is my child's child? I did not know when he sneaked out of bed."

"When I wake up, I usually wake up my own daughter, Ugbochi. And the first thing she does is to whistle to call him. And off they go to the tap." Mamma Ugo explains.

"So they have gone to fetch water?"

"Yes-o. That your child's child is very good. He does not behave like the child of a big man. He wakes up early and runs errands with other children." Nne Ukwu chooses to be ambivalent in her response. She does not want to acknowledge directly that her grandson is good. But she does not contradict Mamma Ugo either.

"He can't begin to act like a city boy when he is here with me in this small Emene? But much as I warn him, he never wakes me when he is leaving in the morning so that I can put on the lantern for him. It is always dark these days in the morning and I don't want him to hurt himself."

"Don't worry about that Mamma. Dubem is cleverer than you think." Mamma Ugo replies and then changes the subject. "Is there anything you want me to buy for you today? Do you still have pepper and salt?"

"Nothing, my child."

"What of meat. I shall get dry meat for you."

"Thank you Nne Ugo. You know that I cannot say no to dry meat."

As the younger woman makes to leave, Nne Ukwu calls her back.

"Before you leave, help me to remove that stick which Chigo kept there."

"Chigo? Did she return?"

"Yes. She brought me a stick for killing snakes. And there are no snakes in my house," Nne Ukwu complains contemptuously.
“Since when has it become my daughter’s duty to tell me that I should use walking-stick?” She queries and continues to complain. “Children of nowadays! They have no respect for elders.”

Mamma Ugo understands the older woman’s resentment for a walking aid especially since she is strong, so she intervenes. “Mamma, I am sure that she meant no harm. People who are not old also use walking-stick to show off.”

“I don’t want to show off with a walking-stick. The market is full of colourful wrappers for showing off. Why didn’t she see them to buy for me”

“Let me go and remove it,” Mamma Ugo says in a placatory manner.

She, however, does not remove the walking-stick because she knows that Nne Ukwu loves her only daughter too much to discard anything she gave her even if it is a detestable reminder of the feebleness and senility that come along with old age. She fondles the handle of the walking-stick admiring the icon of a mother carrying a child on her back which is deftly carved into it. She now takes a better look around the room wondering what Nne Ukwu was doing in her late husband’s room so early in the morning. Mamma Ugbochi picks up a broom and begins to sweep the house. She understands Nne Ukwu quite well, perhaps more than her children because she, too, is a widow. Both know that pain of the loss of a companion especially husband. She grimaces at the thought of old Nne Ukwu missing her husband as a bed mate.

“In their seventies, they were too old for that kind of thing,” she muses as she sweeps out the dirt under Nne Ukwu’s bed. “Afterall they had long ceased to share the same bedroom before Nna died.” She glances at Nna’s room. She imagines that the old couple must have had an active sexual life for many years. Afterall she has five children who are well educated and successful to show for it. Her four male children are married and have set up their own homes. Her only daughter, the last, is doing well in Lagos, the capital city, where she works. While he was alive Nne Ukwu had no choice but to cling to her husband. They were as close as any two relations could be: son and daughter, brother and sister, man and wife. They were all alone all day and all night except when one or the other of their children came home to spend an odd night or two. “The couple lived as one
mind for such a very long time that it is not surprising that Nne Ukwu cannot easily face the reality of her husband's death."

Mamma Ugo concludes drawing on her own experience as a widow. Only a widow, she feels, can appreciate the subtle lonesomeness of widowhood. Nne Ukwu has that forlorn visage that signifies deep-seated sadness, but only masks it with an outward show of courage. Mamma Ugo seems to catch her unawares now noticing that deprived look which makes the flesh on her entire face saggy. She, however, appreciates Nne Ukwu's show of courage before people. She is concerned that the old woman's children cannot appreciate their mother's predicament. "They cannot see through her mask and choose instead to believe that she has overcome the loss of her beloved husband. As for them, youthfulness coupled with the emotional support they received from their spouses helped them to overcome their own grief over the death of their father unlike their old mother for whom life has never been the same."

Nne Ukwu intrudes in Mamma Ugo's reverie. "My daughter, you will be late for market. Why not leave it for me and the boy to sweep."

"Mamma, don't worry. One of the joys of being a market woman is that one is able to control her own time."

Nne Ukwu watches how she carefully lifts items on the floor and sweeps out dirt. She is slightly embarrassed that another woman is cleaning the dirt in her own house. She has not taken any interest in the house in a long while, and guiltily asks to be given the broom to continue the sweeping.

"I am not too old to clean my house myself."

"Mamma, I say don't worry." She finds a reason that would please Nne Ukwu, "I know you are not too old to clean your house but I just want to do it for you so as to claim your largest blessing today so that when I return from the market I shall tell you tales of my huge sales. Your blessing always draws customers to my stall."

"My child, you know that my blessing is always upon you. Well, if you will not let me help you then let me pass, you joker." Nne Ukwu nudges Mamma Ugo as she bypasses her to go to her room. Mamma Ugo raises her head for a few moments from the ground she is sweeping to cast a good look at an old woman whose carriage belies the grief she carries in her heart.

From the adjoining room which was previously used by Nna,
Mamma Ugo can hear Nne Ukwu still muttering about her daughter and the walking stick. From the room, the woman raises her voice and asks, "My fellow woman, do you know what?"

"No mother." Mamma Ugo replies enthusiastically, glad about the sisterly appellation from this age mate of her mother.

"Children of nowadays in the city think that they know everything," she starts in a note that reveals her fondness for the subject of the complaint.

"My daughter now thinks that she has to take me to Lagos."

"Really?"

"Yes-o."

Mamma Ugo tactically refrains from continuing with the conversation. She continues to sweep Nna’s room. She supports Chigo’s idea to take her mother to Lagos. In fact she had discussed it with Chigo but she does not want Nne Ukwu to know this. "She might think we are conspiring against her," she reasons. She finishes sweeping and starts dusting the furniture as she recalls her conversation with Chigo.

"What are you people doing about your mother?"

"What about her?" Chigo had asked in reply.

"My sister, an elder cannot be in the house and watch a she-goat deliver its baby on the entrance to the house."

"What do you mean?"

"I am an elder when it comes to death of husbands and fathers."

Chigo regarded Mamma Ugo’s coarse hands and wrinkly rough skin and felt pity for such a young woman of her own age who had been ravaged by the travails of marriage and widowhood.

"My sister, I was twenty when my own father died so I know what you are going through. At first, I used to sneak out to his graveside in the compound in the dead of the night and call him weeping and begging him to talk to me, even if once."

"And you were not afraid?"

"Afraid of my own father? How could I have been afraid of my father? I was his youngest child just like you. He used to call me his walking stick because I was always beside him. Papa Ugo, my late husband, was negotiating to marry me then. My father used to joke that the man could marry his daughter but leave
his walking-stick alone."

"How could that have been since you were his walking-stick?"

"I wondered. Then he died."

Chigo sighed in sympathy for the young woman who had lost her fatherly support at a crucial moment in a woman's life. Mamma Ugo had thought that Chigo's sigh was an expression of self pity until Chigo asked, "Did he ever respond to your cries at his grave?"

"Never. In fact, it did not last long."

"Why?"

"One night as I knelt by his graveside weeping, something began to rise."

"I screamed. "Sh-e-e." The figure cautioned."

"What!" Chigo had screamed, getting hysterical at the thought of a ghost rising from the grave.

"Don't get anxious. It was only my mother. Unknown to me, she too had gone to the graveside at that hour of the night to commune with him."

"Poor woman" Chigo sympathised with the woman. The narration had continued.

"Take heart. my daughter. Your seasons are still ahead. Do not waste away in grief" she had pleaded with me as we both wept in each other's arms by father's graveside. I still remembered that same counsel ten years later when my husband died leaving me with no money with which to take care of our three children. I could not afford to spend a long period of time mourning him like my mother did for her husband. I had to find the money with which to take care of my children. I was able to get a stall at Ogbete market. I embraced the market with all my strength. And Ekeneme mu Chineke. I am able to feed my children well." As Mamma Ugo thanks God, Chigo again regards her coarse hands and rough skin and missed Mamma Ugo's last sentence about feeding her children.

"It is not easy losing a husband at a young age like yours," Chigo said sympathetically. Still taking special notice of the woman's hands hardened by hard work and her skin wrinkled by suffering, she continued, "At least, older widows do not have to battle single-handedly to train their children because they are usually already trained."

"But for me, it was my strongest motivation."
"What do you mean?"
"I mean, I derive great strength from looking for money with which to bring up my children without support from any relatives. It has been a great challenge and I have done very well."
"Very well indeed," she added for emphasis.
"You did not remarry?" Chigo asked.
"God forbid!" Mamma Ugo clapped her hands as if beating off dirt. "Who will take care of my children? Do you expect a man to marry me and take up another man's responsibility?"
"But you take care of your children yourself, so you could equally have catered for them in a man's house." Chigo countered.
"In my house I bring them up my own way. I am my own husband. If I had married, I would not have been the same. I would have had to change in order to be under a man."
"Then old widows are better off."
"Not really so, my sister. They soon grow senile and have nothing to work for. No challenges and nothing to add pep to their lives. My mother became quarrelsome, sickly, and grew old quickly after my father's death."
Chigo recognised a congruence in Mamma Ugo's account of old widows and her mother's.
"My mother is almost like that. She is suddenly becoming afraid of getting old or being reminded that she is old unlike when my father was alive. Then they used to joke about their becoming old. I still remember their golden jubilee wedding anniversary."
"What happened?"
"Just as we were preparing for the church ceremony, my mother's people came to make trouble for my father."
"Trouble?"
"Not serious. You know, sweet trouble."
"I see. What was it really?"
"They wanted my father to marry her again. But he refused. Instead, he teased her by telling her that he would not marry an old woman and that her people could take her back if they wanted."
"Eh! What did she do?"
"She took it as a joke. She told my father that his eyes were so old that they could not recognise that she had become more beautiful with age just like a good work of art."
"Oh! They must have been very close to exchange such hearty banters." Mamma Ugo laughed and continued. "Her people were also amusing to have made such a demand."

"My father carried the joke further to a serious level. He re-married her. He performed the bridal ceremonies that brought my mother to the limelight again in her community. He bought goats, cows, and all the other items for his in-laws."

"Eh?"

"Yes."

"I now see why she misses him so much. Take her away to another environment where she will not have many things that remind her of your father."

"I was thinking about it myself especially because I want her to go for a medical check in a clinic that caters for old people."

"That will be good. But we will also miss her own clinic here."

"Clinic?"

"Yes. She caters for our spiritual need, you know."

"Oh. Is it her kolanut ceremonies?"

"Not only that. With age she grows nearer and nearer to God. Her words are potent."

"I see." Chigo says without understanding fully.

Mamma Ugo has entered Nne Ukwu's room to inform her that she has finished the work and should be on her way to the market. The elder woman wakes up with a start as she enters.

"Ahl Ahl you are still around."

"Yes-o, I am about to leave now."

"You have done very well this morning. Thank you and go well."

As she is about to go, Nne Ukwu asks about the children who went to fetch water.

"What is keeping them this long?"

"You know that they will first bathe before collecting water. And you know how children behave. They may play a little since they go to school in the afternoon. There is really no hurry now."

"Okay," is Nne Ukwu's feeble reply as she makes to continue with her sleep but Mamma Ugo now thinks it wise to broach the subject of her going to Lagos.

"Mamma, did I hear you say that you are going to stay with
your daughter in Lagos?"

"I am not going. She wants me to come but I do not want to leave my house."

Mamma Ugo suspects that she does not want to leave the house because it contains things that remind her of her husband. In order to confirm her suspicion she volunteers to look after the house. "We can take care of the house in your absence if you go to Lagos. You should know this Mamma. As for your grandson, Dubem, he will be quite happy to stay with my children."

"These are not the problems. Dubem can stay with his father in Lagos and even go to school there."

"Then what is the problem?"

"I cannot abandon the house."

"Our mother, why not go and take care of your only daughter for a while. She is so thin these days that she can do with your care." This allusion to her motherly duty does the trick. It arouses the motherly instinct in her and instantly changes the tune.

"It is really true. I shall think about it. My fellow woman, you have the wisdom of our people."

Nne Ukwu is sitting in front of the mirror watching Chigo tie her scarf for her.

"Chigo, are you telling me to leave your father alone in this house and go to Lagos?" She asks Chigo who refrains from reminding her mother that her father is dead and therefore no longer in this house. She reasons that such a reminder might prove too harsh for her in her present mood. She merely reminds her of her responsibility to them, her children.

"You are telling me to leave this place where I am mourning my husband."

"You have mourned him for over one year. See what you are wearing. Is it mourning apparel?"

Chigo asks touching the colourful madrass her tailor made for her mother.

"It is really nice. That your Lagos tailor is very good." Nne Ukwu says turning her shoulders to admire the huge sleeves of the blouse.
"Lagos is full of nice people and nice things. I told the tailor that my mother is a very fashionable woman, that she likes good things-o."

"I did not tell him the exception though." Chigo adds playfully. "What?"

"I did not tell him that she loves her old curtains."

"Those curtains were bought by your father when we travelled to Maiduguri in the North for your brother, Igwe's wedding." Chigo tries to steer the conversation towards another direction.

"My mother loves beauty too much-o. Her scarf must be the best. Her blouse, shoes and everything must be the latest in the world of fashion. That is how spoilt my mother is." She says jokingly while moving away in pretense for fear of reprisal.

"Why are you running? Do you think that I have time to pull your mouth with this hand on which I have already rubbed Avon scented pomade?"

"Hello Mamma. But you can bluff-o. Where did you get Avon from?"

"Smell it." She places her palm on Chigo's nose as she replies. "One of the gifts my senior wife, Dubem's mother, gave me during their last visit."

"Everybody spoils my sweet mother."

"Where is that stick?" Nne Ukwu looks around for the walking stick.

"I'll shut your mouth for you if you say again that I am spoilt. That used to be my Nna's view. But I won't take it from you."

At the mention of her father, Chigo becomes impatient, wanting to leave the place and take her mother away from this house in which everything reminds her of him.

"Mamma, let us hurry. I want us to take the early morning bus."

"I am almost ready. The only thing remaining is for me to put fresh leaves in the pot of kolanuts."

"The pot of kolanuts?"

"Yes. Did you ever think that I will leave it here?"

"We don't need it in Lagos. Why not leave it here."

"The kolanuts will spoil."

"One of the neighbours can take care of them."

"I have always taken care of them myself during all those years I lived with Nna-m, my husband."
Chigo refrains from reminding her that the man is dead. Instead her desire to remove her mother from the environment becomes more urgent. It was not easy convincing the old woman to go to Lagos so Chigo resolves not to say anything that would make her change her mind. So she decides to cooperate with her.

"Mamma where are the fresh leaves? I shall help you put them in the pot as I used to when I was young."

This reminds Nne Ukwu of how closely Chigo used to dote on her when she was young.

"Yes, we used to be together a lot." The old woman recalls fondly.

"Yes, and that was how I was able to study and know you very well. How are we going to carry the big pot." asks Chigo steering the conversation in the direction of her major aim.

"Don't worry about it. I'll put it in my basket."

The early afternoon sun casts a bright halo on the Lagos Island location of African Flowers Health House. Nurse Anasta breathes in the fresh fragrance of the frangipanis and gardinia dancing to the gentle touch of the lagoon breeze. Her problems seem to desert her aching head as she looks around smiling at the well-manicured izora hedges lining the walls of the clean compound of the Health House. It always looks beautiful and inviting—and has no air of a clinic except when the heavy mahogany door swings open to let people in. She tries to smoothen the processed hair sticking out of her cap like disgruntled weeds. She feels that she must look smart like the clinic. She adjusts her dress. As she enters, the therapeutic smell of the clean clinic caresses her nose slightly as if to remind her that it is an infirmary. She smiles back at the potted plants and their flowers as they spread their colourful petals in welcome. Even the clean white-washed walls seem to beckon Anasta to another day of easeful work. She settles happily at her desk thinking that it is ironic that in the clinic she finds the peace that eludes her in her stressful home. She looks at the appointment book for the list of patients registered to see the doctor that afternoon. She discovers that one more name has been added to the list: Madam Udeaku. She identifies the writing as belonging to nurse Carol on morning duty. This addition annoys her. For one, she never likes to over-work the doctor on
duty who is noted for thoroughness in attending to patients. In addition, an extra patient would keep her longer than usual in the clinic. She cannot afford to stay away from her family. There is always a problem to tackle at home. And what if her husband gets drunk as usual, then the children would be at his mercy and something serious can happen. She looks at the card again. Madam Udeaku. "There is nothing special about the name." She thinks as she goes to the filing cabinet for the patients’ files.

The wall clock in Chigo’s Maryland apartment chimes twelve times. She turns round in the couch where she has dozed off reading Franz Fanon’s The Wretched of the Earth. She opens her eyes lazily taking in the quaint look of her living room. The sun seeps in through the purple curtains giving the room a warm look that invests it with a dainty outlook. Chigo wipes her eyes and turns again hugging herself and squeezing the book lying on her bosom. "If only my mother is as warm as this room” She sighs and makes to take another lazy nap when the sun suddenly invades the room with sharp rays. She squints and turns in an attempt to ascertain the cause of the radical change in intensity of light only to find that her mother caused it. She is about to pull the other row of curtains when she sights the old man upstairs wielding an umbrella like a walking stick. His grandson is walking leisurely beside him. “May be they are going shopping” Nne Ukwu thinks recalling such scenes with her late husband and Chigo. She is still watching the old man and his grandson when Chigo disturbs her with what she considers to be a rude question.

"Mamma, didn’t you see that I am still sleeping?”
"Is that how you greet your mother?”
"But I greeted you when we woke up in the morning.”
"The stomach can never overfeed with greeting. Don’t you see how the sun’s laughter is spreading everywhere and pouring into the house in all its radiance? And should you deprive your mother of the sun’s free favours even as you choke yourself with that book all day long?” She says eyeing the book. Chigo promptly removes Fanon’s book from where it is snuggling on her breasts and heaves a sigh.

"See. Your neighbour is walking leisurely with his parent. All I get from you these days is sigh sigh sigh. You no longer like my
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mouth. You want me to keep it shut when I am still alive. I cannot do that! Maybe it is time for me to go back to the world that I understand."

"And tell people there that you could not live with me?" Chigo asks in reply getting up and walking into the kitchen.

"That should not worry you." Her mother says and goes on talking loudly so that Chigo will hear her from the kitchen.

"I have danced various tunes in my life and I know how to react to new sounds. If I did not follow you to Lagos, people will say that old women are difficult. I followed you to Lagos and now you still perceive me as difficult because I correct you." Chigo does not reply and her mother continues more loudly.

"As long as I see the sun wake up in the morning and go to sleep at night, I must continue to perform my duty as a mother. God is my witness."

At this point, Chigo storms out of the kitchen, picks up the book and is about to dash into the bedroom when her mother's words hit her like cold water in harmattan.

"That book is closer to you nowadays than your widowed mother! Hug it! Love it! Let it be your mother!"

Chigo stops in her track panting with emotion and starts to explain. "Mamma, I do not love the book more than you. I have explained to you over and over again that I read it because ... it helps to expand the philosophy of my movement."

"Movement, movement, movement. This is another word that never lets me drink cold water in my daughter's house again. If she comes back late, it is because of movement. In the house, she keeps company with books because of movement. If movement wants to marry you, let it bring wine to us and perform the other marital rights. Then I shall know that it is my in-law. But stealing my daughter from me like a night marauder is not the proper thing to do. When the flying termite finishes its dance in the air, it always falls down on the ground at the feet of toads that don't know how to fly. You are my daughter, movement or no movement, book or no book. What is it that you think you are doing at your young age that I have not ..."

"Mamma!" Chigo cuts in.

"The trouble with you is that you never give me a chance to say my own bit. Because you are my mother, you think you can run my life for me. And you think that you are the only one who
is bereaved. I also lost my my ... I can never have another father." She bursts out crying and runs to the bedroom.

Nne Ukwu follows her. She sits beside her daughter wondering how to bridge the gap that keeps widening between them. She places her shrivelled hands on her daughter's back and gently massages her as she used to do, not too long ago when Chigo was younger. Chigo begins to wonder about her mother's ambivalent attitudes these days. One moment, she is very loving. Another she is very annoying. All these, she recalls, started since she came to Lagos. She believes that she used to get along fine with her mother way back home at Emene. She had felt that her mother was having some health defects which needed thorough diagnosis hence she brought her to Lagos and ensured that she was registered in the best clinic for the treatment of elderly people. The doctors had said that nothing was medically wrong with her mother. But now, her mother is very ill. She feels that getting her mother back to the clinic is the best thing. She has already booked an appointment with the doctor in spite of her mother's objection. She bitterly recalls her mother's objection to the idea of consulting a doctor to help shore up things between them. Chigo had guessed that the doctor would put her mother's problems in proper perspective and help change her pattern of behaviour. She had hoped that this would drastically reduce the tension currently brewing between them. She shudders and makes an impossible attempt to sink into the mattress, as she recalls her mother's response to the idea of visiting the clinic for that purpose.

"I am perfectly healthy. I am not going to involve any outsider, doctor or no doctor, in this matter. Did the doctor help me to conceive you? Was she there when I gave birth to you? Did she tell me how to breast-feed and mother you? This new stupidity of yours is an insult which I can't take easily."

Chigo was astonished. She apologised in order to prevent a full blown quarrel but she did not give up. She contacted her brother who gave his support to her idea of going to the doctor without Nne Ukwu. The doctor might then find a way of calling back their mother for one test or the other and seize the opportunity to counsel her. Chigo had become relieved by her brother's support. He had even volunteered to pay the doctor's bill. But she had turned down the offer because she did not consult him or any of her other brothers before bringing their
mother to Lagos. Her acceptance of the offer would be an indication of her inability to cope with the expenses arising from their mother's visit. She is quite capable of accommodating her mother and any financial strain her visit might cause. The only thing that is giving her a little budgetary tension is that she is saving in order to give her mother an expensive present for Christmas since both of them would spend it in Lagos with her brother's family. An unexpected rich present would revitalise her mother's dwindling excitement about life, she had reasoned. If only her mother's behaviour could change for the better before Christmas, then she would have the domestic peace she needs for her movement's New Year package for the military regime. The thought of the growing strength of the movement, its abundant goodwill in cash and kind, as well as the pressure it is mounting on the regime warm her heart. She relaxes a bit and breathes evenly in line with the rhythm of her mother's massage.

On her own part, Nne Ukwu has been thinking as well as watching and massaging her only daughter. She has come to a conclusion. This evil spirit that is causing the incessant rifts between her daughter and herself must be in Lagos. It suddenly becomes very clear. They had no problem at home in Emene. Now in Lagos, things have changed. It must be the work of a wicked spirit. Next she thinks about how she will capture this evil spirit and deal with it. But she stops to wonder if the fight is actually worth it? Isn't it better to go back to the homestead at Emene where she is usually surrounded by friendly spirits and friendly people. If she goes home, she will be at peace and her daughter will be at peace. Her mind goes back to the friendly visits and loving letters she used to get from Chigo when she was at home. She shudders at the thought of the changes in her daughter and her hand relaxes from its rhythmic stroking of Chigo's back. How could she believe that this "Lagos Chigo" is the same one who used to chat with her very far into the night in Emene.

"Yes indeed. There must be a bad spirit in Lagos," she concludes, "but should I run back home and leave my child at the mercy of an unknown evil spirit?" Again she resumes her action of rubbing Chigo's back with a gentle massage that though soothing, continually confounds Chigo.
“My name is Madam Udeaku,” replies the young woman presenting a small card for identification of her mother’s hospital file. The nurse looks at her suspiciously because she looks too young for that designation — Madam. She thinks that young women are usually Miss or Mrs. or even Ms. but not Madam. “That is for elderly women,” she reasons scrutinising Chigo and the card intermittently. Chigo can guess at what is going on in the Nurse's mind. She adopts a defiant stance ready for any hot argument that might erupt between the nurse and herself. She knows that there is no photograph on the hospital files so the nurse cannot be sure that she is impersonating her mother.

“Yes?” Chigo asks the nurse authoritatively. The nurse shrugs.

“One can never tell when the norm changes for these fast Lagos girls.” She thinks shrugging again and accepting the card.

“You can sit down, Madam.” Chigo notes the sullenness in her voice and the absence of the usual reverence that would have accompanied the word 'madam' if the nurse had equated it with 'Mother.'

“I don't care for the matronly title anyway. All I want is to see the doctor with my mother's card and avoid paying their exhorbitant fee for opening a card for myself. Afterall, I am seeing the doctor on behalf of my mother. Anyway if the doctor insists that I pay a fee, I shall do so. All I care for now is the resolution of the problem.”

All these go through her mind as she waits her turn.

“Madam Udeaku,” the nurse calls a second time adding provocatively, “Have you forgotten your name?” Chigo starts, rises, and moves towards the consulting room ignoring the nurse's unnecessary emphatic question.

“Wait” The nurse rushes after her, intent on solving the riddle of the name. Chigo does not wait but opens the doctor's room immediately. Both women rush into the room. The startled doctor looks from nurse to Chigo.

“Yes Sister Ann? I didn’t call you.” Chigo quickly reports herself before the nurse says something that would embarrass her.

“I am Miss Chigo Ego. I think that the nurse wants to tell you that I am here on behalf of my mother, Madam Udeaku Ego.”
The nurse attacks immediately.

"She did not pay the consultation fee."

"Maybe you didn't hear me," Chigo replies formally. "I am here on behalf of my mother whose card I gave you."

The doctor intervenes, "Thank you, sister, I'll handle this."

As the nurse leaves, Chigo slumps onto a chair directly in front of the doctor's large table. Life now seems to her an endless battle ranging from her father's death to the renewal of hostilities between the government and the movement and her mother's strange attitudes. And now she must contend with this rude nurse. Chigo now looks straight into the doctor's eyes and wonders if the encounter would reduce or add to her problems.

As her mind roams through her problems, the doctor scrutinises her keenly. The purple shadow lining her eyes is so light that it seems her eyes are manifesting a reflection of the purple in her silk dress. Only discerning eyes like those of the doctor can observe that the purple color is that of an artificial eye-shadow that is thoughtfully used by a careful person. Even her lips are prudently lined in purple that matches the lines of well manicured nails. The doctor smiles at the young woman whose meticulous and dainty appearance reminds her of her own youth. She wonders how the young woman can make-up so carefully while looking so tense and impatient. She however notices with dismay, the sagging pouch beneath the woman's eyes and her terse mouth that suggests tension.

"I am doctor Taiye Oladimeji. What can I do for you Miss ...?" Chigo heaves a sigh of relief as if she has waited for too long.

"I am Miss Chigo Ego. I am here on behalf of one of your patients who happens to be my mother. She needs your counsel immediately."

"Why is she not here herself?"

"Doctor, she can't be here personally, at least not now. As a matter of fact she should not know I came here to report her?"

"Report her? What about?"

"Her behaviour. She is ... She nags to no end. She treats me like a baby and monitors my movement. She is irritable. She is just ... just ... simply impossible. I don't know whether she has hormonal problems or what."

Chigo hurries through her complaint and finally adds, "I'm just fed up of her."
"Is that all?"

"Is that all." Chigo echoes incredulously. "Isn't it enough that your patient is frustrating me?" She adds defiantly closing her mouth with a very tight pout.

The doctor does not appear to be vexed by her outburst. She flips through the pages of Nne Ukwu's file studying the reports and examining the result of the tests as if she has not seen them before. Chigo can see the movement of the doctor's eyes through her transparent pair of glasses. Her visage does not register any alarm, surprise or even worry. Chigo expects her to say something. But the doctor does not look up. When she does, it is to open her bag to bring out a case containing a handkerchief which she also brings out. She removes her glasses and proceeds to clean them with the handkerchief. She puts on her glasses again and once more meticulously goes through the motion of replacing the handkerchief in its special place. She now looks squarely at Chigo and says, "I have looked at the case history of the patient again. She came here for a routine test. There was nothing pathologically wrong with her."

"But she has changed. She has changed." Chigo insists in an attempt to register the force of her case.

"Are you alright?"

Chigo glares at the doctor.

"Am I all right? I am telling you that your patient is very ill and you sit down coolly and ask if I am alright." She screams and picks up her bag getting up and making as if to move but stopping midway into her first step.

"Sit down." The doctor commands. Chigo promptly obeys looking at the doctor expectantly. The doctor knows that there is a problem.

Chigo's nervousness which she just exemplified convinces her beyond all doubts. Dr. Oladimeji, however, suspects that much of the problem might lie with the young woman sitting right before her. The ironic thing is that she believes that her mother is the only one who has a problem. She is obviously unaware of her own abnormal behaviour. The doctor feels that the case is not a pathological one but since the young woman has faith in her ability to provide a cure, she must try her hand at sociotherapy.

"For how long have you noticed this change in your mother?"

"For about two months now. It started gradually since she
came from the village to stay with me."

"Two months ago," The doctor echoes flipping through the file.

"Yes I brought her here for routine check as soon as she came to Lagos."

"We are getting somewhere."

"What."

The doctor feels that if the woman's agitation started in her daughter's house, then the cause of the problem probably lies in the new environment. Could it be her daughter's behaviour?

"What does she nag about?"

"She complains when I do not return from work in time. She cannot understand that I have to contend with the traffic hold-ups and the congestion in Lagos. Then when I stay in the house, she also finds things to complain about."

"Things like what?"

"That I sleep too much because as soon as I return, I retire to bed because I am always too tired. You know." She continues to explain.

"I leave the house very early in the morning, return late in the evening, tired, worn out, and in need of sympathy and rest. All I get from my mother is nagging, nagging, and nagging, complaints."

"I see." The doctor says knowingly. She flips the file open again.

"Why is your mother living with you. I mean, what of your father and so on?"

"My father died last year. My brothers are married and leading their own lives. As things are, I am really the one who takes care of her, you know, being a woman and her only daughter. My brothers have their own families. But they still render financial assistance, you know. I thought she needed company. So I brought her here to Lagos to live with me."

"And is she getting the company you said she needed and for which you brought her from the village?"

"Well ... eh. I work hard. I don't have the time to sit and chat with her. I always come back tired and ready to sleep. Then she would quarrel about my returning late."

The doctor nods with understanding. It does not require the wisdom of a psychotherapist to know the cause of the problem.

"Miss Ego, you said that your mother is a widow?"
"Yes. My father died early last year."
"For how long were they married?"
"For over sixty years."
"Sixty years." The doctor echoes incredulously.
"How did they manage to stick together for so long?" Dr. Oladimeji wonders recalling her own attempt at marriage.

She was getting on beautifully well with Dele when they were undergraduates. They were reading partners. In fact that was how their relationship started. They were both brilliant and eager. Lecturers liked them and used to lend them books which they shared. They also shared ideas and discussed their work. As time went on they began to study together and soon became so close that they were always linked together by their classmates and teachers alike. People expected that they would naturally get married. And they did just that as soon as they qualified as medical doctors. Trouble started a few months after their wedding when Dele tried to halt her ambition to do her specialist course in Medicine. He felt that as a woman she did not need to go in for further studies. She tried to make him see with her the need for self fulfilment. He got his mother and sister involved. They came and threatened her with divorce. In their ignorance, they contended that her pursuit of further training meant that she was not satisfied with being Dele's wife. Their intrusion into a matter which she felt only her husband and professional colleague should understand was the final knife which severed the chord that bound them together as husband and wife. She considered it insulting and could not bear it. When she queried Dele about making his illiterate mother a judge in such a case, he got annoyed with her for referring to his mother in such a derogatory term. Things became too hot for her and in the midst of this tension, she made up her mind and went ahead to do her specialist course. She damned the consequences. That was the end of her six months marriage. She found an appreciative husband in her studies and work. At this point, she looks around her consulting room appreciatively.

The carved mahogany doors leading to the corridor and her spacious wash-room as well as the brown and black ebony table are the stuff of which dignity and class are made. She smiles up at the hand drawn pencil work hanging imposingly on the wall and satisfactorily inhales a large gust of air cooled by the powerful air-conditioner. The doctor's self-appreciative smile
The Kolanuts are all Dead

seems to have infected Chigo. Although she has not taken note of it, it is the first smile she has seen today. When she saw her mother in the morning, she was sour-faced as usual chewing steadily at her stick and muttering curses at evil spirits which were after her and her daughter. Chigo had restrained the impulse to tell her that there was no evil spirit and if ever there was, it would be found inside her. She had merely swallowed her thoughts and greeted her mother before dashing off.

The nurse opens the door suspiciously. Not seeing any cause for alarm, she becomes embarrassed and in order to cover up, she asks the doctor whether she wants anything.

“No Sister Ann, I’m fine.”

“You were overbooked for today.” The nurse states obviously eyeing Chigo as the culprit.

“Yes, I am overbooked. But I could not help it. I had to accept this extra case because of the urgency it required.”

“I see.” The nurse says still eyeing Chigo and retreating reluctantly. It is clear that she resents Chigo’s continued presence with the doctor. When she finally takes her leave, Dr. Oladimeji resumes her questioning.

Although she knows that Chigo is telling the truth, she still repeats some questions in order to ascertain the consistency of her thought.

“Do you work during the weekends?”

“No.”

“How do you two get along at weekends?”

“Just like the week days. My mother always finds one thing or another to complain about.”

“Like what?”

Chigo eyes the doctor suspiciously, wondering why she is being queried surreptitiously.

“Doctor. I had expected that you would give me a note requesting my mother to come and see you so that you can examine her and make the necessary prescriptions. I did not bargain for all these questions.” She adds as she shifts uncomfortably in her chair and picks her handbag, and not quite prepared to go, shifts again replacing the bag. The doctor smiles, fully aware of her dilemma. She considers Chigo’s impulsive desire to quit the room and her reasonable decision to endure her inquiries which are aimed at getting to the cause of the
estrangement between mother and daughter. She reclines on her chair still smiling at Chigo.

"That's my favourite kind of girl, impulsive without being a prisoner of impulse," Dr. Oladimeji says rather unconsciously.

"What are you talking about?"

"Never mind. I was just thinking aloud."

In annoyance, Chigo stretches her long neck unwittingly showing the lines of her neck to advantage. She pouts like her mother. The doctor notes that the sagging flesh under her eyes seems to decrease for a while.

"Extraordinary."

"What doctor?"

"You are a very interesting character."

Chigo turns her face to the left showing object disinterest in the compliment. The purple beads on her neck glitter with unusual sheen as the light from the bulb on the right hit them directly complementing the lines of her neck which have now formed glittering rings.

"The purple effect." The doctor says still reclining on her chair.

Chigo starts. It is disturbing enough to have been queried consistently on her relationship with her mother. Now this scrutiny of her sartorial adornments, she reasons, is absolutely irrelevant to the matter of her mother's incomprehensible behavioural inclinations. She concludes she was actually wasting her time with a doctor who seems to be more interested in her physical appearance than the problem which brought her to the clinic in the first place. Still undecided as to whether to storm out of the room or not she springs up from her chair but this time without picking her bag.

"I can't stand this!" She screams. The doctor sits up and replies rather gently, "I know," before commanding her to "sit down." Chigo stands defiantly still undecided about what her next move should be. The doctor continues.

"Try to cooperate with me a little longer. In this profession, we encounter many kinds of problems, medical and otherwise and we approach them in different ways depending on the demands of the particular case. I have had to employ the methods of a priest, psychologist, social worker and so on. Now you think I am an inquisitor and bird watcher. It is true but it is not so I might gain any personal advantage thereby. I am doing it only
purely for professional reasons. I am sure you are aware that I have other important things to do if ..."

"I am sorry doctor." Chigo cuts in sitting down. For one thing the doctor has ascertained that Chigo is impulsive. If her mother proves to be equally impulsive, then the source of their problem could lie in their interaction and not in the Lagos environment.

"Miss Ego. Let me assure you that any information you give me is confidential. I only want to help you."

"Go on doctor."

"Your mother is lonely. She needs company. Yet when you stay with her at weekends, she complains, why?"

"She complains about the kind of people who visit me. I am..." She hesitates.

"Go on, Miss Ego. Remember, you can confide in your doctor, a fellow woman. Again I assure you that any information you give me is confidential."

"Well ... my mother does not like my political friends. She thinks that I may get into trouble with them."

"Why? What politics? We are under a military regime."

"Yes. That precisely is the justification for politics. There is a movement working hard to force the army boys out of the political arena."

"I see. The Activators of Freedom." The doctor echoes the name of the popular movement nodding.

"You work in the National Oil Company?" The doctor adds still nodding.

"How do you know?"

"I subscribe to the movement but because I cannot run around like you young ones, I assist by having this hospital send ten percent of its profit to the movement through its agent whose name I traced to National Oil."

Chigo slowly shoots up from her chair as if she has just been shocked into new realisations, more like an early evening star's slow walk across the firmament. She walks round the table and into the doctor's outstretched arms. She remains in the older woman's arms. Unshed tears of frustration locked inside her soul now seek sisterly understanding. They are hopeful tears that many times sought to reach Nne Ukwu only to pull back in frustrated anger at her mother's lack of sympathy. The tears, long bottled up, now find unrestrained expression as they stream...
down joyfully cascading through Chigo's cheeks and painted lips. They spread the purple effect on the doctor's breasts. Her voice, though tired, regains some new vitality and she verbalises her gratitude for Dr. Oladimeji's financial assistance to her Movement.

"Thank you for your very generous donations. I did not suspect that the cheque I receive regularly is from a woman. Thank you so much, Sister, I assure you that the money is very helpful and well utilized."

"I know. We know."

For the first time since she entered the doctor's room, Chigo sits back in her chair. She crosses her legs pushing back her head to relax on the head-rest. She seems to forget the purpose of her visit as she smiles appreciatively at Dr. Oladimeji consuming the elderly dignity of what now strikes her as a powerful personality. The doctor's unprocessed hair clings closely to her scalp trailing off into her wide forehead which shows her face to full advantage. No ugly wrinkles or marks of stress intrude into the grandeur of her facial outlook. Her eyes, bold and egg-like are even more resplendent in the doctor's transparent pair of glasses which sits confidently on the ridge of her broad nose. Her full mouth, Chigo now feels, is cast in a mould that suggests reconciliation and peace with a smile of self-fulfilment playing radiantly on it. Chigo looks round the room for the first time and notices the telling beauty of the carvings on the doors. Her eyes rest on the painting. She appreciates the artistry of the work noting how the petals are distinct in spite of the harmony they generally exude. Chigo is fully back to life. Almost unconsciously she ejaculates,

"Spectacular. I have never seen this kind of painting before, all in pencil and yet bringing out the different shades of the foliage."

"Who is the artist?" Chigo asks suspecting that the artist might be one of those noted for advocating freedom through art.

"My father," is Dr. Taiye Oladimeji's proud response.

"Where is he based?" Chigo asks.

"Nowhere here. He is dead. He completed that work shortly before he died just a few weeks to my birth. My mother preserved it for me." Dr. Oladimeji can not help thinking of how versatile her father could have turned out to be if he had lived long.
Both women now remain silent, Chigo also having been unwittingly reminded of her departed father.

The doctor wonders for the umpteenth time what her father could have looked like. His descriptions by her mother could never capture the picture of the father she has always yearned for. She idolised him through her mother’s stories and in the process cut the portraiture of a man so visionary he could have supported her in her quest for the high realms of her profession unlike her husband. She now focuses on the painting as if seeing it from a new perspective, taking in every detail. She ends up yearning for a physical feel of the hands that dexteriously wrought the artistic masterpiece. Chigo on this score seems more fortunate than the elder woman. She did not have to form her opinion of her father through stories. She remembers him very well and appreciates him for his devotion to duty and respect for justice and fairness. These influenced her as a young activist in the workers’ union. Her face shines with satisfaction for she feels that she is living up to a family tradition through her activities in the pro-freedom movement. The only stain, she thinks, in her spotless garment of happiness is her mother’s opposition to her activities. Her mother used to be as strong a defender of justice as her father.

“Why then has she changed,” she wonders as her mind returns to the predicament that brought her to the clinic in the first place. Her eyes finally rest expectantly on the doctor’s.

“So your mother objects to your political activities?”

“Yes.”

“Has she always objected to them?”

“No. That is what baffles me. She used to take pride in them especially when I told her stories of the Movement’s political manoeuvrings each time I visited her at home in Emene.”

“Has she lost interest in your stories now?”

Chigo hesitates for a while before responding. “Thinking about it now, doctor, I realise that we don’t spend much time together these days and when we do, it is to quarrel unendingly.”

“What does your mother do for a living?”

“What can she do. She is too old.”

Dr. Oladimeji winces at Chigo’s response about old age and senility. She finds the pronouncement rude.

“What was she doing before she became old?”
He Wants to Marry Me Again...

“Nothing.”
“Nothing?” The doctor echoes incredulously.
“Well. She was just a housewife.” Chigo admits casually obviously betraying her poor regard for full time housewifery.
“That’s a very big job, you know, considering that she combined it with baby-making, children-rearing, and general home management.”

Chigo burst out laughing. The thought of the multi-faceted nature of housewifery has never dawning on her.
“I have never thought that she does anything really let alone being an employee with many portfolios as you analyse. Yes, she was a wife, baby-maker, mother, and manager. She was also my father’s assistant in his work in our local community back at home in the East.”

“And you say she does nothing now?”
“Nothing. Absolutely nothing since my father died.”

“I see. Your mother has lost all her jobs. She no longer makes babies. You and your brothers are now grown-ups and so need no special care. They are even no longer around her and you that are still close to her is too big and busy. Your father’s death has meant she has no one to assist any longer. She is no longer a wife but a widow managing a home comprising of just herself as against the usual family of...?”

“Above seven.” Chigo completes the sentence for the doctor.
“Your mother is almost redundant now.”

The nurse opens the door cautiously and regards Chigo with a hardly concealed anger on her face. Chigo stares back at her without showing any aggression. Instead she smiles at the nurse. The doctor asks,
“What is it Ann?”

“Nothing”, she says and retreats wondering what is responsible for Chigo’s apparent change of attitude towards her. The doctor smiles and assures Chigo. “She wanted to find out if I am alright. She is always very protective of me.”

“I see,” Chigo replies.

Doctor Oladimeji soon steers the discussion back to the issue of Nne Ukwu. “Your mother is redundant. She has to develop new interests in order to give her life some vitality.”

“At her age? She is too old. If not that she is strong and very proud, she would be relying on a walking-stick by now. She is
really too old doctor."

"Too old to live? Is she better dead then?" The doctor asks.

Chigo shakes her head vehemently. She finds the thought of her mother dying too horrible to contemplate.

"Too old for what then?"

Chigo has no reply. The doctor continues.

"There are a lot of things she could engage herself in especially at the community level where you just said she assisted your father. There, your mother is sure to get respect and courtesy as an elder and these would contribute in rewarding her for her services. This is the kind of experience she needs at her age. Granted she is above making babies but she can make do with being a sociological grandmother in the neighbourhood. Have you tried to get her involved in your political activities?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Because I don't think that she has anything to offer the Movement."

"Really? If she was your father's Assistant as you said, then your movement has an unharnessed and invaluable source material in your mother. You can benefit from her experience and by that give her a new life and a greater sense of being useful instead of making her feel redundant as is the case now."

As she leaves the consultation room that afternoon, Chigo knows she has an uphill task at hand in making her mother develop interest in her Movement.

"Will she agree to develop new interests?"

This question keeps nagging at her mind as she begins a replay of her encounter with Dr. Taiye Oladimeji.

As Chigo kicks her volkswagen car to leave African Flowers' Health House, she thinks about the prescriptions of new interests, hobbies, new friends and so on for her mother. She had agreed to start taking her mother out of the house sometimes to parks, museums, markets, and other places of interest. Even as she recalls her promises she wonders if she would have enough time for such visits. If only someone less busy could be found...but there is nobody. Her brothers are busy just like herself. Their weekly visits on Sundays are usually brief. Her
neighbours are also busy. But... but there is a man, an elder who is always around. He had shouted greetings at her a few times from a distance but Chigo was always in a hurry. Chigo laughs. It is ridiculous thinking of the man in connection with an outing for her mother. Any suggestion of it to Nne Ukwu would cause a big quarrel. She has not moved the car for she is still thinking. The most problematic aspect of the prescription, she believes, is that of making new friends.

"How can one get an old woman of my mother's age to make new friends? It won't be easy." She thinks as she presses the accelerator. As she drives out of the compound, she sights the nurse standing at the bus-stop outside the gate of the hospital and stops to give her a ride even though she does not ask for it. The nurse is pleasantly surprised by the offer and accepts it graciously. She is taken in by Chigo's lighter mood which contrasts with her agitated state of mind when she first came to the clinic.

"Where are you going to?"
"Alaka area."

"That's on my way." Chigo says. The nurse enters the car thanking her stars for a free and comfortable ride in a volkswagen beetle car instead of the torture of those slow over-crowded buses. The look of anger and worry on her face disappears as she settles in the cushion seat of the car which contrasts sharply with the rusty iron seats of the cheap buses she usually affords. She steals a glance at Chigo before finally allowing her eyes to square up with hers. With a grin that is very wide, she introduces herself.

"I am Nurse Anasta and thank you for the ride. Actually I missed the bus because I did not close in time. I always wait for the doctor to finish with the last patient." Chigo now realises that was why she kept intruding during her long stay in the doctor's consulting room.

"Apparently, I made you stay longer than necessary today. I am sorry." She says speeding and enjoying the fact that the road is free of the usual heavy traffic. "Never mind." Nurse Anasta says contented that the comfort of Chigo's car and the saved transport fare compensate for any injury suffered as a result of closing a little later than usual.

In her bid to reciprocate Anasta's friendly enthusiasm, Chigo casually remarks that the clinic seems to be a nice place to work.
"It is wonderful. Once I enter the compound, all my worries just disappear. It is like a spiritual healing house. And Dr. Oladimeji is also wonderful."

Quite willing to supply more facts, she opens up.

"She is a very big woman-o. She owns the clinic and even employs other doctors who also work there."

"I see. Then she is really big in every sense of the word." Chigo agrees.

"Yes ..." Anasta emphasises flippantly.

"But ... but ... God no give her everything. She no get husband."

"Mmh." Chigo mutters not knowing how to react to this irrelevant and unsolicited addition. She does not wish to discuss the doctor's private life. What she wants is time to ponder on her prescriptions. But Anasta has taken Chigo's offer of a free ride as a friendly invitation much to Chigo's discomfiture. She makes efforts to shed her official stance and therefore mixes pidgin with formal English language.

"I get six children, four boys and two girls. The only thing be say my husband lose him job because he join people to demonstrate against soldier government. I warn him-o. But him no listen to his wife. So him demonstrate and them come sack him. Na di thing dey happen to men who no dey listen to their..."

Chigo cuts in. "How can you talk like that? Was he not demonstrating for the good of everybody?"

"Na foolish person dey fight against soldier government. See what my husband's foolishness do to my family. Him no get job again. I am now doing man work and woman work."

"Madam. I understand why you are angry. But try, also to appreciate what your husband did?"

"To my family?"

"Some people have to make sacrifices in order to force the soldiers out of the government."

"Why you no tell your husband to sacrifice him job?"

"I don't have a husband."

"So you don't understand how a wife feels."

"I understand more than you can imagine." Chigo retorts evenly before she adds "Well ... we must all show our resentment to this unpopular and oppressive military regime. Or don't you think that it is an oppressive government?"
"Everybody knows that." Anasta quickly replies.
"Then how can we let it continue if we don't like it? We must work against them. Some people get hurt in the fight but we must not give up. Please do not ridicule your husband again."
"My husband. He himself used to ridicule me. Anyway sha-a, Dr. Oladimeji has agreed to give him a job as garden assistant. So he will be okay soon."
"Mmh." Chigo mutters again seeing in Dr. Oladimeji's offer one more gesture of support for her Movement. She really would like to dwell on her experience with the doctor if Anasta would let her.
"Who knows what my children dey do now?" Anasta wonders flippantly.
Anasta's constant reference to her family makes Chigo feel that she is proud of her family, so she decides to complement her. She politely tells Anasta that she is lucky to have what she wants in life, a husband and many children.
"No-o. Not at all. You think say I no like to own my own car like my fellow women of nowadays? You think say I no like to put my children them for better school? You think say I no want to have enough to eat and give my children? You think say I no want to dress fine fine like you and drive car? No-o, me too, I want better life. But water don pass garri. My problems pass my money. I get too many problems."
Chigo does not bother to find out what these problems are. She is very keen on reviewing her visit to the doctor. But Anasta would not give her respite. She continues to talk about the job her husband is expected to start soon.
"When my husband starts work in African Flowers where I be nurse, him go start to respect me small."
Chigo glances at her briefly. In spite of her impatience with Anasta's chatter about the quantity of her life that lacks quality, she cannot help but admire the mixture of pidgin and English as they flow freely from her mouth.
"You know men now-o," Anasta continues familiarly, "they think because them hang something between their thighs, them be master all the time." Chigo would ordinarily argue about that assertion but her present mood is too despondent for any argument.
Dauntless, Anasta continues. "As my husband no get job
now-o, na me be the master. I dey pay school fees of the children, pay rent, buy food, in short, do everything. But now water don pass garri well well. When I don give him job by the grace of Dr. Oladimeji, I go become a real king. Na king I talk-o, not queen. Woman king. Even sef my mother-in-law has made me queen of the house." She laughs and continues with the story of how she became a king.

"My husband was always drinking and drinking. But he never raise him hand against me o. I for show him pepper." She laughs again and continues with her tale.

"My mother-in-law come to di house. Do you know what she did?"

"How will I know?" Chigo replies resignedly.

"She tells her son make he take him time-o." At this point, Anasta changes her voice obviously in imitation of her husband's mother.

"Di country don change my child. Today no be time for man to cry because woman don become master. You lucky sef to have woman who dey feed you and your children'. That was what she told him," she adds for emphasis. "She never finish with him-o. Hear her. She tell am 'Make you treat this our wife like an egg-o.' Eh-hen! Na so she come make me master for the house."

"What did your husband tell his mother?" Chigo asks warming up to the story.

"He did not like it at all. He said that his mother has teamed up with me to oppress him. So, I just laugh one big laugh. Na so him team up with him Mamma to oppress me before before. Now I be breadwinner. Things come change. Him Mamma don cross to my side."

"For good?" Chigo wonders aloud.

"For good-o, for bad-o, things don change. They now know that I am somebody very very powerful. Na me go give him job now as garden assistant."

"But why him dey drink?" Chigo asks, already infected by the familiarity of Anasta's brand of the English language.

"Eh now. Na adjustment now. He no fit adjust to new situation like him Mamma. Heh This na where I go stop-o." Chigo swerves to the right and screeches to a halt.

"Thank you, my sister." Anasta greets warmly still beaming with the excitement which she feels at having told the story of
her empowerment to a fellow woman.

“My pleasure.” Chigo replies sincerely almost regretting the disruption of the story. “See you next time,” she adds.

“Yes-o.”

“And take care of yourself and your very large family.”

“Yes-o.” Anasta replies waving as her fellow woman drives off.

Chigo’s mind does not dwell immediately on her own problem. Not even the distraction of Anasta’s story could have prevented her from taking in the lively scenery she is now confronted with. The weather is changing as dark clouds chase the sun. The bright sun which has been having a free ride on the sky is now losing its speed as dark clouds pursue it vigorously. Chigo smiles as she notes the vivacity of people hurrying about their business and of those who are less worried about the threatening sky as they walk leisurely to their destinations.

The sight of beggars by the traffic light intersection dampens her spirit. She slows down as she approaches the light and observes with dejection how the beggars try to eke out their own living by knocking on car windows, singing for the occupants of the car and displaying their deformity, all in an attempt to get the occupants’ attention and sympathy which will in turn elicit some money. The inscription SAP on the shirt worn by a little child in his mother’s arms catches her attention.

“SAP — Structural Adjustment Programme,” Chigo remembers the full meaning of SAP and immediately recalls Anasta’s casual explanation of her husband’s drinking habit.

“No adjustment now,” Chigo echoes nodding. The military government has introduced SAP as a way of dealing with the new economic depravity. Government’s adjustment led to a chain of reactions such as retrenchment of workers, hunger, begging, separation and in some cases total break-up of couples. The last in the chain is yet to manifest, Chigo reasons as she comes to a stop when the light turns red.

A blind man singing what sounds like a well rehearsed duet with the little boy who is leading him moves near her window. Since the window’s glasses are wound down because the car is not air-conditioned, she gets the full volume of this sonorous music. She reaches for the till in her car, takes some money and stretches out her right hand to give it to the boy. Her gaze once again catches the woman carrying the child wearing SAP shirt.
"Madam." Chigo calls twice trying to attract the mother's attention to give her some money too. The woman does not respond to Chigo because she is more interested in something in the horizon that has caught her child's fancy. The light changes to green. Chigo revs the engine of her car and drives off unhappy at her failure to succeed in getting the mother's attention. She also wonders what it was that so much interested mother and child gazing at the sky. She, however, is not angry with the mother. "Giving these people money will not solve the problem. Wrestling power from the gun carriers and confronting our problems without fear of any mad man will be the beginning of the real political struggle." The tide seems to have changed in the struggle going on in the sky because a flood of rays shine into her car through its front windscreen. Her spirit also brightens at the thought of political struggle of the movement. She smiles at the thought of the support the movement enjoys across the land. Her mind inevitably goes back to the encounter with Dr. Oladimeji.

"She is certainly remarkable." Chigo echoes her conclusion about the doctor. She, however, does not agree with all the ideas projected by the doctor. The idea of Nne Ukwu developing new interests, for example, she thinks is far-fetched. It seems crazy to expect a woman of seventy to adjust to new things and make new friends.

Just as she stops in front of the block of flats where she lives, it starts drizzling. She looks up. The sky is clear and sunny once again. She wonders whether the heavens are going crazy or why would tears race down a smiling sky. "It did not rain when it was cloudy. Now that it is sunny, it is beginning to drizzle." She searches for her umbrella. Not finding it, she decides to wait in the car so that she can think of the best strategy with which to approach Nne Ukwu who as usual must be angry about her long absence from home. She is about to recline her seat and gear herself towards a confrontation with her when someone knocks on the car's window. She looks up to see a roughened face smiling at her. She would have locked the door promptly against the strange man but his warm smile and age prompts restraint. Moreover something is familiar about the face. She opens the door and accepts his offer. The old man holds her protectively by the waist as they walk under his umbrella. The old man who turns out to be the grandfather of her neighbours, the occupants
of one of the flats upstairs, was returning from a walk when he saw her. She now remembers seeing him around a few times.

Nne Ukwu opens the door for her daughter and notices that she is not alone. The visitor radiates a happy smile at her in greeting and in spite of the rain, he stands outside to introduce himself.

"And must you do that in the rain, my child?" Nne Ukwu asks without seeing the visitor to ascertain his age before adding her customary stereotype, 'my child.' The man steps in before responding to Nne Ukwu's greeting.

"Our people say that a short man should always hang his bag where his hand can reach it. I cannot impose myself on the young woman because she was kind enough to accept shelter under an old man's umbrella."

"And who are these people of yours who said that a man should stand in the rain even when shelter touches his nose?" Nne Ukwu asks jokingly without adding her habitual endearment having seen that her daughter's helper is not a young man. Soon it is time for the customary introductions.

"I am a Kanuri by birth and a Burmese by death," says the old man laughing at his own joke. Nne Ukwu turns her head in wonderment. The old man is quick at noticing Nne Ukwu's peculiar features, her lovely pear-shaped head resting on her long neck ringed with natural lines. He moves closer to her.

"Me gal," he says winking, "I am an old soldier. And a soldier can always be excused. Once a soldier, always a soldier. I am an old soldier. I was born in Maiduguri where I grew up."

"My husband and I visited Maiduguri when we went for our son's wedding." Nne Ukwu fondly remembers.

"So you know my birth place," he says enthusiastically and asks for her impressions of the Northern city. He urges her to tell him every bit of the good and the bad impressions.

"What will you pay for my story?" Nne Ukwu asks the visitor. Chigo has slumped on the cushion seat watching the two. She is getting impatient at the old man's endearing overtures to her mother.

"Why can't he just introduce himself and leave my mother alone," she grumbles.

"What do you want from an old soldier?" he asks. Chigo starts and thinks the man has heard her complaint. But he was only responding to Nne Ukwu's demand.
"What can one want from an old soldier but what he carries with him — his war stories and songs. Tell me about Burma." Nne Ukwu says obviously enjoying herself and exhilarated at the prospect of listening to the kind of stories her husband used to tell her about the Second World War.

"My husband served in the militia corps" Nne Ukwu adds without any obvious sign of sadness at the mention of her late husband. Chigo resents the old man's presence in the house and now feels thoroughly peevish at her mother's enthusiasm for the soldier.

She is shocked when her mother offers the old man a seat and for that matter, on her favourite couch where she usually takes a nap with political literature.

"Where is the woman who would abruptly leave the room once my political comrades visit?" Chigo wonders as she listens to the old ones.

"So you fought in Burma?" Nne Ukwu asks again to emphasise her interest in hearing his war escapades.


"Heil!" Nne Ukwu exclaims. Chigo eyes the man with disgust for his poor sense of geography. Nne Ukwu cheerfully tells Chigo to "find the visitor some kola!"

Chigo gets up to do her mother's bidding still grumbling silently.

"Where is the old woman I used to know? She has not even finished mourning my father and now a visitor has captured her fancy just like a little girl's." Chigo quickly holds her mouth with her hand as if she has actually uttered these thoughts which are unfair to her mother who has since completed her one year of mourning and has been unduly wasting away in grief. She is shocked by her wayward thought and rebukes herself. To compensate for her thoughts of the old couple on the couch, she searches for the biggest kolanut in her mother's pot only to discover that all the kolanuts have dried up. Her mother has not remembered to keep the fruit alive by putting fresh vegetables in place of the ones that have dried up.

Now the kolanuts are all spoilt. Chigo storms back to the living room to report the matter to her mother whom she knows would be alarmed about the spoilage especially since it relates to her
late husband for whom she has always believed she owes a duty to keep them alive.

"Mamma. The kolanuts are all dead!" Chigo announces expecting her mother to thunder at her in reaction.

"Dead!" Nne Ukwu echoes as she listens delightfully to the man's story.

"Yes. They are all dead."

"What, my child."

"The kolanuts are all dead."

"Yes. What of it?" She asks as if it is nothing. Chigo is perplexed at her mother's unexpectedly subtle reaction.

"You did not change the green leaves so the kolanuts dried up."

"Why won't they dry up. Nobody ever has need of them here."

Nne Ukwu accuses nobody in particular before consoling her daughter whose concern for the fruit touches her.

"Don't worry about them, my good child. Find Mallam Musa something else."  

"Maybe he'll eat food with us." Chigo replies sarcastically.

"Thank you, me gal." Musa replies quickly catching her disapproval.

He adds awkwardly.

"I won't be waiting for that. It has stopped raining. Actually I was taking a walk when the rain forced me to return. My grandson is not coming back till late in the evening. So, I should go and finish my walk now that it has stopped raining. I want to walk as far as to the Ikeja park. The air would be refreshed after this rain." As soon as he finishes his speech, he smiles charmingly at the women and invites them to join him. To her daughter's surprise, Nne Ukwu accepts this offer from the old man.

"Yes. I'll come along. I have not taken a walk since I came here. In fact I cannot find my way around here."

As the old couple leaves, Chigo sinks into the couch which they vacated. "How can she readily accept a walk with a stranger? She did not even think of me before rushing off with a man. At her age?"

"This is incredulous!" Chigo bursts into laughter at the realisation of the truism in the cliché that after old age comes youthfulness.
“Or how do I explain what has just happened to my own mother?”
She wonders and replies.
“Maybe I'm not being realistic.”
“Am I the one who is now becoming too old?” she wonders again.
“Do I now suffer from hormonal impairment?” She thinks with alarm! Huge drops of tears trickle from her lonely eyes down her cheeks onto her breasts. They soak the purple colour of her dress giving it a new hue.