## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preface</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PART I: Mothers and Fathers</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He Wants to Marry Me Again</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Kolanuts are all Dead</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resurrection Before Burial</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over his own Dead Body</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PART II: Teachers and Learners</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professor's Return Journey</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pupil in the Thorn Bush</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms Smith and the Multicultural Game</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Champagne for Men Only</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rats Come in Anger</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She is a Man</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anecdotes of her Rites of Passage to America</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Preface

*He Wants To Marry Me Again And Other Stories* by Chinyere Okafor is a collection of eleven stories divided into two sections: *Mothers and Fathers, Teachers and Learners*. The stories evoke laughter and they all have several layers of meaning. On the surface they can be read as reflecting the everyday experiences of very ordinary people, laughing at the situations and questioning them at the same time. At this level we hear our own voices, our own thoughts and then see ourselves acting the same way as the characters.

This surface level then reveals another deeper level: what our voices echo back to us, what our own actions reflect about us — reflections of self empowerment as in *He wants to Marry me Again, The Kolanuts are all Dead* or as in the hilarious, and I dare say, yet to be written into a full length story, *Resurrection Before Burial*. Even the *Professor's Return Journey*, an autobiographical story, which celebrates the life and time of a professor upon the announcement of his death, is also about empowerment. The empowerment surfaces in the very life of the student whose vocation eloquently answers the rhetorical question:

Professor,
Shall we await your return
when we all know
that the deadly visitor
Always returns alone
where owls sing a dirge?

The Professor cannot go away or die because his life continues in this and other students.

At yet another level, there is a strand that runs through the stories, sometimes like a puff of cloud in the wind and at other times, like a torrent in a storm. It is the strand of the pain that injustice and oppression breed in the relationships between individuals or between groups in the same society.

Although each of the stories breathes this pain, it comes fully alive in *Rats Come in Anger, Champagne for Men Only, and She is a Man*. 
Chinyere Okafor's achievement in this regard is to force attention on the issue by appearing to ignore it. It is never the central focus, some other event is being presented, some child is even trying to 'get away with a lie as in Pupil in the Thorn Bush and yet, the pain keeps nudging us where it hurts.

We laugh in pain as the rats eat the curtains in a Professor's office because he can no longer throw any leftovers into the office dustbin — he has in fact stopped eating lunch because he can no longer afford it. In the story, Champagne for Men Only, a lady sexually harassed by her boss finds that her story cannot be accepted nor acted upon because she is complaining to a world dominated by men. In fact, in the classic manner in which all oppressors relate to the oppressed, the woman becomes a victim of her misfortune. She is asked to stop seeking the favours of the man who says she is a 'drink' that he must have and to add salt to the wound, the men have a hearty laugh over the matter. In Anecdotes of her Rites of Passage to America, the young lady travelling to America is insulted and humiliated by the Airways staff for daring to seek a better life. In Ms Smith and the Multicultural Game, the young black girl cannot talk about her roots in Ms Smith's class — in a world in which opportunities and the individual's sense of identity have much to do with roots.

An important feature of the stories is how this pain is overcome. Chinyere Okafor's characters show that each individual has a need to take responsibility for his/her actions and that only action on the part of the individual and group can provide effective answers. These actions can take simple to complex forms. In Anecdotes of her Rites of Passage to America, Chioma turns round and waves at the woman who has insulted her and with that act shows that she is above the world of insults. The response of the crowd to this unexpected gesture is to cheer Chioma. In He Wants to Marry Me Again, Ivuoma finds in the story of the woman who sits by her that the answer to the pain of injustice and humiliation lies in the decision to empower herself.

In She is a Man, the response is collective and violent as the group of hungry youths break into Madam's house to liberate it of the food that is denied them. In The Kolanuts are all Dead, and Over his own Dead Body, the response is underground revolutionary work with the promise of a heated morning in the long harmattan season.
The author's achievement in the collection lies in the very manner in which the stories are told. Her narrative style incorporates the use of humour, dialogue, flashbacks, proverbs, pidgin English and symbolism. Her use of the active present continuous to narrate the experiences of the characters ensures that the action is always on-going and because of this, there is always the need to have recourse to the past through flashbacks which reveal the experiences and hence motives of the characters. Since the characters are ordinary people living extraordinary lives because of the solutions that they devise to their problems, they use pidgin English and a lot of proverbs to narrate themselves and their ideas.

Finally, it would have been surprising if many of the stories were not about women. After all, Chinyere Okafor is a woman writing about a world in which men see women as wine to be drunk or as people to whom only the word "Sir" rather than Madam is often used by the men who work under them.

In these circumstances, the question of self empowerment is not just important — it is the critical consciousness that must inform what lives women and the rest of society ultimately live. I want to say that another achievement of Chinyere Okafor is that although the question of critical consciousness is presented largely through the eyes of women, each story leaves the reader in no doubt that we all — men, women and children — share the same space and the same ground.

Chinyere Okafor was born to a family of teachers from Arochukwu in what is now known as Abia State, Nigeria. Her primary school education was largely in Eke, Enugu while her secondary education was in Holy Rosary, Awgu and Queen's School, Enugu. She studied at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, where she obtained her BA degree in English (1975) and University College, Cardiff, Wales where she got the PGD in Theatre Studies (1977). She also attended the University of Sussex, Brighton, where she obtained her MA in African Studies with specialisation in Drama in 1978. Her Doctorate of Philosophy was from the University of Nigeria in 1989. Her doctoral work was on Drama and Society in a Traditional African Setting.

Chinyere Okafor, a Senior Lecturer, currently teaches Literature and Drama in the Department of English and Literature, University of Benin, Benin-City. Before joining the University of Benin, she taught at the University of Port Harcourt, (1976–
1980). She was at Cornell University, USA, as a Rockefeller Fellow (1991–1992).

Chinyere Okafor's first stories were written in the mid eighties. Since then, she has written and published literary works many of which have won national and international recognition. In the 1994 award for Literary Excellence organised under the auspices of the Association of Nigerian Authors, she was “the special discovery of the year for her proficiency in the three genres of Literature — poetry, drama and prose”. I have always considered it a major achievement that she produces and acts in the very drama that she also writes.

Chinyere Okafor has stated that the purpose of her life “is to contribute positively to society in any environment in which I find myself. All forms of oppression — class, racial or gender — instinctively bring tears and then anger to my heart”. The stories in this collection are an eloquent tribute to the fulfilment of her life's purpose. They evoke laughter, sadness, anger and ultimately, faith in the ability of the individual acting in concert with others to overcome life's hurdles irrespective of what or who are behind them.

Festus Iyayi
9th January, 1996.
PART I

MOTHERS AND FATHERS
"Madam, where you dey stop?" Ivuoma does not hear the question from the taxi driver. Her mind is still focused on the incident. She visualises the scene in a distorted form: a man with horns and wings, spiky wings that frighten her. She draws back from the imaginary man, receding to the corner of the taxi as the man seems to come after her. The man wears Uba's face and there is a girl clinging to his arms like a bride. The girl's face does not look like hers but it looks familiar. Yes .... Ivuoma is now coming out of the dream. She now remembers the owner of the face and frowns. It belongs to the girl who accused her. Fully alert, she adjusts her sitting position. The girl ... yes ... the girl and Uba, both .... Mrs Ivuoma Ezuma frowns in revulsion. She does not want to acknowledge what she saw when she entered the room. She shudders. Those girls might be using charms to influence the man, she reasons as she recalls the girl's accusation, "You are the one who made juju for my man, so that he will love only you and forget me! Your medicine don foul today!"

"To think that the man in question rightly belongs to me," Ivuoma now reasons, "and other girls are confidently enjoying him to the extent that one even had the audacity to regard him as her man. Since she accused me of using juju, it must mean that they use juju on him. Is it their juju that causes him to forget even me, his own wife?"

"Madam, I dey ask where you dey go?"

Mrs. Ezuma is still engrossed in her thoughts which are not directed towards the cause of her agony. She no longer admires the paved front yards of the rusty coloured houses as she did when she entered the city. She now notices the small shrines in the yards.

"Yes, is this not Benin, reputed to be the center of juju and magic? No wonder it has turned his head. The girls all visit the shrines and make medicine for the man. Why won't he become
confused and foolish?" Although Ivuoma is now blaming the shrines and the girls, she knows that her problems started ever before her husband, Ubanwa Ezuma, came to Benin. She tries to divert her thoughts towards a review of her relationship with Ubanwa since they got married, but the car stops abruptly, jerking her to reality. The driver opens the door and orders her out.

"Madam! Commot quick! I no know dis kin' woman wey no know where 'im dey go."

"I beg you. I am going to where I'll get a bus to Owerri."

"And we don pass Iyaro long time ago," shouts the driver adding "Now you go pay me extra five naira."

"I'll pay."

The driver slams the door, starts the car and makes a three-point turn on the right side of the dual-carriage way oblivious of the obstruction he is causing other road users. He quickly branches left into Iyahen, a side-street which curves back into Urubi, where he made the turn. The driver does not really need to have gone into the trouble of trying to confuse Ivuoma for although she is looking out through the window, she is not interested in the roads. The huge rubbish dumps catch her attention and nauseate her.

"Such a dirty city," she thinks, "is proper environment for dirty life. No wonder the city has corrupted my man." The taxi is flagged down by a nicely dressed lady who enters after bargaining with the driver. On seeing the lady, Ivuoma cringes in revulsion and recedes to the extreme left side of the seat so as not to let her body touch the lady's.

"Look at her," she says to herself in Igbo. "She is the type who uses her own legs to go in search of men, even other people's husbands."

"Madam, you know me before?" retorts the lady. Ivuoma does not know that she said her thoughts aloud, so she is surprised by what she considers to be an unwarranted outburst.

"Did I call you? What is wrong with you?" She says in English before adding in Igbo, "This town is bad-o."

"The town bad! Wetin you come find for di town? See am!" retorts the lady. Ivuoma keeps quiet. It is obvious that the Lady understands Igbo. There is an uneasy silence.

The taxi driver suddenly breaks into a song:
Poor man dey suffer,
Monkey dey work,
Baboon dey chop.

For the first time since she left the University of Benin, Ivuoma smiles. It is the taxi driver’s jarring metallic voice like that of a frog that she finds funny. Even the frogs in the swamp near her home make better music than this arrogant taxi-driver. She cannot understand why somebody with such a voice should sing.

“A beg, stop your nonsense song!” commands the lady.

“Who be poor man set? Who be monkey? A beg no disturb me with your croaky voice,” she adds. The driver continues his song oblivious of the command. Ivuoma begins to think about the lady’s questions. She feels that she can identify with the poor man of the song. It is at this point that the driver stops to let her out.

“Madam, bring your money-o! This na Iyaro. See bus dem wey dey go East.”

Ivuoma is confronted by a variety of buses with different colours and names. Touts try to hustle her, each trying to make her enter a bus. She ignores them because she is looking out for a particular type of bus whose drivers are reputed to be careful. She soon finds the popular green and white striped “EKENE DILI CHI.” She is about to enter when her eyes scan through the inscription on the bus. She stops and glares at it. Another passenger pushes her slightly as he struggles to enter the bus.

“Sorry Madam,” he says. She steps back angrily. One would have thought that she was reacting to the passenger’s push. She did not even notice him. She was questioning the inscription on the bus. She is repelled by the bus because she feels that the name, “EKENE DILI CHI” is inappropriate for her present mood.

“There is nothing to thank God for”, she contradicts the inscription on the bus, and continues her search for another one. The sparkling white, green and orange colors of a bus whose horn is blaring catches her attention. She reads the name, “UHURU.” It looks familiar but she cannot place the bus or the name. However, she enters and finds that it is almost full.

“Come in. Aba so-sei, so-sei,” sings the conductor.
“T I am going to Owerri.”
"You no go find bus to Owerri," declares the conductor, before advising her.

"Take dis one, stop for Owerri. Na same price, no more, no less!" He looks away casually as if he is no longer interested in attracting Ivuoma to his bus and starts humming the music issuing from the bus' radio. Ivuoma feels that the sooner she leaves the city the better for her so she pays the conductor and proceeds into the belly of the bus.

While locating a seat, Ivuoma ruminates on the taxi-driver's song and tries to find her place in his satire. She no longer sees herself as the poor man but as the monkey who is suffering. Certainly, the girls are the baboons who are enjoying her husband and his money.

"I dey greet-o-o," salutes a middle-aged woman as Ivuoma passes by her to occupy an empty seat next to the window.

"Sorry Ma, good evening. It is the noise of this their music that won't let me hear you." As if in response to Ivuoma's complaint about the music, the driver's mate intones the lyric thereby adding to the noise:

Free world is saying,
Kill this apart-heid,
Africans are singing,
Freedom to your mind,
Yes!
Now, yes!

"I don't know the freedom they are singing about," Ivuoma complains again, sighing.

"Ah-a. That is a bad sound, my daughter," the middle-aged woman says in response to the sound just made by Ivuoma.

Ivuoma sighs again, "I am very sorry. I was thinking about my life. A woman's life is not easy," she says sitting down.

"Life no easy at all," the woman declares instantly before repeating herself for emphasis "No life is easy, my child."

"You won't understand," replies Ivuoma before becoming engrossed in her thoughts. Her mind wanders to her happy life as a student and she compares it with her present life.

"Just imagine how my education was halted prematurely because of marriage to a man who now treats me like a common dog who eats shit! After two children, he has deserted me." She
sighs again shifting in her seat uncomfortably, before continuing with her musing.

"Now I realise my mistake. If only I had listened to my father and finished my course, I would now have something to build upon. Now it is too late. How do I take care of two children all alone? I can't even improve myself by going back to school." Her eyes have become glazed with unshed tears.

"And now I am too old to go back to school and I cannot ..."

She is thrown against the woman as the bus makes a sharp bend. It is only now that she realises that the bus has left the Iyaro motor park.

"Sorry Ma." Ivuoma apologises to the woman.

"No worry, my pickin. It is not your fault."

Her accurate English sometimes mixed with pidgin makes Ivuoma suspect that the woman belongs to two worlds. Ivuoma's love for adventure and languages had excited her about coming to Benin but her experience in the city has wiped off her initial enthusiasm about mixing with and learning the languages of peoples from different ethnic groups found in the city.

"Madam, are you from Benin?"

The woman is surprised by this question coming from her moody companion.

"I am an Universal, my child. I lived in Benin for a very long time, but now I am Universal." Ivuoma wonders at the country called Universal. She cannot remember in which continent to locate it. The woman notices the confusion on Ivuoma's face and explains.

"I belong to wherever I find myself, my child. Although I was born in the eastern part of the River Niger, I consider myself a Bini because I have lived and worked in Benin for a very long time, after all our people say that "Where one lives is where she thatches." The woman suspects that the young woman does not fully understand the explanation. This does not surprise her because Africans tend to tie a person with the village where his or her forebears lived irrespective of the person's choice of place of residence and work. So she proceeds to give the younger woman a tit-bit that would broaden her perspective.

"I am from Benin today, tomorrow I may be from Sokoto or even the Moon. The nature of my work is such that I move from one city to another, from one State to the other, studying the
problems of the ordinary peoples, noting their commonality and knowing that human beings are the same irrespective of creed and origin. You can see that I am right in regarding myself as an Universal because I have been moving, working, and easily identifying with the peoples I work with although they are not from my great-grandfather's village. Maybe one day, this work will take me to other parts of Africa and the world. And I will find out that we are still the same."

"What work do you do, Ma?" Ivuoma asks with fresh reverence.

"I am involved in the Adult Education programme for rural dwellers and I am on my way to Ekwuoma to see to the establishment of the program there. Do you have a similar program in your area?"

"No," Ivuoma shakes her head, "I have only heard of 'Better Life for Rural Women'."

"The program is for all rural dwellers," the woman corrects Ivuoma, before asking, "How did you know about it, if you do not have it in your place?"

"I used to hear about it on the radio."

"Then you must see that it is introduced in your town."

Ivuoma is amused by this idea which appears far-fetched, but she does not show it. However, she now looks at the woman with a new respect. She has not seen many women of such stature before. The most influential women in her experience were the Principal and her deputy at the Teacher's College where she studied for two years prior to her marriage with Ubanwa Ezuma. Once again, she recollects how her plans to further her education were prematurely halted by marriage.

The woman notes that Ivuoma has reverted to her thoughts and interrupts her with an observation.

"You are unhappy, my child. You should not allow whatever it is to weigh you down."

"You do not understand. If you know my story, you will see that it is big enough to weigh down anybody." Ivuoma answers.

"What story?" The middle aged woman continues, encouraged by Ivuoma's apparent readiness to open up.

"The stories of life are not different from each other. The details may differ but the essentials are the same." She remarks in a casual manner that annoys Ivuoma. The woman then changes her tone, looks deeply at Ivuoma and asks, "You are not more
than twenty years old?"
    Ivuoma nods in affirmation.
    "What is it that a child of twenty has seen that will shake me.
You are married, I guess?"
    Ivuoma nods again.
    "Then it is your husband?"
    Ivuoma is silent.
    "You do not wish to talk about it."
    Ivuoma is still silent.
    "Your husband does not give you money?"
    "Worse than that," replies Ivuoma.
    "He sees other women?"
    "Worse than that."
    "You caught him in bed with another woman?"
    Ivuoma hesitates before answering. "Still, worse than that."
    "Then, what is it?"
    Ivuoma, again, is silent.

    The woman takes pity on the girl who looks like a rat beaten
to the ground, just as she had looked many times when she was
the wife of Osaigbovo.
    "My daughter, I shall not allow you to mourn, unnecessarily.
I have a daughter like you and it will pain me if she dwells on
her problem instead of trying to solve them. Everybody has a
problem. I have had many. Whatever is your problem at your age
cannot be more serious than what I suffered at your age as an
illiterate wife of a soldier." The woman notices how glowingly this
admonition has lit up Ivuoma's countenance, so she continues
the story of her life.
    "I was brought up in a remote village near the River Niger. I
came back from the stream one morning. Do you know what?
My father told me to pack my things and follow my aunt who had
just given birth to a baby in Benin. That was how I started living
with my aunt and her husband. My father enjoined me to obey
her always and to take good care of my nephew. He said that he
did not know when I would be allowed to return since the baby
was still young but that he was certain the umbilical cord linking
me with my mother and twin brother would remain strong and
would not allow me to forget home. He said he would use my
salary of ten shillings a month to send my brother to school. I
saw myself then as a special person on whom the fortune and
future of our family depended. So, in spite of my attachment to my father and brother, I left home without much weeping."

"What of your mother?" asks Ivuoma.

"My mother had died a few months earlier while giving birth to a child that also died. In fact my father was still wearing mourning clothes at the time of my departure."

The woman notices Ivuoma’s sympathetic face and asks, "Is your mother alive?"

Ivuoma sighs before replying, "She died long ago."

"So we are sisters in many ways," comments the older woman.

"I never really knew my mother," says Ivuoma with another sigh.

"Poor child. And your father?"

"He is still alive, the only father and mother I know, the only man I can depend on. Please, continue with your story. How did you marry?"

"Do not be in a hurry. We have a long way to go before Ekwuoma, so I shall tell you the whole story," replies the woman before continuing.

"My life in Aunt Mode’s house was one of misery. I was beaten and constantly reminded that my father and brother depended on the money paid them by her husband who was a corporal in the army. I looked after the baby in the morning when my aunt was at work in the Hospital where she worked as a cleaner. In the afternoon when she came back, I hawked medicine and kai-kai in the neighbourhood. That was how I met Osaigbovo, my husband. It was easy for me to fall in love with the first person who showed concern for me in a hostile environment. I used to give him extra shots of the local gin because I was grateful for his attention and protection. He was strong, so no other recruit could touch me. When they finished training, he was posted to Uselu. I used to sneak out to visit him until the day my aunt’s husband found out."

The woman claps her hand in excitement. Her face lit up in triumph. "Do you know what he did?" She whispers to Ivuoma. She draws near in a conspiratory manner.

"What?" Ivuoma asks in a whisper.

"My aunt’s husband said to me, 'Well, since other men take you from my house, I must have my own cut. If you agree, fair enough. If you don't allow me, I'll report the matter.'"
"What did you do? I hope you did not .... ."
"Wait." The woman interrupts her and continues. "I said to him, that's my aunt's husband, Uncle Mat."
"Ye-es." Ivuoma cuts in impatiently for she is eager to hear the substance of the story.
"I said to Uncle Mat, 'I am coming. Let me go and get ready.' He started getting himself ready, you understand?" At this point, the woman laughs.
"What happened?"
"I never returned to the room to find out what happened to him. As for me, I packed my things, jumped out through the window and made straight for Osai's house in Uselu. That was how I got married to Osaigbovo. He just welcomed me and before long, we were married traditionally and he started paying my brother's fees."
"Hei! This story is sweet-o," declares Ivuoma, "Just wait, sister, that was only the beginning. My husband's mother did not like me. She looked at her son, looked at me and said 'Ebo, it is your yellow skin that you have used to kill my son.' Osaigbovo laughed but his mother did not smile. I felt cold, very cold and I used my palm to wipe off goose pimples from my skin. I knew she hated me. I told Osaigbovo that I was afraid but he said that it was nothing. That was the beginning of my trouble."
"My mother-in-law started weaving a basket for me. I was already heavy with my twins."
"You are a mother of twins?"
"Yes, a boy and girl."
"Just like me and my brother."
"I knew that there were links between us. They are showing gradually. I could easily have been your mother."
"But my brother died and I never knew him."
"Then you are really a survivor, Africa-never-die. 'Im no easy o-o. To survive the death of a twin and mother. You are spiritually strong, do you know that?"
"I think so." Ivuoma replies, "because I sometimes feel my mother's spirit around me especially when I am in distress. But, let us go on with this interesting story."
"It was a good thing that I was already heavy by the time Osai's mother knew of her son's involvement with a non-Bini. She
started making things difficult for me. First, she tied my womb. Before she could complete the process of knotting it, my twins were forced out at seven months. She might have completed the knotting after I had put to bed because I have never been pregnant since then."

"This is terrible. Tying her son's wife and blocking the coming of her own grand-children!"

"Never mind, she knew what she was doing. As for me, my umbilical cord ties my two children and the link is really strong!" She declares and then continues with the story.

"Although she blocked my womb, she continued weaving her basket relentlessly. I did not know all these at the time. I thought that with a boy and a girl and a man who loved me, I had established myself. I devoted my life to my family while my mother-in-law continued weaving her basket."

"It was when my husband started coming home late that I realised the extent of his mother's hatred for me. The way she gloated when I complained to her about my husband haunted me for a long time. I could not turn to my husband. I threw myself further into my family because my husband had refused to allow me trade or even...." The sudden blaring of the bus' horn interrupts her story. The passengers, all look out for the cause of the driver's agitation. He is overtaking a long line of cars in a corner and using his horn to dare any of the cars to challenge his right and might. The conductor is shouting;

"Get off, tadpole cars,  
Onward Freedom!  
That's my name!  
Uhuru! Uhuru!  
Movement to freedom!"

Though the passengers are uneasy about the speed, none dares complain for fear of the sting of the conductor's tongue or upsetting the driver who might become self-conscious or even reckless. Only Ivuoma ventures to talk.

"Driver please-o."

The conductor quickly admonishes her. "Shut your nonsense mouth, woman. This na Uhuru. Freedom by flight!" Ivuoma wanted to retort but the woman restrains her.

"You no go match his prowess in quarrelling. Na part of his
trade. Don’t worry yourself. That is how they behave. Only the police can put a check to their irresponsibility but the police is not interested. That’s why people tolerate them."

One thing Ivuoma has gained from the outburst is that she now knows why the bus appeared familiar. The name, “Uhuru,” featured in one East African novel she had read years ago.

When the bus steadies, she turns to the woman, “E-he-e. Please, continue.”

“How your mother-in-law rejoiced when you were unhappy. She is so unlike my own mother-in-law.”

“Well, a few days after I reported my husband to his mother, he brought home a young girl, saying that his mother said that I needed somebody to help in the house and keep me company so that I would not be keeping a whole man prisoner. I was happy to have the girl, Odion. We got on well, but, I did not know then that by accepting her, I was putting my feet into the basket woven for me. You know how girls are when they start maturing. She started insulting me, beating my children, going out without permission and coming back when she liked. That was just similar to the way my husband was behaving. I beat up Odion and told Osai that his bad example was starting to take its toll, first on the girl and maybe later on my children. The beating my husband gave me that day, I have never forgotten. He said that he had never beaten me before and I had no right to beat Odion. Although I fought back courageously, throwing things at him and cuffing Odion who was on my way when I was running to my room, I felt humiliated. I felt like running away from the house but I had nowhere to run to. From that day, he started taking sides with Odion in quarrels between her and my children or me. He never saw anything wrong with her going too frequently to his mother’s house. I discovered that I had lost my man completely when he accused me of wanting the girl to hate his mother as I did. “Woman, you are insatiable. You complain of loneliness, and my mother was kind enough to bring you a companion. Since then, you turn on the poor girl because she loves my mother. I don’t know what you want,” he shouted and stormed out of the house.”

“What did you do?”

“I insisted that Odion should leave the house immediately or else apologise for causing trouble in the family. She apologised
He Wants to Marry Me Again

and promised to be of good behaviour. It was a trick."

"How?"

"It did not take long before the whole plan opened before me like a book. Odion was pregnant. I questioned her. She packed her things and went to live with my mother-in-law."

"So, that was how I was inside water and soap entered my eyes. Who would I turn to? Not my husband or his mother. I had lost contact with Aunt Mode and her husband. I told my husband I wanted to go and see my father. He complained that he had no money for my transportation. A quarrel ensued because I was sure that he had enough money. He was just being spiteful. In the midst of the quarrel, he stormed out of the house leaving me to roost in my venom. That was when and how things became clear to me. I was nothing. I could not write to my brother who was then in a Secondary School in Warri, because I was illiterate. I could not visit my father because I had no money for transportation." At this point in the story, Ivuoma's mind diverts to her own predicament and she considers herself lucky to have a job.

"How lucky I am to have a job. Although I would have had a better job if I had finished my course before marriage, I still thank God for what I have," she thinks.

"My sister, are you listening?"

"Of course," Ivuoma replies.

"You will not believe what I did."

"What did you do?" asks Ivuoma.

"I forced open my husband's cupboard and took money from there."

"You were not afraid of what he would do when he found out?"

"I wanted to achieve my aim first and later worry about the consequences. What else would I have done?"

"There was no other option, Ma." Ivuoma replies.

"I told my children that they would not find me when they returned from school and left to see my father." The bus screeches to a halt.

"Jasper, an Inspector dey with dem-o! So, one naira no go belle full dem-o!" shouts the driver to his mate who is already asking the passengers to change a ten naira note for him to smaller notes.

"I know. Na Im I dey find change so. I go give dem five naira,"
replies the conductor. A policeman enters the bus and the mate shakes his hand with a five naira note as the driver impatiently revs the engine and makes to release the clutch at the same time. The bus jerks and the policeman now smiling jumps out and salutes,

"Uhurul!"

"Yeah, brother" replies the mate, "We are moving on. To freedom."

"So open?" wonders Ivuoma in astonishment.

"This is why corruption no go die for this country. Who will check who?" This is the woman's reply because she also saw how the money passed into the hands of the law enforcement agent. They remain silent for some time before Ivuoma asks, "Did you go back to your husband's house?"

"I came back that very day. He never knew of the trip."

"And the cupboard?"

"I had wanted it to be the cause of a quarrel and probably another fight but after my father's counsel, I changed tactics. When I came back, I got a carpenter to repair it."

"He did not miss his money?" Ivuoma asks.

"How could a man who loved women and the bottle have a proper account of his money? He did not find out. Let me go on with the better part of the incident. I met my father and brother who was home for a short break."

"What did they say?"

"My father had wanted me to return home with my children instead of risking my life in the house of a man who no longer cared for me. He believed that it would make Osai return to his senses. Then he would come to renegotiate the terms of the marriage. I convinced him that it would not work. Osai was not tradition-bound. He just used tradition as it suited him. He was city-bred and military in orientation. My father then said that I should come and start life afresh in the village. But how could I? I had become used to city life from an early age. I could no longer fit into the dull life in the village. Moreover, how could I pay my children's school fees without a job? And what of my brother whose education would be halted? My brother said that he could find a small job with the little education he had received. Then he would pay my children's school fees. But how could all of us depend on the small boy like that and even halt his
ambition? I refused to leave my husband. Then my brother came up with a brilliant idea which influenced our decision. With our father's village wisdom, I changed tactics. Instead of fighting and quarrelling, I started weaving my own basket.

"I became happy and determined. Do you know that I started learning how to read and write? My children were my teachers. By the time they entered Secondary school, I had reached their own level. By that time, my brother had finished and got a job. He wanted me to leave my husband and move to his house. I refused.

I knew that he would not be able to support all of us. I did not want to leave my children in Osaigbovo's house for his mother to kill. My brother started sending books and money to me and more books. I was reading on my own. My husband did not find out. He was busy sharing his time between my house and his mother's where Odion was living with her children. When the government started the Adult Education programme at all levels, I told my husband that I wanted to go to school. He was amused but he did not object. He said that I was so idle that I needed something to occupy me and that I could go to school and fool myself at my age. 'What will you do with education even if an old woman like you can get it?' I had developed a thick skin to his insults. I continued weaving my basket. After the interview, I was placed in Secondary class two. My husband never realised how far I had gone until I entered University of the Air."

"How did he find out? Through the children?"

"No, Odion was having problems with our mother-in-law and our husband moved her to my house. I did not resist. All I wanted was peace so that I could finish my studies. But, Odion wanted trouble. She engineered her children to make noise whenever I was reading and sometimes, she would stop the radio during a lecture and a quarrel would ensue. She told our husband that I was wasting electricity too much by having the radio on all the time. That was how he knew I had entered University of the Air. He slapped me and threatened to throw me out of the house if I ever touched the radio again. That was the second time my husband beat me. And on each occasion, it was because of Odion. I did not fight back, physically. I just kept quiet on the surface. My mind was on the basket I was weaving. I wrote to my brother who was then teaching in his former school in Warri. I informed him that Osaigbovo's house was no longer conducive..."
for my educational pursuit. At that point, I had nothing at stake in the house. My children were already in the University of Benin. I was prepared to leave.

About a month later, my daughter came home from the University. As soon as she saw Odion, she became livid with rage. 'You! You again! After what you did to us, you think you can still come here and cause ...' I held her, closed her mouth with my hands and took her to my room. I let her into the secret of the basket I was weaving: we should not dissipate our energy on physical combat but concentrate on improving ourselves so that we would not be helpless again. She agreed with me and told me that her uncle, my brother, sent her to come and tell me to meet a certain woman in Adolo College, Benin."

"Yam market, yam market, Umunede! Some people dey go off here. Quick, quick!" The driver's mate interrupts the story and the woman realises that she is near her destination which is the next town after Umunede.

"Well, my child who is also my sister, I shall be getting down soon, so I must cut my story short." The bus takes off with speed, and the woman starts gathering her things.

"Please, tell me what happened." Ivuoma begs for the story to continue.

As she puts her things together, she says, "Well, my story has ended. Leaving my husband was the beginning of my freedom. There is no time to tell you the details."

Ivuoma decides to take the woman's address.

"I finished my first University degree living with Mrs. Anucha, the woman my brother introduced me to in Adolo College. I was her housekeeper. Today I have two degrees, a good job and a proud personality." The bus stops and as she makes for the aisle, she adds, "Osaigbovo is now my friend. He comes to my house to complain about Odion and his third wife."

"What?"

"Yes. He married a third wife." she says as she disembarks.

From the ground, she tells Ivuoma through the window, "He wants me to forget the past and marry him again," she chuckles and emphasises, "He wants me to forget the two complications, but I remind him that I am too old to marry." Still chuckling, she adds, "Education has got the old woman a husband which she rejects." She is laughing as the bus moves on. The woman's
success story raises Ivuoma’s hopes and aspirations but her own predicament and the fact that she failed to collect the woman’s address and name combine to distress her. She starts reviewing the whole story in detail.
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-light's 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
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
He Wants to Marry Me Again...

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. "After all 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. After all 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 loneliness 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 *Ekene nu 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 relations. 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?"

"He! Mamma. But you can bluff-o. Where did you get Avon"

"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."
The Kolanuts are all Dead 41

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
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 ...”

“Mammal” 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 colour 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 hurried 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?"
"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 dawned on her.
"I have never thought that she does any thing 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.
"You see. 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
The Kolanuts are all Dead  57

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 garrt. 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
The Kolanuts are all Dead

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. He! 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.


"Hei!" 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 cliche 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.
Resurrection Before Burial

From his room where he is reading the feature article, "Tradition and Change," in his favourite weekly, Gadfly, Owen Junior hears a car move out of the compound for the fourth time since he woke up about an hour ago. He parts the curtains overlooking the gate and sees the guard opening the gate for another vehicle, a mini-bus. He ponders on the unusual vehicular movements in and out of the compound for a while before continuing with his reading. Presently, he hears the sound of drumming and promptly drops the magazine to find out what is happening. As he closes the door of his room, he sees his sister emerging from the staircase.

"Hey! Amen, what are they doing outside?"
"Who?"
"All those people making noise."
"Where were you? You mean, you don't know what is happening?"
"What is it that is happening?" asks Owen.
"Where were you? Of course I know. The undergraduate must have his siesta."
"Little girl, I have just no time for you this afternoon. I have legs that can lead me to find out myself." As Owen bypasses her to go down the stairs, she now decides to volunteer the information.
"Anyway, big boy, we are going to have a party. That is the reason for the noise. The bus brought the musicians and they want to see Mummy because Daddy has travelled to Benin to make other arrangements."
"What party. What arrangements? Nobody is having his birthday now."
"Somebody is having his death-day."
"Death-day?"
"Yes, death-day."
"You mean that somebody died."
"Yes, Daddy's Daddy."
"So, the old man has finally died?"
"Has he been trying to die before?" mocks his sister.

Although slightly piqued by this verbal swipe, Owen Junior ignores his sister and calls, "Mummy."
"You won't find her, Mr. Snob. She has gone to the market to buy things for the party."

Mrs. Oghogho Edokpolor is sitting on a high stool in front of a store in Tejuosho market scrutinising the material being unfolded for her. The smart trader studies her countenance as his boy unfolds a bale of black lace material for her. Sensing that she is not impressed, he quickly brings another black material decorated with a shiny border, and signals his boy to withdraw. He notices the brightening up of her face even as she wipes off sweat with her handkerchief. "This one is fine," she says and asks, "How many yards do you have?" This question gives the trader the idea that this customer must be "loaded with money" because customers normally ask for the price first to ascertain whether it is within their reach before asking for the number of yards. He therefore lures her into the store so that another seller would not attract her with a new design.

"Madam, di heat too much today-o. Come inside make fan cool your body."
"How many yards you get?" The trader still ignores this question because he does not have many yards of it. He leads her into the store and directs her to a chair before answering her question.
"Thank you, Madam. True, true, we get fine material. No customer go come for inside this my shed without seeing fine material to buy." He still ignores the question accompanying the compliment for he does not want her to go to another store. As she sits down, the trader orders his boy to bring her a very cold bottle of coca cola. He then brings out a shiny black material decorated with transparent stones which catch the colours of its environment.
"Wonderfull! I have not seen this one before."
"Na new design. Na only yesterday item bring am come from Cotonou, Cameroons. You know, dem import material from France. Not like dis place where dem insist on made in Nigeria. But I know say high calibre woman like you no go like to buy local material."
"I cannot even allow material that is made here to touch my body let alone buying it. My husband will not like me to disgrace him in public by wearing an inferior material. God forbid!" Mrs. Edokpolor replies impressed by the seller's acknowledgement of her copious look.

"My brother dey bring me made in France material. So I dey get designs wey other traders no get." The woman is impressed. The boy offers her a bottle of coca cola which she accepts while repeating her question, "How many yards ..." This time, the trader does not allow her to finish the question before quickly replying.

"I get am plenty. How many yards you want?"

"I need the material for aso ebi for up to thirty people. It is for a big burial. My husband and myself, our two children, and close friends shall wear it."

"I no sure say you go fit buy dis one for thirty people." The trader informs her again testing the strength of her pocket. "No worry. Just tell me whether you have plenty." The trader now confirms that money is not the problem because the woman still has not asked about the price.

"A person who get too much money for waste for expensive uniform for burial no dey pity him money. No be me go pity am," the trader muses as he unrolls yards of the material while silently thanking his stars for bringing this cash madam to his store. He resolves to 'milk' the woman by doubling the price of the material.

"Madam, dis cloth fine well well. How many yards you say you want?"

"Aso ebi for thirty people. Let's say about six yards for one person."

"Madam, buy five metres for one person."

"I don't know whether it will be enough."

"I'm go reach. Buy five meter for one person. Na double meter. Na one ten a meter."

"One ten what?"

"Na hundred and ten pounds Madam. Na so we dey sell. We dey buy am with foreign money so we sell in foreign...."

"I am not questioning the logic. I only want to know the currency. I have dollars here not pounds. If you insist on pounds...."

"Sorry Ma. I no mean to annoy you. I go accept dollars. Dollar-o, pound-o, even sef Cameroon money, all na money pass
“What is the last price?” asks Mrs. Edokpolor.

“Madam, I don look you. You be high class. So, na last price I give you, but I go give small discount.”

“Okay bring for thirty people.”

The trader’s boy uses his calculator to compute the amount and informs the woman.

“Hundred and ten pounds times thirty times five is sixteen thousand five hundred pounds only. Convert to dollars na thirty three thousand dollars. Discount bring am down to thirty thousand.”

Mrs. Edokpolor begins to bring out bundles of dollars.

A mercedes 250 XXL saloon car is entering the compound of River Side Clinic for the second time today. The cleaners look up from the lawn. The chauffeur comes out first and runs to the other side of the car to open the door for a man clad in expensive red agbada and sitting on the right side corner of the back seat popularly known as ‘owner’s corner.’ The cleaner whispers loudly to his mate, “That is Chief Owen Edokpolor. The man is big director for big company in Lagos and London and America.”

“I tink dis na di second time I see di car here today. Wetin ‘im dey come to do for dis small place?”

“It is because of that nurse who looks like stockfish. She is the one he is looking for. She says the man is her brother.”

“How can? That bone no go fit be sister to dis shiny flesh wey I see just now.”

“It is true. Their Papa is the dead man or maybe almost dead man who is in the private room.”

“Iye mwee! Party don land for big man house. Make I begin purge my belle, evacuate di bad food inside it, make big space for better food wey I go eat for di man’s orbito. For which side dem live sef?”

“We shall soon know when they announce the burial arrangements. The only problem is that they have not allowed him to see his Papa.”

“Why?” Maybe him don die and dem wan prepare di body for burial.”

“I don’t know. Nurse Meg says that it is the doctor’s order. She
is the only one who is allowed to enter the room."

"Wit doctor no-ow. Mh. I no know wetin di doctor dey find for her body."

"Don't talk like that. The doctor is kind to all of us not just Nurse Meg."


The chief has entered the reception hall. He looks disdainfully around and again wonders how his friends can accompany him to this low class place to bring his father's corpse. He walks to the doctor's room, knocks and without waiting for any response, enters immediately. Instead of the doctor, it is his half sister, Meg, he meets.

"Who be that?" She looks up and recognises her elder brother.

"Koo Broda," she greets in Edo.

"Where is the doctor?" he asks without acknowledging her greeting.

"He hasn't come."

"Is this how he runs his hospital, in absentia? No wonder my father died here!"

"He hasn't died yet, Bro."

"Then let us transfer him to a better hospital."

"This hospital is good, Bro."

"My father should die in a Teaching Hospital not in this dingy place. My friends will laugh at me."

"But he is recovering."

"Are you sure he is recovering?"

"I don't know. He may die. He is in the hand of God."

"I want him in my own hands. He must be out of this place. I have arranged for an ambulance."

"But you cannot move him in his state. He will die in your hands and people will talk."

"Then let the doctor do it immediately."

"I'll tell him when he comes."

There is another knock. "Who is that?"

"Na me. Edokpolor Edokpolor."

Nurse Meg opens the door for another half brother, the most senior in the family. After a snappy exchange of greetings, the senior son informs her that he has not found the key to their
father's room. His half brother, who loathes him, gives him a contemptuous look before leaving the room unceremoniously.  
“What do you want from the room?” asks Nurse Meg.  
“I wan paint am.”  
“But it is only the outside that you people are painting.”  
“Visitors go enter 'im room see 'im corpse so I go paint di inside.”  
“But Papa is not yet dead.”  
“Yes but 'im don dey die. Him go die soon by di grace of God.”  
Nurse Meg grimaces at her brother's verbalisation of his wish for their father's death. She is clearly annoyed although she is not shocked by his attitude. She contains herself to continue with the unpleasant dialogue.  
“Where did you get the money for painting the house? You have never given Papa anything even during the Ague festival which requires you as a first son to pay him homage with presents.”  
“Shut up! You no get any right to talk to me like dat. You be woman and you be my junior. I say, shut up! Make you begin dey find place wey you go live. I no go keep you for dat house after Papa's burial. I just dey warn you now.”  
Ordinarily, she would have felt desperate because of his callousness but she simply gloats over it and instead challenges him.  
“You can't eject me. By tradition I must have a place in my father's house.”  
“After burial, 'im no go be Papa house again. Na my own house 'im go come be. Edokpolor Edokpolor house.”  
“We go see!” she says defiantly.  
“Wetin we go see. A beg give me di key.”  
“Which key?” asks Meg, her mind still on her brother's threat to eject her if their father should die.  
“Papa's room 'im key.”  
“I don't have it.”  
“But you live with am.”  
“He did not give it to me.”  
“Search 'im bag. If you no give me di key when I come back, I go break di door.” He storms out.  
Sister Meg resolves not to tell her father that her brother has declared his intention to eject her from the house when he dies
because he would be worried. She unlocks the private room quietly. Although the door made little noise, her father opens his eyes. She locks the door very quietly and kneels beside her father in greeting. He smiles at her tenderly and raises his once feeble but now strong hand which she holds tenderly for a few moments.

Then she asks, "How are you Papa?"
"I think my body is filling out."
"You look very well."
"Why won't I look well. All di food wey I been dey eat here nko?"
"The bill is almost one thousand naira already." Says Meg.

The old man chuckles, "Make di bill reach two thousand sef. I don't care. Make I chop my own now. How dem dey prepare now? Make you tell me di latest news."
"Your senior son came."
"Edokpolor Edokpolor?"
"Yes."
"Wetin him want? Him wan see if I don die?"
"No. Him wants the key of your room. He has painted the house, na only your room remain."
"My house wey never see paint since your Mama die!" exclaims the old man springing up from the bed.
"Di whole place is white now like that time of my Mamma's obituary."
"Ah Ah... I no want white. 'Im go dirty quick quick. Make dem paint am blue or brown. You know, as di house near di road like dat, 'im go dirty quick quick with white paint."
"But how will I tell him that. You know that he will not listen."
"Dat one no hard at all. When you reach house eh? Just shout am, make everybody hear you. Make small trouble. Say na me tell you my spirit no go want white paint. Him go take fear. Him go change di colour one time."
"What about di key? He will come back."
"Give am di key. Na my bank book 'im dey find but I remove am before I come here." Meg bursts out laughing, then remembering that nobody should hear the sound of laughter coming out of the room of a "dying man," she covers her mouth with both hands while stifling the laughter midway.
"You are really very clever, Papa."
"Cunny man die, cunny man bury am. No be so?" he replies and adds, "Small time my house go get new look too like me."
Resurrection Before Burial

“No be only new look. The house is filling up with food which will last us for many years.” She goes on to explain.

“Brother’s wife sent a lorry load of food all the way from Lagos. Bags of rice, beans, yams, onions, and even Oyibo food wey me no know. Maybe the foreign food is for Bro’s foreign partners.”

“We go sell dem. Di food too much.”

“She sent her housekeeper with one fine bed that shines like gold. She brought bed sheets and fine lace material for decorating the bed on which you would lie in state.”

“We go use di cloth make agbada and you go make your own buba and iro. We go wear am go do thanksgiving to God for church.” Meg looks at him with wonder and admiration.

“No wonder my Mamma been dey call you old monkey. You cunny cunny too much, pass monkey own self.”


“I never understand why he did not finish in school.”


“Why did he leave our house self?”

“Na me commot am when him begin steal. I tell am make ‘im go join ‘im Mamma wey dey do asewo for Lagos street.”

There is silence as Meg watches her father’s robust face with satisfaction. She wonders at the transformation that has taken place since he was admitted a week ago. “So it was really malnutrition that was his problem as the doctor had said,” she thinks maintaining her steady gaze on him. The old man breaks
the silence.

"Na only you be my mistake. Na only you I no train for school. If not for dis small nurse maid wey your Mamma send you go, I for don die. No be only you dey take care of me now?" There is silence again. Again the old man breaks the silence.

"But I go surprise everybody when I die. Even dat house sef. Di useless boy no go get am."

"A beg no give me-o."

"I dey craze? I don arrange with lawyer. No worry. Na when I die people go know say I be real old monkey."

"My Papa, when did you arrange to see a lawyer? I fear you-o, my Papa."

"You tink you go fit know everything I do," he says patting a finger of her plaited hair sticking out of her cap.

"Papa, but you always tell me everything."

"When I die, you go know say 'im get some tings wey I no tell you."

"Like what, Papa?"

"Like wetin I go do di boy wey squander my money. I no go let am squander di small thing wey go remain when I die. No. I wan do something for you wey look after me in this my old age."

"I am happy to be the one living with you. Since my mother's death, you are the only one I have. My brothers don't have time for me. Maybe because their mothers quarrelled with Mamma. Maybe Bro Owen is ashamed of me because I am not educated. As for Bra Edokpolor, he hates everybody. You are all I have to care for." The old man closes his eyes as if in sleep.

Her words have touched him. He has always known that his daughter has a selfless devotion to her loved ones comparable only to her late mother's, but this verbal expression of it has affected him deeply. He recalls how her mother, Esosa, remained faithful to him all the time he recklessly got involved with other women who eventually left him when his fortune started declining. He remembers Iyobosa who declared that he was not the father of her six children and left with all of them. As for Iye Edokpolor and Iye Owen, he believed them to have been witches whose exit from his house was a blessing even though they continued making trouble from outside, "because they gave birth to boys," he thinks. He blesses the memory of Esosa who alone remained faithful to him just as her daughter is doing now. He
silently prays that Meg's loving heart endears her to someone who will merit such a selfless devotion. He smiles at his recollection of how he, himself, has taken care of her in his Will. He has already bought a twin duplex in her name at the Government Housing Estate. His lawyer will make it known to her when he dies. He had sold the house in which they live in order to complete payment for the new house. Meg is still watching him, thinking that he is sleeping peacefully not knowing that his mind is on his Will. He smiles and she thinks he is having a pleasant dream but he is in fact congratulating himself.

"I don play my useless son real game. Cunny man die, cunny man bury am."

Meanwhile, Meg smiles fondly at her father as her mind reviews the event of that night when he called her to his room and intimated her with his plans.

"I wan go hospital."

Meg was alarmed.

"No look like dat. I no sick. I just wan enjoy small. When I die now, my rich son go bring money for big party. I wan enjoy for my obito party now."

Initially, Meg wanted to laugh but the logicality of his plan and the seriousness with which he said it forced her attention and ensured her sobriety.

"I know my son, Owen, rich well well and him no dey give me money because he say I no treat him Mamma well. I know he no like me, me wey send am go school. But, him go spend thousands to bury me when I die. He go do party to rejoice over my haggard dead body. So make I go hospital. You go plan am with that doctor wey dey help you. Him go gree. Una go say I don die or don dey die. My sons go plan obito party. I go resurrect after I don enjoy well well. I go come back for house come wait my death."

GLOSSARY OF UNFAMILIAR WORDS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>agbada</td>
<td>big three piece garment worn by men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aso ebi</td>
<td>uniform</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>buba</td>
<td>blouse</td>
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<tr>
<td>iro</td>
<td>wrapper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iye ruwe</td>
<td>my mother (an exclamation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>koyo</td>
<td>greetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>obito</td>
<td>obituary party</td>
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<tr>
<td>oyibo</td>
<td>of European stock</td>
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Yinka turns round to lie on her belly while stretching her arms wide on the big double-sized bed. Not satisfied with this position, she rolls on to the other half of it and curls herself in a foetal position. This does not soothe her troubled mind as a sudden surge of heat wells up inside her. She glances at the broken down air-conditioner which her son, Dapo, has taken to the repairer two times to no avail. There seems to be a sound breaking into her thoughts. She gets up from the bed straining her ears to ascertain whether the sound is from within her aching head or outside it. She switches on the light as if it has the power to help her determine the kind and source of the sound. The sound, faint and coming from a seemingly long distance, resembles a siren. "Maybe the governor and his entourage .... But where will they be going by this time of the night." She now thinks of the possibility of its coming from an ambulance or a police patrol vehicle. "More likely to be police chasing armed robbers." She thinks, recalling the spate of armed robbery in recent times. She never could contemplate how people were able to sleep peacefully with the threat posed by these night marauders. As for her, it was by the singular luck of her husband's place in the political class that she had police guards for the house the family occupied in the State's Council Quarters. But now, things have changed. As soon as Party for Progress, her husband's party, lost in the last elections, they had to move out of the Council house to their present house at Ugbowo estate which is as vulnerable as any other part of Benin City.

Yinka cannot complain about their loss of power for she has always regarded it as the bane of her family problems. She has always been comfortable even before her husband became a politician. How comfortable, she queries herself looking around the room? Her eyes scan the persian rug which a party member had presented her as a birthday gift, "in appreciation of your husband's good gestures to me," he had told her without
revealing that her husband had taken the party's share of the proceeds from the rural electrification contract which was not even executed and that he then had his eye on another contract to mobilise women for effective participation in politics, a venture which would require the presence of Yinka as wife of one of the ruling men. The air-conditioner has packed up but it is the least of her problems now. Her eyes rest on her husband's side of the bed which he has not slept on for several years. In the Council house, he was always preoccupied with one political activity or another both day and night. With the change in her husband's political fortunes, she had hoped their domestic life would be better. But she is disappointed as things have become even worse.

She queries the wisdom behind her continued use of their double-sized bed which occupies the larger part of this room that is smaller than the one she occupied at the Council quarters. It represents for her a repository of memories that are better forgotten. She decides that it is high time she removed it and substitute it with a smaller but cozier one. The blaring sound now becomes more discernible. "It is definitely a police siren," she thinks, and turns on her back and continues her ruminations. "Armed robbers have struck. Who is the victim this time." She shudders at the unjustness, the cruelty of some people who use force of arms to rob others of what rightly belongs to them. In a sudden flash of epiphany, her mind begins to draw a congruence between the robbers' forcefully dispossessing people of their property and the deprivation she is currently undergoing in her own home. The heat wells up inside her causing her to get up from the bed. She hears the clock chiming, three times. By now her head is so hot that she has to resort to the only thing that assuages her headache these days which is taking her complaints to her Maker. And she always chooses the living room for this communion especially at times like this when her own room has become psychologically stifling and physiologically oppressive to her. The siren blares again. She is now sure of herself and concludes that a big robbery must be taking place in the land. She gently opens her door and tiptoes through the corridor bypassing her husband's room. She makes to knock on the door of the room where her husband now sleeps to see if he will open up to her now, but decides that it is better to proceed to the Arbiter who never fails her.
She is still kneeling in front of the statue of Infant Jesus when she hears the creaking sound of a door being opened. Maybe one of the children is going to the toilet, she thinks, glancing sideways once and continuing with her prayers. "... that I continue to thank you for Dapo's admission into the University, for Ayo's continued excellence. Protect all of us from robbers of all kinds who now operate both at night and during the day depriving people of their possessions through deceit, intimidation, and force of arms. Peace has eluded my home for a long time, My Lord and my God. Please, whatever has made my husband restless since yesterday ..."

"Olayinka!"

She recognises her husband's voice. She is not startled. At least he is now out of his room and has decided to talk. She is, however, disturbed because from the way he has called her, she knows something is amiss. It is only on very rare occasions that he calls her name in full the way he has just done and those are usually when things are not normal. That was how he addressed her recently when he broke the news of his party's defeat in the last elections. Under normal circumstances, he calls her Yinka or more fondly Yinkus. She neither turns to answer his call nor continues with her prayers. She waits. He waits.

"Olayinka Adebayo." Yinka is now convinced that something terrible must have gone wrong. Even though the call this time is more gentle, it is no less menacing. What is more, he has called her by her maiden name, something he has not done for twenty years now. And the way he almost spelt out every letter in them ... She sighs, turns her head in his direction, slowly, almost slower than he had called her name. The now blaring siren does not scare her nor disturb the slow movement of her neck in response to her husband's call which is more menacing than the threat of robbery communicated by the siren.

She screams at the "apparition" she beholds. The piercing sound of her voice synchronises with the siren to rouse and draw out the children, Dapo and Ayo, who run out promptly as if they, themselves, have been apprehensive of an emergency. The scene looks like horned Chamcha confronting his wife and her lover in *Satanic Verses*. It is the kind of situation which Dapo with his rather queer sense of humour would have used to thrill his mother or his colleagues in the drama class except that this particular one appears too bizarre for such a pastime. Ayo grips
her brother's arm and in her fright digs her fingers into his skin as if her grip is not firm enough to strangulate the poor boy who is equally appalled by the "apparition." Yinka's mouth has remained open after the initial scream that brought her children out of their rooms.

"My wife." This time, the call has a tinge of desperation but it appeals to Yinka's bond with her husband. She starts to rise from her kneeling position. Dapo cannot understand the scene. He struggles to free himself from Ayo to see if he can seize the cutlasses. He cannot understand why she would not let go his hands. He begins to bump his buttocks backwards to get his sister off him thereby hurting her tommy while pulling his imprisoned hands. Suddenly, he lets out a scream. Ayo's teeth has dug into his neck.

Ogundele quickly drops the cutlasses on the floor, temporarily abandoning his own mission, in a desperate bid to free Dapo from his sister's grip. Both husband and wife join hands in dealing with the crisis; a cooperation that has eluded them for a long time now. As soon as she loses hold of her brother, she launches wildly. It is her father who receives the punches. "Ayo! Ayo!" Two shakes bring her back to her senses. She starts weeping. She is now in her father's arms. It is Dapo who demands an explanation. He calmly turns to his mother, "Is the family going mad or are we rehearsing a scene from House of Horror?" His mother does not answer him but follows him to his room. Dapo knows that he will definitely unravel this puzzle but he must wait. His father's elusiveness has given him the opportunity to cultivate the friendship of some political enthusiasts on the campus who are just beginning to constitute themselves into an influential study cum action group. They first "dissect" a problem through discussions and arguments before mapping out strategies for action. That was how they arrived at the decision to vote another political party into power to see whether they would be better than Progress Party. Once convinced that it was the right thing, he went along with the plan against his father's party.

Sitting on the couch, calming his daughter, Mr. Ogundele begins to appreciate, for the first time, how big the girl has grown. He recalls her as a baby and wonders how and when she has grown into this big woman almost too large for him to carry in his strong arms. He scans her body smugly sleeping in his arms.
just as when she was a baby and shudders at the thought of her fright at seeing him with matchets. "Did she think I wanted to use the implements on them? How could she think of such an outrageous thing? Doesn't she know how much I love my family?"

He continues looking at her as if to extract, from her sleeping body, the answers to his questions. It shocks him to realise that as a father, he cannot foretell her answers to such questions. For the first time since Prudent People, the new political party, came into power, he realises that he has something more precious than his political life. His wife has always drawn an analogy between the political system and the family. He recalls her counsel that one member of the family can upset its balance and cause crisis which, if not properly arrested, can "tear the whole fabric of the organisation apart." He remembers how hard she tried to make him appreciate that his public life is dynamically part of his domestic life just as the internal and external affairs ministries of the political system are connected. He of course had drawn a dichotomy between the two and zealously pursued the external affairs. And now that it has crashed, "Shall I be able to pick up the pieces of my family?" He wonders thinking of his family as a shattered clay pot.

Ogundele has pumped all his time, effort and money into the elections. When he lost, Yinka tried to convince him to accept defeat graciously and other people's rule for a change.

"But they are not the people's choice. They bribed the electoral officers and manipulated the result." He has said in reply to his wife's counsel.

"It is God's will." She replied refraining from reminding him that others said the same thing about his party's success at the polls on the two previous occasions it won elections.

"God's will that the person who is ruling us is corrupt?"

"There must be a reason for it," Yinka has replied, adding, "a reason that we mortals do not know. If it is not God's will, He would have prevented it."

"Woman, it is annoying when you go on like this."

"Maybe we need bad rulers so as to learn how to find a good one and appreciate it when we get that one."

"It is enough now, political and religious preacher," he has sneered at his wife, an indication that he was clearly annoyed. He then pretended not to hear her any longer even though she persisted in making her point. "Dear husband, when you learn
that God works in mysterious and miraculous ways, you'll be able to understand and accept His will. Not that you won't try your best but you must use the talents ..."

"I said that is enough!"

"I have not finished." She entreatingly insisted, "Once you have used the talents God gave you and in a positive way too, then you leave the rest to God. We should not fold our hands and wait for God's will but should learn to be happy with our achievement after we have given our best efforts to a venture."

"Thank you Madam Yinka. Know All!"

"So," she continued ignoring the mockery "Now, it is your turn to do your job as a teacher. As a father and husband, take good care of the family God gave you since you have not done so for a long time now." Ogundele would have liked to protest about the insinuation of his inadequacy in domestic affairs but knew that his relegation of the family had caused some major family quarrels which he had quelled by sheer force of his position.

"Leave the new rulers to their fate and allow history to judge them accordingly." His wife has concluded leaving him little room for protest.

The blasting of the siren fills the whole room. Ogundele's gaze leaves his daughter and catches the cutlasses glittering on the floor where he had absent-mindedly dropped them in his rush to save Dapo from his sister's grip. He takes another look at Ayo in his arms and sees that she has calmed down and is still sleeping soundly. He notices her mass of hair has partially covered her face which beauty he observes, has a striking semblance with her mother's. Thoughts of politics for once recede from Ogundele's mind as Ayo's face evokes memories of his first meeting with Yinka.

It was at the wedding of his friend, Ambrose Okoko. He first noticed Yinka when the master of ceremony invited friends of the bride for a photograph with the couple. His eyes had trailed her until she took her position beside the bride. His admiration increased when he saw her face. He followed her immediately after the photograph was taken. That was the beginning of their courtship which led to their marriage by traditional law and custom. After the traditional rites, she insisted on another marriage by christian rites in the church.

"But we are already married," he argued.
"Not in the eyes of God." She said.
"In the eyes of our forefathers, we are husband and wife."
"I am a christian, why not do it the christian way. After all I met you in a christian ceremony." She maintained quickly. Ogundele thought about the inhibitions likely to be imposed by the exchange of marital vows on the altar which his friends refer to as "choking bondage." He knew he had no plans for polygamy, but the "choking bondage" of christian marriage was against his personal inclinations and the tenets of Islam — his own religion. He had another serious reason for his aversion to church wedding. As a young teacher, he knew he would not be able to afford the expenses involved in it so soon after the customary one. He had frowned his face to register his aversion to church wedding because of the financial implications of such a venture. He however had chosen to be tactful as he then thought. He did not tell Yinka the truth but gave her a condition, which he thought she would not accept being the daughter of an Anglican Minister. "Okay. If you want a christian wedding, then it must be in the Catholic church." This information surprised Yinka because Ogundele, as she knew him, had nothing to do with the Catholic church. She could not imagine herself being wedded in the Catholic church knowing that members of her family, staunch Anglicans as they were, would not attend such a wedding.

"Why Catholic church?" She asked.
"I want it," was Ogundele's curt reply.
"But you are not a Catholic. Your family is even Muslim."
"Okay. Do you want to wed by Islamic rites?"
"No no no!" She exclaimed.
"Then to Catholic church we go."

Ogundele grinned in satisfaction for he felt that she would have to forget about the whole idea of church wedding altogether. Yinka knew that her father would not accept her being wedded in a Catholic church. But she wanted to ascertain her own personal view of the matter independent of her parents' views. Having been married under traditional law, she reasoned that she was no longer under her father's authority. She recognised that she could act independently. She had attended other people's church weddings, after the traditional ones. Why would her own be different? She would resist any attempt to deny her
of the once-in-a-life time opportunity of walking down the aisle in a white flowing gown with her man like she had witnessed so many of her friends do.

“I want a christian marriage and a christian marriage I must have whether Catholic or Anglican,” she declared.

What Mr. Ogundele started as a joke eventually led the couple to the Catholic church. He however felt a certain sense of triumph for he had shown that he could not be controlled by his wife or her family which was the impression he would have created if he had agreed to an Anglican church wedding. He conscientiously attended all catechism classes and by the time he completed them, he had become a convinced Catholic christian. Ogundele freely confessed his earlier apprehensions to his wife. Their wedding itself was a simple affair because Yinka by then understood her husband’s monetary handicap and settled for a low-key ceremony.

The sound of siren again disturbs his reverie. He does not ponder on the implications of the sound but looks up at the wall clock to determine the time. As if in response to his scrutiny, the clock begins to chime. Five times. He knows that the time is drawing near for him to pick up his matchets and proceed with his task. His eyes shift to the miniature statue of Infant Jesus and a crucifix in the far corner of the room with a tabernacle light illuminating them. He smiles at the irony of his marriage. While Yinka has become closer to God, the person who took her to the Catholic faith has drawn farther and farther away just because of his pursuit of money and power so that in the innermost recess of his mind, he now doubts even the existence of God. The siren blares as if beckoning him to his mission.

He removes Ayo’s hand still wound round his neck, carries her to her room, and carefully lays her on the bed. He watches briefly to see that she is sleeping soundly before going to Dapo’s room where his wife lies beside him.

“My wife,” he calls quietly but she does not stir. Gently, he removes her hands wrapped round the boy. Both of them stir. Dapo merely grunts and continues with his sleep. Ogundele makes to carry Yinka as he did his daughter. It appears an awkward thing for him to do because he has not done so for many years now. She resists.

“Please, let me,” he pleads, “I want to explain.” Dapo half-opens his eyes and dreamily asks, “You want to kill my mother?”
“God forbid” answers his father despite his doubt in the existence of God. The boy closes his eyes. Ogundele leaves Yinka beside the boy, draws a chair nearer the bed, sits on it and begins his explanation.

“Yesterday afternoon, my former friend, Ambrose . . .”

“Which Ambrose?”

“Ambrose Okoko.”

“The one in whose wedding we met?”

“Yes.”

“But he is in the other party.”

“Yes. He is my political enemy. But you must realise that robbers can go anywhere because they are armed.”

“He came with guns?”

“No. His ammunition was worse than a gun. He was armed with the power of the ruling party, power to steal and not be shot like common robbers, power to destroy and go unpunished. That was why he had the audacity to come and threaten me yesterday that his party would burn my house in the village today. Imagine Ambrose and his gang of hooligans! It will be over my dead body! I must prevent it. I’m going to stop the bastards!”

“How?” asks the boy who is now fully awake.

“By physically preventing them of course. I went and bought those two cutlasses immediately and I will be travelling home this morning to await anybody who will come to burn my house.”

“Don’t you think that guns will be better?” asks Dapo.

“I have no licence to carry a gun. If I shoot, they will just send me to prison for illegal possession of fire arms and then that won’t prevent the house from being burnt.”

“I’ll come with you then.”

“No, my son. It is kind of you. However, the dog does not involve its puppy in its struggle for bones.” His wife hardly allows him to complete the parable before cutting in.

“So, it was because they want to burn a house that you rushed in with two cutlasses to frighten the children and myself to the point of passing out? You want to destroy this family? A family I laboured to raise while you devoted all your time and energy to public life. Did you even remember to raise any of them?”

Without giving him any chance to defend himself, she continues venting her anger on him for all her years of frustration.

“Consider the wreck you almost made of your daughter by your
wild behaviour! You are old enough in politics to know that it is an act of foolishness for anybody to fight the party in government?” Ogundele feels that he deserves his wife’s derision yet he is annoyed about her reference to his loss of power. He however controls his emotions and seeks to appeal to her sense of reasoning.

“Yinkus,” he calls her fondly as if he was not the one involved in the matchet episode, “our people say that a person having something dangling between his thighs cannot be in a house and we say there is no man there. I must show that I am a man.”

“Well, since you have the patience to listen to me now, I might as well tell you that there are better ways of showing that you are a man than having matchets dangle in your hands.”

“Yinka. Please, don’t insult me in front of the boy.”

“Dapo is no longer a boy but you don’t even know it. He has been the one performing a man’s duties in this house for a long time.” In an undertone she adds, “I mean those he can perform as my son.”

“That’s enough Yinkal!”

“If you walk stubbornly to your death, I promise to despise you for I shall regard it as an act of betrayal for you to abandon the family finally and stubbornly walk to your death! It is high time you put a stop to your wayward behaviour!”

“Ah ah? This is getting too much. At first is was that I was wild. Now it is waywardness I am being accused of.”

“Yes! You always like to have your way. Your must always be obeyed. For years I have cried to you to think of the family. No! It is politics today, money tomorrow and election the next. Where have they led you. You poured all your money into the elections and you lost everything. So, learn your lesson. Come back to us for a yam barn starts life from the farm. No! Things have even become worse since you lost the last election. Since yesterday, for example, you have not talked, you have not eaten, you have not noticed or talked to me whom you call your wife!”

“One thing I have learnt in my years of marriage to you is to adopt the wisdom of the baboon who does not react to unpleasant tunes. I can never win you in an argument.”

“Exactly, you will always refuse to see reason. And will swallow your thoughts unless I drag them out of your mouth.”

“Why should I tell you something when I already know what
your reply will be. You want me to believe that God will go to my village and kill my enemies who want to burn my house!” The boy coughs loudly. They both look at him and then at each other, embarrassed.

They however continue the conversation but almost in whispers.

“My husband, God can do it. You have fought enough. Leave the rest to God. Stay with us and let us enjoy what we have. Do you know, for example, that this boy here has developed a talent in ...” The alarm clock rings. Husband and wife turn to look at the clock but the boy does not move. He already knows that the alarm wakes him up at six o’clock. Yinka is about to resume her speech when Ogundele cuts in.

“Well, I go to defend what is mine. If you see me back here, we shall rejoice. If not, then you must find consolation in the fact that I died like a man. I promise to die mowing down my enemies, day time robbers. I must defend what belongs to me in the true spirit of my ancestors, famed warriors in their time.” He storms out. Dapo now fully awake makes to go after him but his mother restrains him.

“Leave him,” she says, “He is still an unbeliever. But, I know that one day, God will touch him and he will believe in the need to fully trust and rely on Him.”

“But we can’t just sit here and watch him go to his death. People don’t fight with cutlasses in the modern world.”

“That is what they use in his village.”

“But his opponents are from the city. They will use guns.”

“Your father is stubborn. Leave him now to his fate and to God.”

Yinka is praying with her son when Ogundele bursts in on them in a fit of hysteria.

“You said it! You said it! you ...” he shouts continually. His wife and son are startled. Ogundele has only his pants on for he was about to get dressed when the radio announcement interrupted him. In excitement, he has rushed to Dapo’s room jumping up and down like a mentally deranged or possessed man. Dapo regards his “naked” father skipping like a monkey taunted with banana and silently vows never to get involved in politics, if this is what it makes of people.

“What is wrong again?” Yinka asks.
Ogundele can only blabber, “On the radio ... martial music ... coup ... God ... My God is great! He is wonderful! He is great! He...”

Mrs. Yinka Ogundele rushes out to hear the news herself, to know that it is true that the new government is ousted by soldiers.

Her husband continues shouting praises to God for “swiftly using His divine hands to rid the country of those political robbers, my enemies.”

“Military robbers and political robbers, what’s the difference?” His son thinks without sharing his thoughts with his father. It is obvious that Dapo does not share his father's excitement and he gets up from bed to get ready for the day. Ogundele leaves the room quietly in search of his wife, still in his pants.

The sound of siren blares continuously, like a straying cow, filling the house with its noise and drowning the military music issuing from the radio. Dapo is piqued by this new noise forcefully robbing the house of peace so early in the morning. He determines to meet his colleagues immediately and make his reservations about the military known to them. He smiles for the first time since the matchet episode in anticipation of sharing his thoughts with like-minds. His mood lightens at the prospect of “dissecting” the recent political events that disturb and rob people of peace and prosperity.
PART II

TEACHERS AND LEARNERS
"It is true."
"What is true?"
"I couldn't believe it myself."
"Couldn't believe what?"
"That he left about two weeks ago. I only knew about it yesterday. I wanted to interview him as you instructed in your letter but ..."
"Where did he go to this time?"
"Madam, are you alright? Or ... maybe the line is not clear?"
"What do you mean!" It is unusual for a student of mine to talk to me in this kind of patronising tone. And to think that Efosa is particularly courteous .... She keeps quiet.
"What are you talking about?"
Again she says, "It is true."
Again the opening dialogue.
"What is true?"
"I couldn't believe it myself."
"Believe what?"
"That he is gone."
I did not notice her substitution of the word 'left' with 'gone.'
I ask again,
"Gone where?"
"That place no-w."
Although my conscious mind refuses to accept the message, it is possible that my subconscious received it because I have become uneasy and maybe even heading for a mood. Anybody brought up in the culture can appreciate the traditional method of this kind of dialogue. I am saved from developing a mood by the telephone which rings again. Again, it is Efosa. She has to change tactics in order to force me to receive the information. It is nice of her to have gone into this kind of trouble. Maybe it is because I am alone in a foreign country.
I am not crying. I am not even sad anymore nor happy either. I am not dumbfounded. Not emotional whatsoever. I am just transported backwards in time to that day in our class in Nsukka. The scene looks real as I relive it alone in my apartment, remembering the characters and their lines. I therefore replay it in the present tense as it unfolds before me just as it happened several years ago:

I am sitting by the window, concentrating on my work, oblivious of the chattering of other students. Star nudges me on my back.

"What is it?" I ask, in a tone that does show my annoyance for the interruption.

"You are missing a serious joke."

I am about to ignore her and continue with my work when a burst of laughter breaks out. Very irritating. I look up. What do I see? The popular comedian of the class is imitating him.

He seems to have used, I think, charcoal or maybe somebody's black eye pencil (I am yet to find out). He might have used it to paint his eye lashes making them appear bushy and dark. Only one person in our Oral Literature class has such thick lashes and that person has not entered the class. This is really funny.

The actor is about to continue when the same Star who has nudged me asks him, "Why don't you use chalk to make your teeth white. You will look more like him without those brown teeth of yours." I notice that this student who likes to make fun of others does not take kindly to this joke. He frowns. People are impatient because of the disruption of the drama and they protest:

"Leave him alone." "Don't disturb him." "Continue sha-a-a."

At this point, the subject of the drama enters the class, fifteen minutes late. The whole class burst into laughter. He also joins in the hilarious laughter without knowing why we are laughing.

"You know," he says when the laughter is subsiding, "I like a class that knows how to laugh because they also know when to start business." We get the message.

Radiance flies out
trough sad windows
of our happy class,
As shutters snap shut
the smiling guards,
gates of bright teeth,
of playful professor.

This duty verse which I scribble on my paper is seen by Star alone because I am shy about my verses.

"My fun-loving classmates would surely laugh at the naivety of my cradle effort. I shall not be the subject of their drama," I always think.

Do you know the first thing the professor does? He tells us to say proverbs in our indigenous languages. This would not have been a problem if he has not added that we should also write them in the particular dialects of our forebears. Some of us do not like this kind of thing. We look at each other. Professor laughs and tries to reduce it to a joke by saying that left to him, the class ought to be conducted in an indigenous language were it not for the fact that we do not all share a common linguistic background.

Professor no prepare today-o.
Na cunny-cunny he from come-o.
Take pass class-time today-o.
For sake of wetin?
Him no sabi wetin him go teach-o.

Another piece of frustration hidden between my lecture notes. I do not like the way the professor is handling this class. I have read the books he recommended. I have read the oral literature from various parts of Africa. I have read his own collection, the one he did with Egudu. We expect him to lecture us on these. I wish I could let him know how unpopular his demands are. I guess he knows for he seems to be greatly amused as some of us fumble with our efforts. The class comedian, however, comes up with a number of proverbs which we cannot understand. He claims that they are in his dialect. Who knows. I am surprised by the number of people raising their hands. I realise that only a few of us are still uncomfortable with the question. Our problem is not with the proverbs but with writing them. I am still battling with my answer when the professor commits what I consider an unforgivable act of wickedness. I hope that other students share my view on this. I am so disgusted that I just write.

WICKED is a name.
It belongs to OLP.
Oral Literature Professor.

I find that instead of going to the hostel, I am walking along Zik Drive towards my brother's house. I review the matter. How can anybody who is not wicked tell another person, even if that person is only a student, brought up under our school system to write a folk tale in dialect? WICKED is a name. Any right-thinking person, let alone a professor, ought to know that we did not learn indigenous languages in school. So, how can we write what we have not learnt? In fact, Star asked the question that was in our minds.

"Go and learn it," he has replied in his usual manner of reducing everything to a joke.

"This is your opportunity to discover your own language," he added seriously.

I am discussing the matter with my brother. "I came to the University to study English not Igbo." I argue.

In a more even tone, he replies. "Igbo is also a language like English." Being a scientist, I presume that my brother does not know the difference between English as a subject of study and Igbo which should belong to the languages department, according to the academic structure of the Faculty of Arts. I desperately need him to appreciate the absurdity of the Professor's unreasonable demand. So, I decide to lecture the professor. He listens patiently to my argument, at the end of which he remains silent. This means either that he does not understand my argument or he does not agree with me.

I emphasise my point forcefully.

"English and Igbo are not the same! If you learn English, you also learn literature. With Igbo, it is just the language."

This time, he replies. I would have preferred his silence to the kind of thing that comes out of his mouth. "You can learn Igbo literature too."

I fight him by ignoring his line of argument. I divert to a technicality.

"In the first place, they do not teach Igbo or Igbo literature here. Even if they do, what am I going to do with it? It will soon be like Latin, a dead language!"

He also abandons my line of argument and runs to tradition. "Our fathers said that the fire that is placed on the hands of a child, does not burn her. Your professor was my teacher in Christ
He Wants to Marry Me Again . . .

the King College, Onitsha. I know him. He is not punishing you."

It is my turn to keep quiet. Tradition is wrong, very wrong this
time, I think, for does Mamma not always hammer into our ears
that “izu ka mma na nne ji”? How is it then that the person born
of the same mother with me readily prefers his school affinity to
the mother’s blood we share? Tears gather. I fumble in my bag
for my handkerchief. I never knew that my brother could be so
partisan and even kparakporic. To side with the Professor against
his own sister simply because of Old Boys’ affinity is definitely
partisan. I squeeze the handkerchief. I do not let the tears flow.
I stifle them. I blow my nose. He must have read the
disappointment on my face. He tries to pull me up gently from
the chair. I resist. He smiles, the smile of one who knows his
sister. I pout.

“What is he smiling at?” I wonder furiously, even though I
know.

He calls upon a familiar proverb for aid. “I know you too. Are
you not dry meat that fills the mouth?”

What is he up to now? I know. This is one of our father’s
favourite proverbs. He is using it to appeal to me. “Sneer at a
tiny pot,” he adds, “It overbolls and quenches the fire.” I smile
for the first time since that afternoon class when he adds, “You
are capable of conquering anything, even the difficult Professor,
if you decide to do so.”

I now tell him why I am angry about the assignment.

“I had hoped to make an easy A in this course. But now, the
professor is pouring sand into my garri.”

“So, why not defeat the professor hands down? I know that
you can do it. You will begin by travelling to Enugu. Mamma and
Papa are there to help you. Mamma can teach you how to write
Igbo. It is not difficult. I learnt it myself in Papa’s school.”

The scene vanishes as if the play is over. And it is over. But it
lingers in my memory. I remember how my father accompanied
me to our ancestral home and we started digging the mountain.
Thus began my romance with festivals, songs, performances;
things I had taken for granted without thinking that they could
be subjects of study. I also began to dig into my mother’s wealth
of stories with new interest.

Thank you professor.
Latin is not dead.
Igbo is bubbling
with helpful life,
Longing for harvesters
of its bountiful barns.

I cannot remember the grade I scored in that course. It is no longer relevant. I gained more than an A+. My journey home is no longer mere trips to participate in events: harvest festival, Christmas, funerals, and so on. It has become an inquiry into my culture and tradition. It has led me to other cultures, experiences and “wicked” professors. For these, I cannot weep. I celebrate his life with a song. I thank God that I no longer hide my thoughts. My forebears, I rejoice that this song has escaped through my shy mouth, even without my permission. It is for Ezinne, his wife. Please, let it touch her heart. Ezinne, who did cross seven waters and seven forests to build her nest on the mighty stem. She knows how it feels. Tell her NDO, SORRY.

Shed no tears, dear sister,
For that huge tree,
That black stem in our house,
Its leaves withered
Thorn in this deadly season.
Harmattan will pass, my dear.
Then the Mighty Stem,
With deep black roots,
Boiled at home and beyond,
Shall flower in new colours.
The petals shine already,
In myriads of books,
Folklore and festschrift:
All beginnings of the feast.

My friends,
Fellow students and scholars.
do not be angry,
For the host exits
As guests get ready.
Spirits of our land,
Shall we break kola,
And pour libations,
When you allowed
Professor to leave
With the deadly visitor
Efosa could not name?

Professor,
Shall we await your return,
When we all know
that that deadly visitor
Always returns alone,
Where owl sings a dirge?
Shall we feed the spirits still?
Guardians of our homestead
Who have failed to arrest
The ghostly fouler of our feast.
Take heart, dear ones
For the sun shall rise still
At the break of day.

I am not crying. I am doing nothing, just watching the night,
and thinking and wondering about things, about life. Am I having
a dream? No. I think I am watching a scene. I am not weeping,
for sure. I should not weep because I am watching a great scene.
Not a representation of a past event like my undergraduate
experience in the Oral Literature class. This is a scene I have
never seen before. Two characters are involved. I am not a
participant as in the other play. I am the sole audience of the
episode:

As soon as he realises where he is going, he starts laughing.
"Why are you laughing? I am used to companions who are
confused. Some of them even weep."
"This is why I am laughing," he replies. His white teeth have
assumed a new brilliance and his skin shines with blackness as
he continues.
"I am laughing at the ridiculous situation."
"What is so ridiculous?"
"You. You were happy, very happy to see me briefly confused
when I did not know what was happening. As soon as you noticed
that I had found my bearing, you became deadly morose. You
are ridiculous. You are sadistic, sadornic and satanic. He! I
know book-o. My students would have clapped for these big words. But, you are so metallic that you can’t even appreciate a joke.”

His companion does not reply. It is obvious that he loathes the man who dares ridicule him. The man’s interest in his surroundings also infuriates his companion. Instead of being nostalgic like many others, he is behaving as if this is the best thing that has ever happened to him. What the man’s companion does not know is that he is a man who makes the best out of any situation, good or bad or both.

“I can see some interesting objects which I would like to study.” He really looks happy. In fact he is happily observing the surrounding which somehow I cannot see myself.

“This man is really annoying,” the deadly being thinks, without saying it loud. He merely sneers at the man for not knowing that the place is not structured like the world from which he came. He refrains from saying anything for the man’s vivacity cowers him. He would have liked to send the man back but Chukwu had ordained the journey and the ancestral spirits have gathered for the festival of homecoming. The man pulls his deadly companion. “That piece reminds me of Chris Okigbo. What of ...”

Oh God! I am just about to tell him to look for my Papa because he can see the world that I cannot see when the scene fades. He may still find my father since he is still interested in literature.

“Try to find him, Professor, for he will tell you stories, stories sweet, stories strict, stories strong and stories wrapped in folds of laughter, like the big fold of my father’s cloth.”

Tears snake down lonely cheeks
Searching for warmth
In this cold place,
Searching for Papa,
Mazi, my father.

Eyes seek out spaces,
Searching for spirits,
In this same place
Of passing scene.
Searching for Papa,
Dede, my father.
Ears grope for sound,  
For whisper,  
Of passing wind,  
Straining to catch,  
Straining to feel,  
To hear,  
The voice of Papa,  
Teacher, my father.

Seek.  
Seek that sweet self  
Snatched by loathsome visitor  
That stole my father from me,  
From us, from Mamma,  
Before the feast of books,  
My books that loved  
My father's heart.

"Tell him for me. Tell him, Professor ... you will know him. He looks like the sun but he does not burn. His teeth are like yours. Tell him that you were there, at the feast of books, my book. Tell him about it, how you praised me, the same way he would have done. He would like to know. Tell him...." I am trans-ported again to the reality of that loath-some telephone. Even before I pick up the receiver, I already know the dialogue that would ensue:

"It is true."
"What is true?"
"I couldn't believe it."
"You couldn't believe what?"
"He is dead...."
I continue with my mourning experience all alone, far from home.

Flashes of white teeth.
Bushy eye lashes.
Black.
Ivoriен black.
Blacker than black.
Golden black.
Different.
Bronze. Ebony.
Different from blackness of eye.
Different from blackness of hair.
Different from blackness of black board.

Black board behind him.
Golden black.
Ivory black
Shaded penetrating eyes
That compel attention.
Shake.
Shake away images
Of that day in Nsukka ...
This man with a deadly companion,
Companion without a face,
Without a heart ...
Again,
A call,
A call from Nigeria.
Fright!
Fear!
Who is it this time.
Again the same voice.
Again the same Efosa.
I sleep finally but I wake up at dawn and still alive.
The sun is still out.
I still hear squirrels
Playing outside my door.
Even the birds still sing.
And the sun still shines.
Do people still laugh?

Let him go,
Let him depart,
Peacefully.

Let him stay well.
We who are left,
May we also stay
In peace,
Continue with work
That is left behind.
Egbe bere,
Ugo bere,
Nke siri ibe nya ebena,
Nku kwopu nya.
Ise. Ise. Ise.
Let kite perch,
Let eagle perch,
The one that says that the other should not perch,
May its wings break off.
So be it. So be it. So be it.
Pupil in the Thorn Bush

Again Mr. Edokpai, the headmaster peers at the paper through his worn-out spectacles. He removes them, brings out a handkerchief, and wipes his face, all the while thinking about the name. He cannot remember any hospital in the city with such a name. He frowns for he does not like to be taken unawares. He always believes that anyone who comes to see him already knows something about him and that he has a right to know something about the person too. In this connection, he tries to study such a person carefully through his or her physical features. He has almost decided to grant the visitor entry when suddenly he remembers that one of his students bears the name.

"Maybe the doctor is related to the student," he mutters. He tries but cannot remember what the boy looks like so he can use it to determine whether he is a good or bad boy. Anyway, he presses the bell.

The man is closely followed by a student who looks depressed. "Good morning, Mr. Edokpai," says the doctor as they shake hands.

"Good morning Dr. Ebigbe, sit down. What can I do for you?"

"I am really sorry to bother you. I am here because of my son."

"So, this is the connection," the headmaster thinks nodding his head. He quickly reminds the visitor that he ought to have made acquaintance with him during one of the Parents' Days' activities.

"This is really true, Mr. Edokpai. But, you see, I have been abroad for studies. My children have been in the care of my wife and my mother."

"Are you back now?"

"Yes, for good."

"So we shall expect your full participation in the school's activities?"

"Of course, yes."
“So what is the problem?”
“Tell me what happened,” says the headmaster.
“I brought my son here this morning and went to the Teaching Hospital where I work. I later went back to the house to pick something only to find him by the gate of the house because everybody had left either for work or school. When I questioned him, he said some boys in the school have threatened to deal with him today.”
“What’s your name boy?” The headmaster asks directing his gaze to Dr. Ebigbe’s son.
“Titus Ebigbe, Sir.”
“What class?”
“Class 6A, Sir.”
“Oh! That’s the bright boys’ class. Let me hear your story, Titus.”
The headmaster adjusts his spectacles, folds his arms and nods at the boy.
“Sir ... Sir ... I’m s-sorry.”
“Tell the story,” says his father impatiently.
“I’m sorry Sir, for ... for breaking the school rule.”
“What are you talking about?”
“I pass shit for ground,” he bursts out trembling. The headmaster unfolds his arms, pushes up his spectacles and asks,
“Are you speaking English or what? A class six student cannot express himself correctly? And a boy in an A class for that matter!”
Tears begin to run down his cheeks. He trembles and attempts to wipe the tears with his hands but his father offers him his handkerchief.
“Just cool down. He won’t eat you. Tell the story truthfully just as you told me.”
The boy wipes his eyes and uses his right hand to hold his chest, his heart pumping at an extraordinarily fast rate. The headmaster waits for him to control himself while he takes time to study his father.
He thinks that the doctor might be slightly younger than him. He is stout in stature and overgroomed by Mr. Edokpal’s standards. “If he spends so much time and money on his looks, what will be left for his family?” he wonders. Again, he scrutinises the doctor’s navy blue suit, white shirt and the striped white and
black tie that matches his black shoes. He then focuses on the black rimmed white silk handkerchief on his coat-pocket, his low cut hair, side burns and moustache. He compares father and son. It is evident that the boy has his father's watery eyes and small lips that give the face an innocent look. The headmaster frowns. The boy is not as well kempt as his father. His skin is coarse and his exterior generally rough. His hair is bushy and his sandals have lost their brown colour. The doctor becomes aware of the headmaster's scrutiny and the frown he now wears. He too is watching the headmaster. He notices that the lapel of his white cotton shirt is worn-out but very clean. He observes his glittering hair as the sun illuminates his shiny bald. The doctor concludes that he looks kind in spite of his reputed sternness. The boy interrupts the exchange of glances between his father and the headmaster and attempts to start his story again.

"It was last month, the day we finished our first term examinations. I was having running stomach."

"I remember that period. I just returned from Western Germany. In fact he was my first patient in Nigeria."

Titus' father cuts in to lend credence to his son's story.

This confirmation has given the boy more courage. The headmaster notes that Titus instantly removes his hands from his chest, a sign that he is becoming less tense. The headmaster bends his head towards his table.

"I had to leave the examination hall at a point in order to go to the toilet," the boy continues more confidently.

"It happened after the examination. I was walking from our classroom to the library when sudden pain gripped me. I felt like easing...." The headmaster raises his head but before he can speak, the boy corrects himself.

"I'm sorry Sir, I felt like going to the toilet. Four boys were coming from the opposite direction. I just rushed into the nearby bush. It was there that the boys caught me. They surrounded me saying I was uncivilised and that they would report me to you Sir. I pleaded with them." Here the boy's voice begins to shake. Once again he holds his chest, this time with both hands. He blinks away the tears forming in his eyes and continues.

"They called me all sorts of names, abused my family and threatened to deal with me."
“What names did they call you?” This question by the headmaster surprises the doctor and his son who stare at him. It is not his eyes that confront them but the glittering baldness of his head which he slightly bends towards a paper on his table. The boy bites his lips, thinking of names, then continues.

“They called me ‘hot shit’, Sir.” He expects a reaction for that ugly word. Not getting any, he comes up with a string of names, “Ewu, Nama, anumanu, bastard, uncivilised he-goat.”

“It is enough. Go on with the story.”

“Sir, they produced a piece of paper and told me to write a statement of confession and pledge. I was afraid.

I was still squatting. They told me to write that I stole a pair of shoes and that I would pay back the sum of five hundred naira at the end of the month.” The headmaster stands up.

“What? Did you borrow money from them?

“No Sir.”

“What then is the five hundred naira all about? Do you mean that we are breeding criminals here?”

“No Sir. They forced me to write the statement. I did Sir and the payment was due yesterday. They came to ask for it but I could not produce it. So, they said that I would suffer the consequences if I failed to bring it today. That was why I went back home.”

“They even suggested that he stole the money from me.” His father adds. “Just imagine the corruption at such an early age!”

“Who has the confessional statement?” asks the headmaster.

“They made me to write two. They have one and I have one.” His father gives the headmaster their own copy.

“What are the particulars of the boys?” As the boy calls their names and class, the headmaster presses the bell and commands his messenger to summon the boys from class 6A.

The first to enter was John Uche. the headmaster peers at him. He is a brown-skinned boy with fine features and has his hair cut in the latest fashion. “Yes, this one is vain and can do anything to maintain his vanity,” the headmaster thinks and notes how he eyes Titus.

“Kneel down!”

John kneels and starts rubbing his hands in anticipation of the cane.

“I am not going to waste my time flogging a criminal. I will just
expel you.”

“Please, Sir, please Sir, forgive me, Sir.”

“Forgive you for what? What did you do?”

“We told him to bring money. But he provoked me.”

“I did not do anything!” Titus has found his courage for his reply has venom.

“You are a liar and a thief,” retorts John.

“Shut up!” shouts the doctor.

“Your son is a thief,” retorts John.

“Can you prove your statement. Who is your father?”

“Doctor, leave this to me.” The headmaster glares at the boy who immediately apologises to the doctor.

“Sir, I am sorry,” he says bowing his head. He now turns to the headmaster and asks, “May I say my own side of the story now, Sir?”


He unfolds his arms. “Right!” he says.

John looks up thinking that it means the headmaster is giving him a chance. He sees the man pull out a drawer and bring out some sheets of paper. He gives John a paper and pen. “Write your own side of the story.” Still kneeling, John places the paper on a stool near him and proceeds to write, just as two other boys enter.

“Yes?”

“Good afternoon, Sir.”

“You are ... the gangsters eh?”

“Yes, Sir.” It is the messenger who answered.

“Let them stay in the general office. I give you ten minutes to write down what happened between you and Titus Ebigbe. I want the truth only.”

The boys leave immediately.

The headmaster gives a paper to Titus.

“Write your own statement.” He sits down and starts a conversation with Dr. Ebigbe.

“Doctor, this is what is happening now in schools. No discipline in the homes. No discipline in the schools. No discipline in the society. Discipline has disappeared. You see them. All brilliant boys in A classes. But, see what they get
involved in. They now use their brains for negative things."

"In our time, things were really different," the doctor replies. "Now small children know the value of money." He continues. "Five hundred naira! That is almost half of my monthly salary. In our days, I would always give to my mother any money given to me as gifts and they were always small. Tell me, Mr. Edokpai, what will small boys like these do with five hundred naira?"

"They use them to buy the latest shoes, trousers, shorts and other things."

"Do their parents not see them wear these expensive things?"

"I suppose they don't. They are simply not vigilant enough. The boys are too smart for them. They hide the expensive clothes in all sorts of places."

"Like where?"

"Right in their own homes or in their friends' homes. They sneak out in them to go and show off."

"Do their parents not see them?"

"They claim not to see," replies the headmaster adding after a pause, "They are too busy chasing money."

"How can money be more important than one's children. I had to come home as soon as I finished my studies so as to help my wife take care of the family in spite of the fact that I knew she herself is very vigilant. I do not see how we cannot notice when our children are becoming deviants, no matter how busy we are."

"Well, we always discuss this issue during the Parents' meeting. Some of the parents whom I have confronted, claim that the economic situation in the country is so bad that if they do not make extra money, their children would starve."

"Nonsense!"

"No, do not dismiss their argument like that. It has some merit. Look at me now. What I was earning ten years ago when garri was fifteen cups for one naira is what I am still earning today that garri is two cups for the same one naira. How does one expect me to feed my family and dependents with the same amount I was receiving ten years ago? Not everybody is a doctor, you know."

"You really have a point there."

"You now see it. However, I am luckier than some other parents. As soon as I finish from school now, I lead my family, wife and all, to the farm. We continue our family life there and
all of us get involved in working to eat. This way, I bring up my children even though I am engaged in another means of livelihood. But not everybody can farm or even has the land for farming." The doctor is affected by the headmaster's personal example. He now sees the issue of children's upbringing as a serious thing to merit national attention. He declares:

"We cannot afford to play with the upbringing of the future leaders of this nation. The government must address the issue."

As if in reply, John Uche says, "I have finished writing Sir."

The two men are embarrassed. They seem to have forgotten the boys. The boys have heard them blaming parents and the society for their crimes. The headmaster tries to cover up by saying, "However, in spite of all these arguments, we have rules and regulations in this school. No matter what one's background is, as soon as he joins us, he has to behave accordingly. This is what I tell my boys every time. Is it not so? My boys?" he asks the boys emphatically.

"Yes Sir." They chorus.

The headmaster takes the written statement from John, sits, and reads. Both John and Dr. Ebigbe watch his face for expressions that can betray his emotions. From his kneeling position, John peers at the headmaster through the side but he cannot get a clear glimpse. His face appears dark because his head is bent towards the paper. The contact of the sun with the metal frame of his spectacles emit rays that offend John's eyes, so that he withdraws his head in reaction to the glint and pushes it forward again in fulfilment of his desire to know the headmaster's reaction to his statement. Dr. Ebigbe has given up watching the sheen of the headmaster's bald which blocked his view of the man's face. Instead he turns his gaze to John who is busy pushing and withdrawing his head like a lonely lizard. The trio, Dr. Ebigbe, John and the headmaster, are absorbed in watching John, Headmaster and John's statement respectively and do not know when Titus finished writing his own statement and joins them in the watching game. He watches his father as he removes his coat all the while staring at something. He further juts out his mouth as he usually does when he is disgusted. He still stares. Titus follows his eyes and sees John jutting and withdrawing his neck as if he is doing the popular break dance. The movement looks funny without music. He almost laughs at the spectacle, which he finds bizarre, but for the timely
intervention of a burst of laughter which comes from the headmaster. All of them look at him still laughing as he passes the statement to the doctor. Osman and Tunde in the general office have finished writing and are curious about the laughter. They enter the headmaster's office and give him their statements. He reads, still standing. There is another burst of laughter from the headmaster.

"Incredible," shouts the doctor who is still reading. Titus notices his father's nostrils widen. He knows that it is a sign of anger.

"Terrible. Really terrible," shouts the doctor. The headmaster's laughter is subsiding as he says "So, three of you have come-up with the same story eh?"

"We did not discuss, Sir," says John.

"Shut up!"

"Yes, Sir."

The doctor has finished reading. He glares at John and hands the paper to the headmaster who gives him the other two. All eyes are on him as he reads.

"The same thing," he says.

"From beginning to end," agrees the headmaster.

"We'll go to the police. This is pure extortion. It is scandalous. I'll charge them for defamation of my son's character, for molestation, for ...."

"Hold it doctor," says the headmaster.

He brings out sheets of paper from the drawer.

"Follow me, everybody. Titus, you lead us to the scene of action."

It is a bushy shrub between the library and the senior classes block. All of them fight their way through the thorns into the bush. All of them are scratched by thorns as they wade through the shrub. They finally arrive at a spot.

"It is here, Sir," says Titus. The headmaster can see that the other boys are baffled. Even the doctor does not know what he is up to.

"Squat!" Titus looks at the headmaster in astonishment. "Squat ... show us how you were defecating the environment on the day in question."

Titus starts to unbuckle his belt.

"No, don't remove your pants. Just squat."
Titus squats. The headmaster gives him a paper and pen. “Now, who was the one who told you to write the confessional statement?”

“All of them, Sir. They all shouted at me.”

“Now, you three. Shout the way you did that day and force him to write the confession.”

“We did not shout.”

“It was not here.”

“We did not force him to do anything.”

The three boys talk at the same time.

“Shut up!” They keep silent.

“I command you to use your mouth to intimidate Titus Ebigbe and make him write that he stole a pair of shoes and that he would pay back the sum of five hundred naira.” A thick notebook is provided as support for the paper. Although the three boys act their part well, Titus cannot really be as frightened as he was on the day of the incident because of his father’s presence as well as the headmaster’s and the confidence this gives him. No matter how much the boys try to intimidate him, he just cannot be genuinely afraid. He starts writing and the boys shut up. The headmaster commands them to continue shouting on him.

“Idiot! Write.”

“Hot shit! Shit on paper!”

“Person wey leave chair sit for ground, leave house go for bush! Ewu.”

“Na real goat.”

“Bush ewu not domestic goat.

“Real anumanu, bush meat.”

“I have finished writing, Sir.”

The sun is going down by the time they came back to the office. The headmaster explains to the doctor.

“You can see that the statements which your son claims to have written in a state of frightfulness, ill health, and fear of his intimidators are in fine, clear, orderly handwriting and shows no trace of unevenness and incoherence as would be expected of anything written under such conditions. This is quite unlike the ones written now that he is healthy and strong. Just look at today’s statement. The sentences are crooked and do not follow the lines on the paper.”

“What are you suggesting?” asks the doctor putting on his
coat.

"I am telling you that your son has not told us the truth. These two earlier statements could not have been written under the conditions he described."

"Are you really saying that my son stole the shoes?"

"I am asking you now, as his father, to find out the truth from him. This 'hot shit' story might have originated from your house."

"My children don't lie. I can vouch for my son."

"I have been a teacher for almost thirty years and I know ways of squeezing the truth out of people of this age. It is true they are full of surprises, but I'll try."

The doctor keeps silent. He is disappointed in the headmaster. He is sure of his son's innocence and he hopes that the headmaster deals with the "ruthless and scheming criminals" (as he thinks of the boys), or else he would go to the police and possibly to court. The headmaster breaks the brief silence.

"Does it not strike you that the three boys wrote the same story."

"They, of course, planned their strategy."

"But they did not know that I have discovered the incident."

"They could have suspected it when the three of them were called out of class especially since my son did not come to school."

"You remember they mentioned the names of people who gathered near the library when they searched Titus and found the shoes?"

"That proves nothing. The boys are criminals. They can bribe the witnesses."

"They have not been proved to be criminals yet and they too have fathers who can vouch for them. But, I'll handle it," declares the headmaster who quickly calls Titus.

"Titus."

"Sir."

"Come here." A cool breeze rushes across the room.

"Titus Ebigbe, bright student of class six A. You are due to leave this school successfully this year if you do well in the final examinations. I know that you will do well. But, there is a big BUT. You may not have the chance to take the examination because one, you wasted my time today, two, you have led me into a thorn bush, three, you have deceived me and ridiculed
your father, four, you have prevented a medical doctor from seeing his patients, five, you have broken the school regulation, and six, you have disgraced the school."

The headmaster observes Titus sweating profusely even though the sun has gone down and the weather is now cool. Even his father who is now having his coat on is not sweating. A cool breeze again rushes across the room through the windows. The headmaster continues,

"For what you have done, I should expel you from this school. But, I give you a chance to redeem yourself by doing one good thing today. This story about your 'hot shit' ...."

He pauses and stares at Titus whose legs have started wobbling.

"Do you want to pass shit?" The headmaster for once speaks the forbidden language but nobody takes notice of it, even himself.

"No, sir. I want to finish and enter the University," says Titus lamely as he sinks into a kneeling position.

"Then tell the truth."

"My story of hot shit is a lie. I stole John's shoes." he says crouching and covering his face.
Ms Smith and the Multicultural Game

Ms Smith, the teacher, is bubbling with fresh enthusiasm. The stressful competition, which had all the trappings of a cold war, has finally come to an end. She has emerged the winner. She is relaxed and happy. She wants to try out a technique, a kind of game, that will underline the joys of her success.

"As Americans, we all come from different parts of the world to settle here. This is why we have many different cultures that combine to make up the American culture. Now, I want each of you to tell the class where your people, your grandparents or great grandparents, where they migrated from to settle in America." Many hands shoot up immediately. "There is enough time for everybody to talk, so we start from Bob at the end there."

"My grandparents came from Ireland. That is why we have an Irish name, O'Cassey. We celebrate St. Patrick's day with our people in Ireland on the 17th of March, every year. We also celebrate American Independence day on the 4th of July with fellow Americans." A burst of spontaneous clapping greets Bob's brilliant contribution.

"My people came from Italy. Italy is a great country in Europe. It is the only country in the world where the Pope lives. They have famous churches called basilicas but they do not have the White House as we do here in America." Another burst of clapping. The children are very excited about this exercise. The history class has turned into a pleasurable game of racial identity and national pride. Each student is itching for his/her own turn to speak. Ross is finding it difficult to pin his bottom on his seat. He stands, sits, raises his hand and puts it down. He is impatient to tell the class about his English heritage: the kings and queens, the castles and museums with beautiful works of art and all the other things he had heard his mother recall proudly of her homeland. He would also talk about his father's wing of the family that came from France which is very sophisticated in art
and music and ... There is silence in the class. Only a moment's silence.

"Yes dear, where do they come from?" This is the teacher prompting the black girl to talk about her heritage. Some students try to suppress giggles. Again she repeats her reply. The class can no longer contain itself. A giggle here, a trickle of laughter there, then the full burst of hilarious laughter which mockery is enough to dowse the fire of the clapping that applauded the other two speakers. The girl looks around, shyly, timidly, almost in tears. Then she seems to smile briefly because she parts her lips showing her sparkling white teeth. But it is not really a smile. It is a betrayal of emotions from one who is in agony of disgrace. Nobody noticed the gap right in the middle of her upper dentition laced by her beautiful black gum. Nobody noticed the circular linings that are naturally ingrained on the skin of her neck as she strained her eyes in search of a friendly gaze to fix them on. Nobody noticed the tears that finally came snaking hurriedly down the face that looks like warm chocolate.

They are once again involved in the game. But, the teacher is uncomfortable. In fact, she is disappointed. She cannot pin down the exact reason for her disappointment. Is it the girl or the class? It does not even occur to her that she could be a part of the failure. However in her usual manner, she files the episode in her memory for future reference.

Far away across many seas in an Igbo village called Owa, another kind of history class is taking place. Young people are gathered around a story-teller who is one of the mothers of the household. Like Ms Smith of the American history class, she also wants to conclude the class by testing her students' knowledge of their past.

"Who can tell us why the school area is called forest of killers?" "Me." "I." "It is because ..." All the children know the story. However, they all concede to little Ngozi. They also laugh in anticipation of the kind of disjointed story which the six-year-old Ngozi can tell.

"Thitory-tery." In spite of her inability to say 'SSS' which made her "Opening" funny, they clap because she is able to remember to start with the formal opening.
"Thtory-tory," she says again. They reply, "story."
"Once upon a time," she goes on, "there was a sister of our big father, the father of the father of the big one inside." The children start clapping again. In the midst of the clapping, one of the young students, Udeala, decides to act a part. "I shall play Ikenga." Ngozi immediately abandons her role as story-teller. She has now seen a good opportunity to get into the part of her historical relation, Nneka, whom she admires very much and identifies with. At school she uses ideas in stories of people from other parts of the world, to decorate her image of her great relation. In her sketches, she has once given her model a black dot on the forehead as Indians do. This of course was in addition to the African body designs of the character.
"I shall be Nneka," she declares, running off towards the house.
"Okay, you act Nneka, I'll be the story-teller," replies Chinwe, her big sister from their father's first wife.
"I'll play a warrior."
"I'll play ..." And so there is a reversal of roles as the children share the parts while their mother, the original story-teller-cum-teacher, acts as the sole audience. It is only when Ngozi reappears with her waist beads and a bag that the others realise what she is up to. Her big sister begins to clothe her with the beads, rattles and other items in her bag. Finally the new story-teller, Chinwe, starts the story.
"It was another moonlight night long long ago ...."
"No!" Ngozi interrupts her. "You have not described Nneka and Ikenga." The others support her. "Yes. Yes."
"Okay, Nneka, step out."
"She doesn't have to step out, you know," their mother corrects the new story-teller, Chinwe. "You can describe the characters without calling on their performers to step out. After all, the historical characters lived in different homesteads," their mother adds.
"Okay. Once upon a time, there lived a beautiful maiden of our household, the sister of our big big father. She was very beautiful. They said that she was the most beautiful girl in the village." In spite of having been told earlier to remain where she was, Ngozi steps out imitating Nneka by displaying her beauty. She swings her arms and bony hips in imitation of the way adults
Ms Smith and the Multicultural Game

walk. The theatrics of the young actress fascinate the other children as well as the teacher and they ululate in applause. The story-teller is about to start describing the character's beautiful set of teeth divided into equal halves by a lovely gap when the children anticipating her next move begin a chorus that extols Nneka's beauty. Ngozi continues walking stylishly to the rhythm of the chorus:

When she smiled,  
It was as if the moon was glowing.  
When she laughed,  
It was as if the sun was shining.  
When she danced,  
It was as if the palm was swaying.

The story-teller continues. "The natural lines on her neck were up to ten."

"No!" Ngozi interrupts her, "Ten are too many. They will make her neck too long and ugly like that of a vulture."

"Vultures don't have lines on their necks. They only have long necks," interjects Udeala.

"I still don't want ten lines," replies Ngozi.

"But you are not the one. You are not Nneka. You are just imitating her."

"It's a lie! I look like her. Her spirit was reincarnated in me. I am Nneka. She is my big big sister, and my big big mother." This last assertion is greeted with protests by all the other children. Udeala, who acts the part of Ikenga, is the first to protest. "Our great great grandfather's sister, Sister Nneka, belongs to all of us."

"Don't say 'my' but 'our' big mother," another adds. The teacher — the sole audience — waits to see how this issue will be resolved. Chinwe, the acting story-teller, finally resolves it.

"Okay. Nneka is the big sister and mother of us all and not just Ngozi. As for the lines on her neck, the story is that they were up to ten. But now, for the sake of our small sister, let us say that about five lines naturally adorn her beautiful neck." Noticing that all is now quiet after this concession, Chinwe continues with her story. "As for her colour, it shines like palm kernel spread out in the sun. One day ..."

The teacher interrupts again. "What about her mother and father?"
Udeala who acts the part of Ikenga pleads to answer the question.

“Okay.”

“Her father, the father of the father of the father of our great father’s big father, was a great farmer. He was crowned the farm-king just before Nneka was betrothed to Ikenga. Our great mother, the mother of Nneka, was from Benin in Edoland. Her family were smiths who fashioned beautiful bronze works, many of which they said were taken to English museums by white people.”

The original teacher comes in again, this time addressing all the children. “Look at the sky and see that the moon is receding? So, Chinwe, let me cut the story short now. Of course I am satisfied that you all know the story. You also know that Ikenga was from a family that was as great as our own. In addition, he was the leader of his age grade.”

“I was also the leader of our age grade during its initiation ceremony.” Ngozi says still identifying with her historical model in spite of the earlier protestations by her peers. Ignoring Ngozi’s interjection the original teacher continues with the story.

“Yes, both Nneka and Ikenga were great. That was why they were attracted to each other. As the story goes, the family was assembling for the marriage feast when armed people suddenly invaded them. Our people were taken unawares. However, they fought back with all their might and killed some of the invaders. Many of our people were killed while others were taken away as captives. Nneka’s body was among those that were not seen after the battle.” At this point, Chinwe starts a well known dirge. Ngozi leaves her position and merges with the group that is now singing the dirge.

Nneka, nne m-oo. Nneka, my mother-o.
Gini ka ina akwa? What are you weeping for?
Gini ka ina akpo? What are you screaming for?
N’ akwa-a, n’akpo-o. Weeping, screaming.

As they hum the song, the teacher continues with the narration since Chinwe is still conducting the dirge. The remaining part of the story now follows the rhythm of the song.
"We buried the dead strangers in the forest near the school. That is why till today it is called 'Forest of Killers.' Many of our people also died in the battle. Many great people of our land ... but ... They held their heads high, As they joined our ancestors,... They died honourably."

"The saddest part of the story was the fate of those who were not found after the battle. Nobody knows what their captors did with them. Some say that they killed them for sacrifice in foreign lands. Others say that they imprisoned them in a big house by the great river. That was why Ikenga left this village in search of the big house to bring back his betrothed, dead or alive. He too never came back." Here the teacher also joins the others in humming the dirge which now rises to a crescendo.

Unknown to the teacher and her students, Nneka's captors did not find things easy with her. She had bitten off the right ear lobe of the man who tried to seduce her. "No man can touch me except Ikenga!" She had shouted and dug her white teeth into the man's ear. Nobody appreciated her act as a display of bravery. It was rather seen as a primitive display of savagery. As a punishment, she was whipped till she fainted.

These moonlight story actors will never know how Nneka struggled in the Smith plantation in Virginia. She was seen as a stubborn slave with a chip on her shoulders. Nevertheless she was eventually made a servant in the master's house. Other Africans in America used to call her 'Rainbow Lady' because in her house could be found many children with different colors: black, brown, pink, yellow, red, and so on. One of them was the great grand father of the black girl in Ms Smith's history class.

Back in her house, Ms Susan Smith is sitting at table. She is not eating but staring at the pizza before her. She had thought she would be very hungry by the time she finished her history class. So she had ordered for her favourite "pizza with everything" before the class and picked it up on her way home. But now she can only stare at the meal and its contents for she has
lost her appetite. "I pity her," she says as she contemplates the source of her present discomfiture which is the ordeal the only black girl in her history class went through earlier. "I encouraged her to talk," she reasons trying to convince herself that the failure was not a reflection of any lapse on her part as a teacher.

She leaves the dining table and walks to the window where she stands gazing at the horizon. The red and blue stripes of her skirt seem to blend beautifully with her white blouse splashed with golden spots of the rays seeping through the foliage of the maple tree. The orange, brown, red, and greenish colours of the spring wood blend with the cool haze of the golden rays, making the horizon look like a paradise. Susan is not thinking about the beauty spread around and before her like a book of Navaho art. Her mind has since left the hitherto palate-tickling pizza and is now trying to recapture the pathetic figure of the black girl; contrasting it with the mirthfulness of her peers. Her face bloats with an indescribable surge of emotion and she instinctively knows that she has to calm her nerves.

She goes to the kitchen to prepare a hot cup of black coffee which usually does the trick. She tries to concentrate her thoughts on pleasant things. She moves to the window which affords her a vantage position to appreciate her favourite view of the wood. But her eyes fail to take in the silvery scene of spring colours, for her mind has raced back to her experience in her history class earlier in the day. She should be happy about her achievement as the teacher who designed and engineered a class that is now acclaimed as the best in the world. Her eyes narrow at the thought of that one dark spot, that episode, that is now making her very uncomfortable. She gulps down her coffee and momentarily enjoys the invasion of her throat by the now tepid liquid. But it does not soothe her. It seems to have lost its potency for calming her nerves. She runs her fingers through her hair and wonders, "Why should one black spot, just one out of the other successful ones disturb my peace?"

As a history teacher, she likes to dig into the root of things in order to find out why things are not what they are supposed to be, and how they can be improved upon so that the world can be a better place. This is why she loves history — especially what she termed 'historical engineering' which is her own self-devised method of negotiating events in order to manipulate the world. But it baffles her that the black girl could not disclose the origin
of her parentage even in spite of her patronage.

"Was it possible that she did not know her progenitors?"

Is it possible that she did not know?
Their country, the group, and culture area?
Why did she not know it or was she merely shy?
Ashamed? But, why should she be ashamed?
Maybe she was nervous or timid?
Why? Why? Why?

She ponders repeatedly with her eyes scanning the horizon and stabbing every direction without focusing on anything. The spring sun is receding.

A cool breeze, like the soft whistle of chirping birds, caresses her face and seems to assuage the troubled mind of Susan Smith.

"Why should one black spot among so many disturb my peace?"
The question reverberates in her mind.

"One black spot." She echoes. A new understanding suddenly dawns on her.

"A black spot in my all-American class." "All-American!" she exclaims holding her mouth as if to strangle the expression that has flown out of it.

"All-American?" Realisation dawns on her. "The black girl should become all-American. The black girl is American? But what is her origin?" She wonders. Another phase of new awareness. Susan draws the window blinds and walks dejectedly to the dining table and slumps on the chair clumsily. She is at once annoyed and surprised at herself for failing to get at Ruth's background. Ruth? "Yes. Ruth Mathews." She re-echoes the black girl's name in her mind as her eyes now hit the neglected meal.

She pushes it away in annoyance, unable to give expression to the new idea whirling in her head. How ignorant she has been, she thinks. She regards the neglected pizza with a new understanding. She appreciates the different colours of the ingredients. The red tomatoes, the green pepper, the brown pasta, and the black mushrooms, all blend to give the pizza its remarkable quality. She dwells particularly on the contribution of the black spots of the mushrooms to the general rainbow-like outlook of the pizza. She appreciates the fact that it would lose much of its attraction if any of the colours including the spots of the mushrooms were absent. She picks out the black
mushrooms and notes how it becomes immediately obvious that their absence has resulted in a distortion of the harmony of the food's aesthetic quality.

"For my class to be a true model that is worthy of the world acclaim it enjoys, it should be a whole, an amalgam of all shades and colours under the sun. It should not be tainted by ignorance, not even from its teacher. I am the greatest teacher. I must remain the best." She concludes.

How will she deal with the riddle of the multicultural game? She decides to unravel it by learning about Ruth Mathews. "Ruth Mathews." She calls the black girl's name confidently and eagerly resolves to employ all avenues to probe her heritage.

"I must discuss with Ruth's parents and that will be the first step in unravelling this multicultural riddle." She declares and digs her fingers into the pizza as a new gust of fierce appetite activates her spirit.
Champagne For Men Only

From a distance, the attire appears sparkling white. In actual fact, it is not. There is a red stain on the skirt that provides a contrast to the immaculate appearance of the white skirt and blouse. The stain even seems to emphasise the white colour of the attire. The boundaries of the stain make an irregular rectangular shape that juts out towards the right base like the problematic peninsula in the country. Sule nudges Tunde who is dozing. "Ol' boy." Tunde is a bit irritated by Sule's disturbance. Nevertheless he raises his chin from his hands. "Wetin?" he asks.

"Make you see for yourself," Sule replies nodding his head towards the direction of the young woman who is walking slowly to the counter for her card. Tunde scrutinises the red shape, juts his mouth, stretches his neck and juts his mouth again.

"Ol' boy, you wan get convulsion?"

"Me?" asks Tunde straightening his face and transferring his gaze from the red colour to his friend before replying, "I dey craze? Na di map I been dey study."

"That na map of ... Nigeria?"

"Of wetin?"

"Of ... of Chicks and co. You know." Sule says laughing.

"God don catch dis one, one time."

At this point, Madam, the woman on the afternoon shift arrives to take over from Tunde. "Tunde, my pickin, dis one wey your face dey look like oily puff:puff wey I dey fry for my children, 'im be like say you never sleep?"

"Madam, no be dis Hot-Shift wey dem open. Na 'im I go check out last night."

"Wetin be Hot Shift?"

Sule nudges Tunde and signals towards the young woman who is now receiving her card. Madam also turns to the object of their attention wondering whether it is the answer to her query about Hot Shift. She is scandalised by what she sees.
wonders whether the young woman is not aware of the stain on her skirt. If she is aware of it, does she not know that it constitutes a disgrace to womanhood? Sule and Tunde have turned their attention from the young woman at the counter to watch Madam's face. She pushes out her mouth in disgust. Her colleagues expect her to spit as she usually does when she is irritated. She thinks that the "girl must be one of those useless girls who do not know that certain things are better hidden than exposed." Her colleagues watch as her jutted mouth becomes normal again. In fact her face relaxes and she does not spit. Instead she makes to go and advise the "ignorant girl." But just then, the young woman leaves the counter with her card, her ample hips swinging sluggishly as she makes her way towards the treatment room. Madam does not follow her. Instead, she settles down to her work as she contemplates the matter. She finally voices out another opinion.

"Na these useless girls," she declares. "Where di man who do am now?" she wonders. "Na di thing wey I been dey tell my small sister. 'When una enjoy am finish, na only you as woman go suffer am when di suffer-suffer come.' Today, I hear new one. Na Hot-Shift dem dey go now." Tunde and Sule burst out laughing. With a frown, Madam dismisses Tunde.

"You no go go your house? Go home! Go prepare for another hot one."

"Madam, no be wetin we dey do there. Na only dance we dey dance for Hot-Shift. Na better nightclub." He replies defensively, still laughing.

"I hear," is her curt reply. A patient walks in with a prescription in his hand.

After the examination, doctor Omaru goes to his table at the other end of the large room. Sister Jane brings out a darkish blue bedsheet from the cupboard and instructs Miss Chizoba Akari to tie it round her waist in place of the skirt before going to the doctor's table. Instead she ties it across her big breasts, knots the two ends of the bedsheet behind her neck, and walks out of the cubicle made by a green screen. Doctor Omaru's examination has not revealed any physical cause of the haemorrhage, so he decides to probe her psychological condition. He presses the bell for the nurse, who is about to leave.

"Sister Jane, please get an attendant to bring some coffee and clean her dress."
"Of course, doctor," she replies as she leaves.
"Chizzy," he calls her by her pet name, "Please relax." She sits back on the chair looking at the doctor expectantly.
"The examination does not reveal any abnormality. Except of course the present symptom which is unusual with your cycle. I have to know the background of your present mood in order to trace the source of this ... this haemorrhage ...I mean heavy bleeding. So open up, please."
"It is not that I want to be secretive, but ..."
"But what?"
"I am afraid that discussing it might upset me," she answers sniffing.
"You are now in my hands or don't you trust your doctor any longer?"
"You know that I do."
"Let the tears flow. It might do you some good."
"Well ..."
"Yes, go on."
"Well," she repeats looking around. Doctor Omaru shoves a pack of tissue papers towards her. She pulls out some and begins.
"Well. I just got this letter and became ill." She starts sobbing as she remembers the humiliation she went through.
"Is it from your boyfriend?" The doctor's use of the word boyfriend is deliberate. He hopes to elicit a protest about his use of that word to describe the person she calls her oppressor. She is not in the mood for argument. She does not even show that she has heard the doctor's provoking question. She just hands the letter over to him, picks up more tissue papers and blows her nose while he reads the letter.
"When ... when did you receive this letter?"
"This afternoon. I just received it. As I was reading it, I started feeling very ill."
"I see. But this letter is not the end of the world, you know. You are still young. Other avenues are still open, you know."
"It is not just because of the letter per se that I am ill, but the humiliation." She begins to sob again. The doctor allows her exhaust herself knowing that this is a case that requires a full discussion for him to properly diagnose the cause of her ailment. He looks at her tenderly as he recalls how as a young medical
He Wants to Marry Me Again... 

student, he assisted the Consultant in delivering the healthy baby girl who has grown to become this young woman, now his patient. He smiles as he remembers her father's joy and the generous gestures to the hospital staff as a mark of his appreciation of their careful and gentle handling of his beautiful wife. The door opens. An attendant brings in a tray and leaves.

The doctor observes Chizzy take a cup from the tray. Her hands shake and the spoon drops as she is about to make the coffee. Doctor Omaru comes to her rescue. She clasps her shiny black arms across her chest, as if she is hugging herself. Her face, exposed black arms and the darkish blue bedsheets blend like the feathers of a wet hen in search of shelter. The doctor frowns slightly for he notices the blend which has emphasised the gloomy effect of her forlorn appearance. Since the colour of the bedsheets is the same one usually used for mourning, it now assumes a new tragic dimension on Chizzy's body for the doctor remembers that her mother died recently leaving her only daughter in the care of her old father. He has finished making the coffee for her. His eyes move from the cup back to her face and he finds it remarkable that the colour of her skin is similar to that of the coffee with a little milk added to it. He again takes in the dark shade of her skin, the coffee, and the bedsheet; all blending with her gloomy visage. He waits for her reaction. She unclasps her arms. Instead of picking the cup, she uses her palms as props for her jaws. In spite of the forlorn appearance on her face, doctor Omaru observes that she has controlled herself sufficiently for his diagnosis to continue.

Unexpectedly, the doctor asks, "How is the old man these days?"

"He is fine but lonely and aging rather fastly."
"Does he know about this?"
"No. I do not want him to worry about me. I have to face my problems myself in my own way as an adult. I don't have to be a child always running to her father for help."

The doctor feels that Chizzy is not completely right about her assertion of independence for she still relies on her father and other people in some ways. He however refrains from contradicting her in order to get on with the diagnosis especially since she has managed to be in more control of herself than before.

"Tell me how this condition started."
"Well, I was in my office preparing for a class when the letter was delivered by our messenger. As I read it, I started feeling this sensation on my head. It soon spread to my stomach and in fact my whole body. I started choking. I sat down hoping I would soon overcome the strange sensation. But I did not. So I knew I just had to see you." She looks at him, her large pupils focusing on him expectantly. Though he finds her pair of eyes disarming, he ignores them and instead chooses to concentrate on the more serious issue concerning her health.

"Was that when you started menstruating?"

"I don’t know. I just came out of the taxi and felt wet. I did not even know that my skirt was stained because I was expecting my period in eleven day’s time."

"How did the situation get to this strange extent?"

"Well, precisely a month ago, he told me that he did not want to see me around the place again if I did not comply, that he had given me enough time to become reasonable and that his patience had run out."

"Did he really put it that way?"

"He did. I knew what his threat meant. He would contrive to make me lose my job. I told him pointedly that I would never agree to that sort of thing. I also told him that I would always do my work well so that he would not have cause to find any fault with me in my professional duties. You won’t believe it but I am always in my office before eight in the morning although he sees to it that my classes are always fixed in the evenings between four and eight."

"But you don’t have to be in school that early if you have classes only in the evenings."

"I have to, because he once wrote me a letter of warning in which he claimed that I was not found in my office by nine in the morning. That letter showed that he was really serious with his sinister motives. I mean, some of my colleagues come to the office much later than nine and he does not even notice it let alone molest them."

"You should have replied the letter and explained things to him."

"I replied it. I said that I did not think I should be in my office all day since I usually have lectures till eight in the evening."

"That was good."
"But he adopted another strategy. He called me and told me that I should be reporting in his office daily by eight in the morning for some special duties. Well, I started doing so only to discover that there was no duty."

"What do you mean?"

"He just used the opportunity to humiliate me. I sat in his Secretary's office for hours and when he finally came to work, he pretended not to know my mission there. 'Young lady, what do you want from me this morning. I am really busy, so state your business quickly.' I reminded him that I was there on his instruction. The next day, I did not report in his office. That was it. He chose to reprimand me in writing."

The doctor appears dumfounded. He is certainly lost for words. He stares at Chizzy's smallish body as if to verify the credibility of her information from it. Chizzy is not surprised by the doctor's reaction because she would have thought the encounters incredible if not that she experiences them herself. She however continues to dwell on the issue.

"You might ask why I am still there receiving such treatment. Why not? The devil you know is better than the one you don't know. Moreover, leaving this place would certainly destabilise my father."

The doctor's recollection of his patient's other encounters with her boss convinces him of the truth.

"Couldn't you have reported to a higher authority?" He finally asks.

"Which higher authority? The Assistant Director? Isn't he also a man? How many times has he himself called me to his office for no just cause. 'Just to chat,' he has always said."

The doctor winces at her acknowledgement of her appeal to men and her careless manner of lumping all men together. He scrutinises her again as if seeing her for the first time. "Her face cannot be considered pretty," he thinks, "because it is just ... just, almost rectangular." He glances at the almost rectangular map of Nigeria on the wall. Chizzy follows his eyes and begins to scrutinise the dignifying map hanging imposingly in the centre of the wall while he continues with his appraisal. "She has an appealing black colour that looks like burnished mahogany," he admits, "fleshy body and arresting eyes, but I still would not classify her as a beautiful woman." His gaze shifts to the object of Chizzy's attention. There is no public visage or private image
competing for attention with the map on the wall. Nothing, in fact, distracts interest from the green map. Yet, the doctor's gaze returns to Chizzy's face.

"She is not good enough for my taste," he muses as if trying to convince himself that the 'little baby' he helped to deliver can attract him. "She is too short, just ...." He flips through her file for her exact height. She is just four feet plus eleven and half inches. That is short for him ... although the fleshy body might compensate for that. He raises his eyes from the open file to look at her. Her eyes turn from the map to the doctor and again the large pupils arrest his attention. He averts his eyes and concedes that she is attractive. Chizzy expects to hear what he has to say about the country whose map they both have scrutinised.

"All men cannot approach that issue in the same way."

"The Nigerian map?"

"I am talking about you."

"Me? What have I or my ailment got to do with the map?"

"I am talking about your assertion that all men are the same. I for one cannot victimise a woman who has refused to accept me. In fact the question of using my authority to go after a woman is ruled out!" He argues as if he is on trial and striving to convince not just the woman but himself also of his innocence. From her expression, he can see that he has not convinced her so he insists. "All the same, you should have tried to follow the normal official procedure by reporting him to the higher authority, the Assistant Director, Director, Dean and so on, even the highest authority in the University."

"I did report to the Director himself once and after that experience ..."

"Yes. What happened?"

"He listened sympathetically. His fatherly look encouraged me to go into details. I told him about that incident in the Chairman's office."

"Which one?"

"That one in which he told me to pick a book from the shelf."

"Did you tell him everything?"

She nods and he continues, "How ... how he lifted your skirt from behind?"

"Not just that. I told him how my dress was torn while I was struggling with him, how I gave him a wound on the face with
the heel of my shoe, and how I spat on him. You know the details yourself, Doctor."

"Of course I do. How will I forget an incident that created so much problems for us here as we tried to control your blood pressure."

"Well, I told him how the man has been pestering me, how he once came to our house when my father was away."

"He dared to come to your father's house?"

"Yes."

"How did he know when your father was away? Who told him? Why is it that you never mentioned it to me?"

"A woman cannot mention everything that happens to her to a man no matter how concerned he is." She retorts defensively, if not defiantly. "As for how he knew that Papa was away, I did not find out because I did not even allow him enter the house."

"Wrong again. Was that the proper way to treat your boss?" He asks hoping that she would fall to his bait and talk about it.

"With the little you know of me, do you really expect me to allow myself to be in the same house alone with him?"

Doctor Omaru feels that she might have a point here yet he suspects that instead of wounding the Chairman's ego, she could have adopted another approach which might have dampened the man's anger.

"What many of you young women don't realise is that there are other ways of tackling this kind of problem. Antagonising the man is not the answer."

"So, giving in is the answer. Doctor, I'm surprised at you!" She says and covers her face with her hands in a bid to push back tears that gathered around her eyes. The doctor suspects that she is shielding her eyes from seeing his face which might have become loathsome because of what he said.

"Please, you misunderstand me. Of course you must not give in. What do you take me for? I am only trying to think of other tactics for tackling the problem."

Chizzy heard his talk about tactics. She releases her hands from her face and rests her chin on her hands as she recalls the scenario of another approach which she once tried on the advice of a colleague.

The doctor gets up and comes round the table. Placing his hands soothingly on her shoulders, he asks, "What is it Chizzy?
I'm sorry if I have upset you. I just ..." The door opens and the maid enters with Chizzy's clothes.

"Ya cloth don ready-ol'" She says hanging it on the green screen.

"Thank you." Chizzy says feebly getting up to go and put on her skirt. The doctor retires to his chair to wait for her. Instead of changing, she sits dejectedly on the bed thinking of the other approach she once adopted.

It was her colleague, Dr. Idowu who gave her the advice. She had informed her that she was thinking of finding another job.

"Why? I thought you are enjoying teaching."

"Yes, but you know, I have not been finding it easy with the Chair."

"So, you want to run away like a child?"

"I am tired of the struggle. The tension is too much."

"And if the teacher gives up, what will her students do?"

This question surprised Chizzy because she had not thought of the students' reaction, especially some of the female students who were having similar problems.

"So you will advise the students to withdraw from here and go to another school. If they encounter similar problems there, they should continue running until they reach paradise? That was how I ran from my first job."

"Really?"

"Yes. What you are going through is not new. I was jobless for one whole year. By the time I got this job, nobody told me to hold on tight to it in spite of everything."

"But you don't have my kind of problem. You are married."

"It is not true."

"Does the Chairman also ..."

"I nip it in the bud!"

"How."

"Confrontation and friendliness. A mixture of the two works for me."

"And your husband too."

"No. I don't bring him into the battle. But the fact that I can bring him in might be a check. So that is a factor but I have not exploited it. Would you like to hear my opinion on the matter of your leaving?"

"Yes."
"I cannot claim to know the extent of what you are going through. As a woman I watch you two and I see things which others don't see maybe because I have gone through similar and even worse experiences. If not that the antagonism shows sometimes at meetings I would have said that most of our colleagues would believe that things are normal."

"So, what are you saying in effect?"

"I am trying to say that it can be worse than it is now. There are men who would be brutal in matters like this. This is their world."

"It is also my own world."

"Good! So, you cannot run away. Tackle him. At least, he is not brutal."

"You mean that a man can tight me for refusing him."

"Not physical fight maybe but other kinds of extreme antagonism. But this one manages to contain his passion for now at least."

"Passion?"

"Yes. Passion. I saw it in his eyes the day he was opening a bottle of wine for you in his office."

"He was not opening it for me-o. I told him that I would not drink and he said he would drink. So he was opening it for himself."

"And maybe hoping to persuade you in the end if not that I came in."

"He does not persuade. He orders me and when I refuse, he regards it as insurbodination."

"Well, he is still better than some other men. Do you know the kind of boss you'll have where you are running to? Moreover, why run from a problem? There are problems everywhere."

"I have tried all I can on this particular problem."

"You have not tried to befriend him."

"What?"

"Yes. Without going to the full extent. Just be nice and friendly."

Doctor Omaru cuts into her reverie. "Are you alright, Chizzy?"

"Yes." She replies. "I am just having a little rest. I'll be with you in a short while."

"Take your time. I had finished with my patients for this morning before you came in. And I am free till night when I'll be on call."
Chizzy unties the bedsheet in order to put on her skirt, her mind recalling her first attempt to befriend her antagonist. The opportunity came when he sent her a query letter for locking her door during office hours. Instead of replying it, she went to his office holding the letter conspicuously for the secretarial staff to see that her mission was official.

"Sir, I did not know that you called me yesterday."

"You locked yourself in your office so that my messenger would not get to you!"

"Sir, I locked the door because I was very busy and students were disturbing me."

"We gave you an office so that students can interact with you, you know what I mean, bring their problems to you. Your duty in this place is not just to teach. You know what I mean. It is also your responsibility to guide the students so you should not lock them out and by so doing also lock out the Chairman who might want to discuss important matters with you."

"There is a notice on my door indicating when I see students. And I saw many of them before eleven when I locked my office to prepare my evening lecture."

"That is no excuse!"

"I am sorry sir." She said and decided to try the first line in her rehearsed speech.

"Excuse me sir. You hate me and at the same time you want me. I cannot reconcile the two."

"On the contrary, Ma'am, I like you. Very much, you know what I mean. But it is my duty as the Chairman of the department to see that you perform your duty appropriately, you know what I mean? If you have an aversion to your boss, you know, you shouldn't take it out on your work."

Miss Akari resisted the urge to remind the Chairman that he was the one who was bringing his private emotions to bear on his official relationship with her as his subordinate by creating problems for her because she rebuffed his overtures. However, since her new approach was that of making friends with him, she merely contradicted his assertion that he liked her very much.

"There is nothing in your attitude that shows you like me."

"My dear, only a man who loves you would want you the way I do."
She was lost for words. He removed his glasses and looked at her evenly with his naked eyes scanning the full length of her body as if daring her to deny her sexual appeal for him. Her large pupils with all its fire focused on her boss. She wondered how to say her next line, a sentence she had rehearsed many times before this confrontation. He was the one who broke the silence.

"Yes? Your silence means that you know I love you. Look at those."

"What?" She asked looking around and pretending that she did not know what he was pointing at.

"Those pairs of tantalising breasts and eyes." Miss Akari winced at the crudity of the assertion and the reference to parts of her body. She wondered how she could afford to be friends with the Chairman and probably bear the humiliation of listening to his bizarre jokes. She however continued to converse with this budding 'friend.'

"Sir, I know that you have many female friends. Female students, workers and so on visit you. Why can't you leave me alone."

"It is not everyday that one sees champagne to drink," was the curt reply.

"Champagne?"

"Yes. One easily gets local beer, burukutu and ogogoro, even tonic wine and sherry. But not champagne."

In spite of the situation, Miss Akari credited the Chairman with extraordinary use of insulting metaphors in classifying women.

"So what am I in your array of drinks sir." She asked sarcastically.

"You know it. Champagne." He grinned feeling very happy with his achievement so far.

"And do I take it as a compliment?"

"Of course, my dear. I love you just like my favourite drink." He laughed heartily enjoying the ingenuity of his extraordinary imagery. Miss Akari regarded him evenly, his smallish head perching on his long neck like a bird's. She loved birds very dearly, so one would have expected her to admire this likeness to a bird. She did not. It in fact infuriated her that this likeness existed in the man. She frowned as she remembered her resolution. The man had stopped laughing and was savouring
the joy of the new found friendship with a funny smile on his lips. In spite of her misgivings, she decided that it was time to come up with the next line in her prepared speech.

"I like you too... Sir. But... but..."

"Then show it. Let us go out now." He got up from the chair. Miss Akari was startled by his sudden move.

"But... we are at work. Everybody will notice sir."

"Leave that to me. You are trying to make excuses." He came round the table, snatched the offending letter from her hands and threw it into the dustbin. Miss Akari's heart was pounding very fastly. She did not bargain for this when she was planning the encounter. She breathed in heavily and released the air noisily in a bid to cool her nerves.

"Sir, there is another thing."

"What other excuse? I'll destroy the bad record in your file."

"I am engaged to marry."

"What does it matter? I don't want to marry you. I have a wife already in my house and one..." He hesitated before adding, "Listen my dear, all I want from you is my own cut, my piece of the action, you know what I mean. Or... come to think of it... you can give me a child. Yes?"

He had raised both his hands to wrap round her shoulders when he dropped them suddenly. His proximity to her had enabled him appreciate the large pupils closely. There was fire in them, very hot fire, raging and vengeful. On her own part, Miss Akari was able to see another kind of fire in his eyes. The fire was blazing red, his mouth was twitching, and he was panting, with passion and lust. The fire was raw and repulsive. It was stinking. She stepped back from the man.

"You may leave my office now, Miss Akari," he said as he opened the door to the Secretary's office, "and I want a reply to that letter within twenty four hours!"

It is her sobbing that brings doctor Omaru into the cubicle where Chizzy is still sitting with her skirt in her hands.

"Chizzy, it is enough now."

"I am coming, doctor." She slips into her skirt and goes back to her former chair.

"Chizzy. We have to find a final solution to this problem. Tell me how the Chairman's boss handled the case when you reported to him."
"He listened sympathetically."

"What action did he take to settle the matter?"

"I don't know. He never called me to tell me anything. Chairman's action, however, indicated that both of them discussed it."

"What happened?"

"Well, he summoned me in his usual overbearing manner and told me that he had since suspected that I was evil and that I wanted to malign him but have failed very shamefully. He did not stop there. He told me that before long, he would deal with me permanently. I was so infuriated by this threat that I started telling him off."

"That was a wrong move."

"I don't care! As far as I was concerned, he could not do anything more demeaning than he was already doing. I do my work well. At least, the students attest to that and he knows it. He opened the door and told his secretary to take me out. I went straight to the Director to tell him about the threat."

"What did he say?"

"I was not prepared for what I got. He informed me that my boss told him that I was in fact the one who had been molesting him. My boss had told him that he gave me evening classes just to keep me at a distance. Instead, that I embarrass him by sitting with his secretarial staff every morning waiting to harass him."

"Amazing."

"Just wait. The most disturbing aspect of the whole thing was that the director felt he had investigated the matter by merely confirming with the Chairman's office staff if truly I used to sit there in the morning."

"Why didn't you explain your presence there in the morning?"

"He gave me no chance before he proceeded to insult me in the name of advising me. He said that I was still young and should not spoil my reputation but should try to find my own man."

"What!"

"Just wait. He further advised me not to put the man's marriage in jeopardy because his wife would not take kindly to the situation."

"You never told me this one."

"It happened only last week. I felt like taking the matter to
even higher quarters and telling my father the whole story but I knew that it would complicate his health problem at this time. I wept. I cried out to my God. I kept to myself. Finally, I resolved to fight. I searched for evidence. From piles of papers here and there, I found two of the notes he had written to me. One of them was accompanied by a bottle of tonic wine which I instantly returned to him. I couldn't find the one he sent later with a bottle of sherry but I found another incriminating one. It actually ends with, 'Love you, stubborn girl'."

As they discuss the letters, the doctor marvels at the sudden transformation of her countenance. Her eyes have assumed a defiant glint. She even smiles. Her nostrils widen as she continues,

“All these have made me realise the motive of my mother's advice when my father and I were jubilating for my success in getting the job.”

“What did she say?”

“I remember her exact words. She said, 'My daughter, I am very happy that you have got this kind of job. It is something we have all wanted. We thank God for it. But let me warn you about the world of men which you are going into.' I protested and argued that it was not the world of men. She then told me that I would learn from my own personal experience but that I must always remember that if I could not solve a problem, I should face its reality with maturity. She went into details which made little sense then.”

“Do they make sense now?”

“Yes. These problems have made me remember my mother. She must have gone through some experiences in her own adult life which made her resign her job as a secretary to become a full time housewife, a situation she did not cherish either.”

“She appeared happy with your father. At least, she never complained to me about him and she used to confide in me especially during her long illness.”

“Not about him but maybe about situating herself in the home and limiting her experience.”

“It gave her enough time to take care of herself. Your father is a good man.”

“Yes, and a good father to me but only my mother can talk about his quality as a husband. It was not easy for my mother
as a housewife. And it is not easy for me as a working woman either." She says adding pensively, "So, it is not easy for a woman in this world of men."

"Not only for women," adds the doctor.

There is a gentle knock on the door. The attendant enters and removes the tray with its contents. After she has left, silence engulfs the room. The doctor is thinking of how best to help this woman with whom he is becoming more friendly than is usual with a patient. On her own part, Chizzy dwells on the alternative avenues open to her for seeking justice.

Madam beckons on the attendant as she comes out of the treatment room towards the dispensary.

"Wetin she still dey do inside there. Since dat time when 'im enter, na other doctors dey see patients."

"Dem jus dey look." The attendant replies.

"Look wetin?"

"Dey look 'im body no-w."

"Wetin dey worry di gal?" Madam asks.

"I no know bo-o. But di tin wey me I no like na to wash another woman 'im flower."

"Na flower? No be abortion?"

"No be di same tin?"

"'Im dey lie down? Wetin ..."

"A beg go inside find out yourself. I no know. My own be say, as diiz gals dey come here come chase doctor, make dem no treat me like shit."

"Hey! Wetin dem dey do?"

"Make she do anything she like with doctor. Dat one no concern me. Wetin me I no like be to tell me wash 'im dress when 'im no sick."

"So na fake 'im dey fake? I no understand."

Inside the treatment room, Chizzy and the doctor are mapping out plans for dealing with the problem.

"You don't have to involve your father. Let us leave him out of it. My lawyer will handle it at no cost to you whatsoever. You are my patient and this problem concerns your health, so he will take it up."

"I shall pay. And I shall find another lawyer, a woman."

"Don't worry. You won't have to. Just watch and see how this case will turn round. We'll put fear in him. I'll show him that I
am personally interested in this case. You will see how he would beg for a settlement.”

In her sparkling white attire that appears to bear no trace of the earlier stain, Chizzy leaves the treatment room with the doctor. They are approaching the dispensary when Sule sees them and nudges Madam. “Madam, see am.” The two watch her. Her attire has lost its red stain. Even its irregular boundary has disappeared leaving a small obscure line that almost disappears in the overwhelming white background. Her determined strides belle her earlier hesitant steps. Even her face wears a new glittering look. She smiles at the world of the hospital forgetting that men also rule the place. She winces at her partner in the struggle who is also happy with the outcome of his long meeting with the patient. Her mood must have emitted pleasant vibrations for Madam’s earlier derision now turns to admiration.

“You no see my fellow woman as ‘im dey shake ‘im bottom.”

“Madam, that one na young chick-o, pickin. No be your mate at all.”

“Pickin wetin! Because ‘im fry ‘im hair, rub better cream, dey shake ‘im bottom?” She asks, before declaring, “Na old woman like myself.”

“But di chick fine sha-a. See as ‘im body dey shine.”

“I don tell you say na cream dey make ‘im body shine like dat. You never hear say, ‘good soup, na money make am.’ If I get better money now, I go buy better cream and dress better and you no go know me again.”

Sule laughs at the prospect of the matronly Madam becoming a young woman. Again he tries to provoke Madam.

“Im map don disappear?”

“You no see as dem treat my fellow woman. Na dat poor gal, di attendant, na she wash di thing.”

“But na ‘im job ‘im dey do.”

Madam has no rejoinder. She is clearly annoyed. None of them said anything about the doctor.
She hesitates at the door, then remembers her mother's dictum: "Try first, the person can only say No." She knocks quietly on the door and waits. She hears nothing. She knocks again. This time, the knocks are louder and bolder than before.

"Na who be dat!"
"Come in"

"That is how they have been disturbing us all day."
The girl prefers to react to the second statement while she tries very much to pretend she did not hear the others. She opens the door, enters and greets.

"Good afternoon Sir. Good afternoon Madam."

Not expecting any reply to her greeting, she hears nothing as she quickly looks around to make sure that she is in the right place. "HEAD OF DEPARTMENT", is boldly written on the door to her right.

"Please," she says with emphasis, "I wish to see the Head of Department of Culture."

"Wetin you wan see am for?" asks the woman dialling a number on the telephone beside her typewriter. The girl hesitates.

She does not know whether it is wise to discuss the subject of her visit.

"Does your mission involve private, personal or official circumstances?" asks the man who is busy looking through a book. She can easily identify the worn-out blue book as Advanced Learners Dictionary because she has a copy which she won as a prize in her former school. She is confused because she does not know how to classify her message.

"It is not too personal, anyway, maybe a bit official."
"Wait"

"Thank you, sir," she is genuinely grateful for she is fearing that she might not be allowed to see the Head of Department.

140
“So, di only thing dem fit do for dis Christmas na to cut people salary?” The girl realises that the woman has already got the number and is now talking to somebody on the telephone.

“I no blame dem. When dem go dey ride for dem big cars, how dem go remember small people like we?” The two others in the room now listen to her own side of the dialogue.

“How you go talk like dat? Dem no sabi say austerity don reach bush kpa-kpa-a.”

“Ehen. Why, because di rat wey dey for inside bush no dey wait for night again before ‘im begin de wahala we.”

“Who say!! ‘Im wey no sabi, go soon sabi. Okay. Bye bye.” She drops the receiver.

“So Madam, by your own meagre calculation, the present economic crunch is not affecting every citizen of this country,” asks the man still looking into the book.

“A beg, leave me boo. You and your big grammar. You want to talk like them but rat still dey wahala you and me.”

“No worry” says the man. The girl notes that it is his first time of speaking the popular pidgin English.

“I no dey go Warri-o. Na for Benin I dey kampe for inside Nigeria.”

“Then make you stay there do your work instead of gossiping through the telephone.”

“Shut up!”

“Whom-are you shouting at like that?”

“I say, you, messenger boy, shut up!”

The man stands up. “Officially I am a caretaker cum messenger, but in practice I am the Personal Assistant to the only Professor of Indigenous Culture and Head of the Department of Culture. So, address me by correct appellation and with respect and dignity.”

“A beg shut your big mouth and do your messenger work.” The woman says and immediately starts dialling another number.

He replies immediately, “Typist, what have you typed since morning. No be complain here, complain there. Gossip up and gossip down. Is it only yourself who is suffering from the severe austerity measures!”

“He-ll-ow.” Her quarrelsome tone has transformed into a sweet one as she greets the person at the end of the line. She uses her
hand to cover the mouth of the receiver as she harshly addresses the girl, "You want fall into my mouth! Why you dey look me. A beg go inside see di man wey you dey look for." She removes her hand from the receiver and talks sweetly into the receiver.

"Sorry. I just dey attend to visitor."

"I say make you go in!" she shouts at the girl not remembering or bothering to cover the receiver.

"Wait, let me go and see whether he is ready to receive any visitors yet." The man halts the girl at the door and dashes in.

She enters the office, her eyes fixed on the ground not daring to look the Professor in the face because she expected the man to be worse than his aides.

"Yes, can I help you, young woman?" Surprised, she does not look up immediately. She is slow in raising her head. Her eyes rest momentarily on the green and white curtains for they have big holes in them. Her eyes are about to focus on the man when she sees that he is also looking at the same curtains.

"Yes, young woman. You are free to look at the curtains for as long as you like. I am not ashamed to admit that rats raid this office. They decided to eat the curtains so as to ridicule me but they have not succeeded because I am not ashamed."

"Excuse me, Sir, I was ... eh, was ...." She is in fact the one who is embarrassed. It is as if she has been caught as a naughty child with her hands inside her mother's soup pot.

"Don't apologise, girl, it is not your fault. The rats are angry and they have left the bush to come and do battle in my office. They have won initial victory."

As if the girl has come on a peace mission to intervene in his war with rats, he proceeds to explain to her.

"They gave me the first sign in 1987. It was the year I stopped eating lunch because the government refused to review our salary. This meant that my salary was at a fixed point while inflation was doubling and tripling. Now inflation has gone mad! Just like everybody!" He sees that the girl is startled by his speech so he lowers his voice and continues to explain.

"Yes. You may think that I took a drastic action. I had to do it so that the money would still be enough for some basic needs of the family. That was the beginning. I have since sold my car so that I could continue paying school fees for my children." The girl is now warming up to the story. It sounds very much like her
own, only that it was not a car that her mother sold but their only house to pay school fees. Now they live in a rented room in Ohoro. "All of us in one room divided by a curtain that also has holes in them." She thinks, still looking at the Professor's curtains.

"I used to leave the left-over food in the bin there." The girl realises that the Professor has continued his story. "Before I came to work, my messenger would clear the bin." The girl who has now regained her confidence walks towards the chair by the table in front of the Professor.

"Yes, young woman, you can sit down," says the Professor belatedly after she sat down. He himself gets up to continue with his story as if he is lecturing her.

"What I have told you was the beginning of a long story that may end in a nightmare. I am telling you how the rats started coming to my office in 1987 when I stopped eating. Isn't it?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Now listen to the real story."

Professor presses the bell on his table. "You will hear the story like fresh palm wine, unadulterated," he says as the man enters in response to the bell.

"Tell this lady what happened in 1987."

The messenger is momentarily surprised, then he remembers. The Professor has made him repeat the same thing to people many times recently. So, he proceeds fluently in his wordy language.

"This room has always been a constant playground cum conference center for rats but Professor did not know. I used to come early in the morning to clear the office. I used to discover that rats usually ate the food left in the bin but would leave the wraps for me to throw away. Then sometime in 1987 the Professor terminated his habit of consuming lunch although he did not desist from poring over his books or writing till late in the evening. I thought that he was consciously reducing his weight. He used to be ... I mean, he was not very slim at the time."

The Professor nods his head in agreement saying, "Go on."

"Then the rats started scattering the books on the shelf," continues the man. "I used to rearrange the books on the shelf and Professor never knew what was happening. Then sometime
in 1988 they started leaving droppings all over the floor. I would sweep out the droppings and open the windows to air the room before the Professor's arrival. This one continued for a long time. Then in 1990, just around the time when we, I mean soldiers were going to intervene in the Liberian civil war, the rats came up with a new behaviour altogether. They scattered the papers on the table. Professor was very angry and summoned me and that woman you saw there, that foul-mouthed human being of the female specie."

"This is rather rude, my boy," says the Professor.
"I'm sorry, Sir."
"It's the young woman you owe an apology."
"Sorry. May I continue, Sir, with the narration?"
"Go on."

"Professor told us to tell him the person who committed havoc on his table by removing some of his papers. I owned up immediately and corrected him. I informed him that they were not removed but that the sheets of paper were scattered all over the whole place when I came in the morning. I just arranged them as I deemed fit, swept the droppings scattered on the floor and opened the window."

"Who scattered them?" asks the girl.
"Rats, of course," replies the Professor who continues with the story.
"Do you understand it now? The rats were angry because I stopped leaving left-over food in the bin. So, they started scattering my books. I did not react. They started despoiling the place with their droppings. I did not react. They have just started to scatter my papers. So, I now know and I have started consulting experts who advise me on the matter."

"See! See the bin!" He tries to draw the attention of the girl who is the only spectator of the comedy. He raises it up and points at the hole that is made by the rats' teeth. The girl stares at the hole.

"It is like map of Africa!" she shouts in bewilderment.

The Professor leaves his chair, comes round to inspect the bin as if he has never seen it before. He takes it from the man, raises it up himself.
"My goodness! Why haven't I noticed it before." He places it on the table in front of the girl. She quickly moves out of the chair. Professor is now scrutinising the hole from the far right corner of the room.

"It looks like a map of the world, from here," says the girl. The Professor runs to her side, bends his body so that his eyes will be on the same level with the girl's, bends his neck to one side and to the other. He hurries to his table, snatches his sunshade, wears it and peers at the bin.

The man goes towards the door, stands with his hands akimbo and stares at the hole fixedly. At last the Professor comes up with the result of his own scrutiny.

"When you see it through the shade, it looks like the world. When you see it with naked eyes, it is Africa cut out in plastic bin."

"Professor! This is definitely a map of Nigeria," declares the man still standing by the door. Automatically the girl and Professor run close to him.

The door is thrown open and the three turn around. The unwanted intruder is the woman.

"Sorry Sir, I no know say di man dey here."

The Professor calls her. "Come here, my dear woman, look at this." He touches the hole saying, "What does it look like?"

"Oga, na hole." replies the woman.

"I know. What does the hole look like?"

"Ah! Oga, me no sabi dis kind question. Make I take my own mouth tell you wetin hole look like?" She begins to back out of the room. "Nobody dey for our office. Make I go see if person don come." She goes and does not close the door properly so that they soon hear her dialling a number on the telephone. She is eager to report another incident that convinces her that "Culture" is not well and nobody notices except her.

The Professor picks up the bin, observes it again and removes it. He walks to his chair, sits opposite the girl, pauses, then informs her, "I am using new weapons now."

"I know."

"How do you know?"

"I can see that." She points at a mouse-trap that is not properly concealed by the curtain. She is not embarrassed this time. The Professor laughs.
"I bought it today with money that I had wanted to use in buying a new book which I recommended to the students."

The girl does not reply. She looks up at the ceiling, scrutinising the holes and marks left by the constant leakage of water through the roof. There is a point on the ceiling from where she can see the sky.

"No wonder," she says shaking her head and wondering whether she should still discuss her mission.

(Written with candle light when NEPA cut electricity supply. It was a kind of triumph over NEPA — National Electric Power Authority)
He is sitting in his office-facing the delegation of students, listening to their complaints which led them to loot the Vice-President's food-store last night. "Yes our people say that no matter how hungry a person becomes, he can never eat common rats!"

"And even vultures which they say is a taboo!" shouts another.

The telephone rings.

"Hello Chief of Campus Police here."

The leader of the students continues talking. The chief listens to the caller while still looking at the students facing him.

"Yes?"

"What?" The student leader has come to the point where he narrates how they search their wardrobes for rats, but the Chief is only looking at him and reacting to the caller.

"Rat?"

"What's wrong with that?"

There is silence on the other end of the telephone.

The student who is talking is also shocked to silence.

On his own part, the Chief is surprised by the silence from the lady on the telephone. He is even more surprised as the students rise up while their leader shouts.

"Comrades, he sees nothing wrong in the fact that we eat rats as our cheap source of protein!" The chief opens his mouth in astonishment as he hears the woman scolding him. His mouth is still open as his eyes register on the group trooping out of his office.

"What's wrong?" he shouts, dropping the telephone.

Beside the well "shaved" lawns and "manicured" hedges of the C100 bungalow occupied by Madame Nne Okoruwa is a small bush. The bush lines the edges of the road that flanks two sides of the house. Madam's gardener is always reluctant to clear the bush. On few occasions when she questioned him, the dialogue
always followed the same pattern.

"Gardener, make you cut the grass outside the barbed wire." She always tries to speak pigdin which is the language of non-literate people like the gardener.

"Madam, Sir?" He usually adds 'Sir' because according to him, "Di woman no be woman again. 'Im don reach man, pass am sef." It would have been demeaning for him to be serving under a mere woman, he feels, so he always adds 'Sir' to reinstate the psychological basis for a man like him with wives and children to be serving a woman.

"I say, make you cut grass."
"For yonder?"
"Yes, for yonder."
"But, Madam Sir, dat na government ground. My own job na to clean for inside dis compound."
"I know, but 'im near di house too much. Snakes fit come for di house." Gardener smiles in satisfaction at his employer's admittance of fear and reliance on him.
"I go cut am, Madam, Sir."
"And I keep telling you not to call me Sir."
"Yes Sir." he says again before quickly adding, 'Madam' as he bows.

Each of the bungalows is a massive four-room apartment with a study-room, living room, kitchen, store and two balconies. At the back of each bungalow is a small one-room apartment with a small kitchen and pantry. The one-room apartment is called boys' quarter, a name that derives from the colonial term 'boy' which refers to an African especially the domestic servant of a colonial master. It is in such an apartment that the gardener lives with his two wives and seven children. He is sitting outside the yard cracking palm kernels. His eyes roam towards the bush where the children are scamping about. He smiles for his large family is another source of psychological booster which gives him an edge over his 'master, Madam'.

"As my Madam Sir no get wife," he smiles at that slip and corrects himself. Although he regards her as a man, he knows that she is still a woman. "As my Madam no get husband and pickins, me wey dey serve am like boy, get seven whole pickins wey I dey manage wit my one hundred naira wey Madam dey pay me every month." He is saddened by the fact that the money is
She is a Man

not enough for feeding his family let alone sending the children to school. The situation has compelled his wives to stay out all day. Very early in the morning, they leave for the farm from where they go to the market only to come home at night. The stone hits a kernel too hard crushing it, shell and all. He brushes it aside in annoyance and curses the present economic situation that has forced a man like him to sit at home and crack palm kernels; a job which he feels should normally belong to women. “But tins no normal again,” he sighs and resumes the job. At this point, he remembers that today is a WAD day, that is, the day of every month set aside by the government for the people to clean their environment. Instinctively, he knows that Madam will ask him about the bush again. He throws one kernel into his mouth and shakes his legs, a sign of his reluctance to clear the bush which is the hunting ground of his children. While the bungalow children go to the staff club and Youths’ Centre for sport and amusement, the boys’ quarters’ children scamp about the bushes, so the gardener is reluctant to tamper with the playing ground of his own children and their poor friends.

Many of the children are skinny except in their tommy areas that have swollen due to malnutrition. They are armed with sticks, stones and catapults. The frightful army of little hunters are not interested in the government’s “War Against Dirt” (WAD). They are engaged in a war against hunger. Not having enough to eat at home, they resorted to pinching garri and palm kernels but soon even the last kernel or cup of garri was always sold to the new kind of aggressive traders who went from house to house buying up any available food. The children turn to the rats which were previously the food of cats since it was demeaning for human beings to eat them. Coincidentally and unknown to them, they contributed their own efforts to the government’s programme, “War Against Rats,” which was aimed at eradicating rats because Lassa fever epidemic was traced to disease-carrying rats.

The dust-bin on the bush beside the bungalow provides a veritable meeting-point for rats, lizards, birds, vultures and the children. The children, first of all, rampage through the huge car-like bin for redeemable left-overs of the bungalow people’s table. Chunks of yam and garri are the usual items found there but occasionally some stale bread can be found by the ‘lucky’ child. Poking through the bins has a more profitable reward
because the small animals which are also preying on the leftovers are hunted in the process. It is usually when they exhaust the supply of game in the site that they move to other bushes. Rats and lizards are freely hunted, roasted in open fire made beside the bush and eaten with glee. They are often tempted to kill the vultures but they have sternly been warned against it because vultures are messengers of spirits and are never eaten.

Madam is fuming in anger at the way the Chief of Campus Police treated her. How can he see nothing in the fact that a rat has run into her house. She eyes her breakfast which is still on the dining table, uneaten. She has refrained from eating it because she wanted to conclude the preparation of the lecture, "Population Control and the New Economic Reality." The shouts of the children in the nearby bush had disturbed her, so, she had wanted to go to the boys' quarter and tell the gardener to clear the bush immediately. As soon as she opened the door, a rat ran in and promptly headed towards her study-room whose door was still ajar. "It must have been those children playing in the bush who frightened the poor thing," she thought. She had quickly shut the door of the study-room and telephoned for help. She had expected the Chief of Campus Police to come quickly to her aid. She never expected that kind of reaction from him. "Why doesn't he consider my predicament important enough to come here quickly?" she wonders as she paces around the room.

She is annoyed because she cannot go into the study-room to continue with her work and she cannot open the outside door to go for her gardener because another rat might run into the house. She feels trapped in her own house. Afraid to go out, afraid to go into the study-room, she picks the telephone again. There is no reply from the other end. Maybe the Chief is coming to deal with the problem. She sits on the chair by her telephone waiting for some time to pass before dialling again. She hears a sound by her gate. She is relieved and thinks, "So, he was just pulling my leg by saying 'what's wrong with that?' That was an expensive joke, anyway," she concludes getting up to go and open the door.

She is rooted on the spot. They are breaking her gate. "The children! And Adults!" she notes with alarm. "Students! A Mob!" She opens the door to the study, oblivious of the ominous rat and runs into her bedroom screaming. From her room, she
She is a Man 151

views the mob breaking the gates and doors of the bungalows. They are looting the stores, she observes, for they are carrying yams, garri, pots and other food items. She sees others carrying television, fans and other non-food items. They are breaking more doors and windows, she thinks with more alarm, for she can hear the noise of banging and cracking of doors. She kneels by her window watching the 'bandits' and painfully praying that they do not invade her bedroom.

Glossary of unfamiliar words

dat that
di the
dis this
don has
garri dried grains made from cassava
lm he, she
pickins children
na is
sef used for emphasis
tins things
wey who
Anecdotes of her Rites of Passage to America

The Crooked Line

She is still gazing at the agitated line of seekers of the 'Valid Stamp' when her mind strays to other lines in her experience. She recalls the long line of acolytes filing to the sacred grove for Earth's clay, the crowd of celebrants with iron implements at the annual festival, the procession of mock mourners making its way to the altar on Ash Wednesday. "But something is different with this line," she thinks wondering what it can be.

"Move no-w." The man behind her nudges her to fill the gap in front of her. She can detect the impatience in the voice.

"As if I am the one who causes the go-slow," she complains silently as she fills the gap with one step. She regrets the loss of her line of thoughts. She glares sternly at the man behind her whom she thinks is the obvious cause of the disruption of her pleasurable thoughts. She decides to observe the environment more closely. In front of her is a woman. She scrutinises the woman's hair. It is braided in zig-zag lines ... like the crooked path of the stream of her disrupted thoughts. The braids are rope-like ... just like a tendril winding round a stem. She focuses on the woman's neck ... lovely slim lines like ripples on a gentle stream. Chioma stretches her hands touching one of the slender lines on her neck. The woman turns round sharply.

"Sorry, I was only admiring your hair." This compliment does not assuage the anger on an otherwise beautiful face despoiled by tension pimples, anxious lines and oily pores.

"How you go fit talk about beauty when things dey hot like pepper."

"I'm very sorry," Chioma again apologises.

"Make you no worry." The woman now smiles coarsely adding, "No be your fault sha-a. Dis na the third time I don come here
with my pickins and dem be American childrens-o. Na only me-o, for sake of say dem Papa dey for America." It looks so simple to Chioma who offers a piece of advice.

"Since your husband is in America, tell him to get the visa ..." The woman cuts in, "For American face, I no be 'im wife."

"Why?"

"Na di tin wey me I no sabi. Dem Papa dey work there but 'im pickins dey suffer suffer here and dem tell me say I no be 'im wife."

"Why no-w?"

"For sake of we no marry for church, no marry for court. Na for our village traditional we marry."

Chioma cannot understand the reasoning. As far as she is concerned, marriage is marriage whether by traditional law, ecclesiastical law or by statutory law.

"Are you sure you married by traditional law?" she asks.

"Yes no-w. I look like Asewo? I no be free woman at all. Na dis stamp wey dem no give me dey make me dey waka wit pickins up and down as if dem no get Papa!"

"Why not ask your husband to come and take them with him?"

Chioma asks wiping sweat from her face. The woman is angered by this question which implies an acceptance on her part of the new arrangement necessitated by the poor economic situation that separates husband and wife so that each can make a living wherever work is available. The woman sees no reason for couples to live separately when they are already united in marriage. She directs her anger at Chioma for reminding her of this emergent disgusting phenomenon.

"When you marry, make you carry your pickins them give man wey dey for America, you hear!"

"When I marry, I go live with my husband." Maybe it is the heat or the pain of waiting for a long time that has prompted Chioma to make this kind of unrealistic statement. Who, in Nigeria, does not know that the time has passed when couples insist on living together. The Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) which the masses have "christened" "Suffering, Adjustment and Poverty" (SAP) has wiped off that spirit of togetherness usually treasured in the institution of marriage. These days, a couple thanks their God if one of them gets a job anywhere in the world. The question of living together is fast
becoming a luxury which only few couples can afford.

“No be stupid you dey, na real mu-mu you be, goat. You no sabi wetin dey happen for ya country and you say you sabi book.”

“I know what I am saying. I cannot let my husband go abroad to work leaving me and my children here. You asked for it!” Chioma insists thereby exacerbating the woman’s anger. The woman visibly annoyed now gives Chioma the rough edge of her tongue.

“Na foolish ...” She says before Chioma is saved from her tirade by the man behind her who shouts, “Move!”

Again Chioma’s eyes hit the lines before her resting evenly on the zig-zag which looks like the crooked path to her village stream. The comparison reminds Chioma of her childhood when, among other children, she used to delight in going to the Ajali stream to fetch clean water which her mother used to equate with rain water. While climbing the hill with her water pot, she had often wondered why the path should be crooked in addition to being hilly which in itself was enough punishment. She looks far away searching for a comfortable spot to fix her gaze. She sights the bespectacled immigration officer and fixes her gaze on his spectacles. She realises that the spectacles look like two chameleons locked in a wrestle. It appears as if the chameleons change colour and size. They now look like a red stream snaking through her village. As Chioma gazes at them, her emotions modulate between enthusiasm, apprehension and even outright hostility towards the American immigration officer, all the while constantly reminded of the reality that is her position on the crooked line.

**Passport To America**

Chioma is right in front of the officer who is checking the passports at the Nigerian Airways checking counter. She checks the passport of the man on Chioma’s left and passes it to the next officer. She now takes that of the young woman on Chioma’s right. It is when she takes from the boy behind her that Chioma confirms that the woman’s action is deliberate. Chioma waits. Having checked the boy’s passport, she stretches her hand to take that of a man just walking in. Chioma decides to complain and calmly she says, “I was here before him.” The man withdraws his passport. The officer has no choice but to take Chioma’s. She
takes it and hisses. "This kind that think the country no good for the men," she tells her colleague not attempting to whisper her words. Her colleague quickly looks through the passport and responds, "She is going to America."

"Where else she go go? No be to go do jankara job, useless job wey white people no go do for America."

"Well, make she go earn American dollars no-w," replies the man.

"Na 'im sabi." She hisses again. Up until now Chioma has refrained from telling the woman to mind her business, because that may lead to a quarrel. She has not forgotten the one she nearly had with the woman in front of her on the line in the American embassy earlier.

"Maybe her husband, that is, if she has not chased him away with nagging, squeezed her mouth today and she wants to take it out on me." Chioma thinks eyeing the woman and wondering why the Nigerian Airport Authority should employ such "an officer who has no sense of order, who deliberately offends customers when she should be very polite to them, who chooses to speak pidgin when she knows that English is the official language."

"A beg pass di tin for her make she leave my front," says the woman to her colleague adding, "See her.. She never reach America before she begin to talk for nose like a masquerade!"

This is too much for Chioma. "Are you calling me a masquerade?" she asks.

"I call your name?" shouts the woman. The line already disjointed now begins to disintegrate as people gravitate towards the scene to watch a budding spectacle. Chioma curses herself for not maintaining her earlier decision to ignore the woman's tantrums. The woman now plays to the gallery as she hisses audibly and shouts, "Ame-ri-caancer." Chioma tries to ignore her and wait patiently for her passport. But a foul "You are only jealous" escapes through her angry mouth. She is surprised by this seemingly irrelevant outburst.

"Jealous! Jealous for wetin? You? Look at you kpanla, stockfish wey dey go do asewo for America."

"I'm not a prostitute!"

"Wetin you dey go do for America wey you no fit do here? Asewo dollar!"

Another officer has emerged from inside to find out the cause
of the commotion. The aggressor is the first to complain, "Look at me-o, doing my duty and dis gal here come tell me say I dey jealous am because she dey go do asewo for America."

Chioma focuses her eyes on the officer, waiting for his reaction. He looks at Chioma.

"Young lady, let me see your passport." He glances through it and says,

"No trouble. Let her go. Young lady, you can go." She says nothing. She is giving the officer some papers.

"What are these?"

"Read them."

"Our duty here is to examine passports and nothing else."

"But your colleague here," Chioma complains pointing at the woman, "has exceeded that duty by saying that I'm going to be a prostitute in America. You heard her call me asewo. I want you to examine these papers and tell her that they are my admission papers to Ithaca University College." Hardly has she finished the sentence than the woman retorts, "Because you no fit pass University for Nigeria, so you dey run go America." The man takes the papers, folds them without reading them and gives them back to Chioma.

"I don't have to examine your papers. You know what you are going there for and good luck to you. Next person, please." Chioma reluctantly takes her papers, picks her bag and is walking away without a word when the woman shouts, "When you reach America, greet my only child wey I use all my money send go school for America. She dey talk for nose like you. Dem say she dey parade herself for Madison Avenue for Amerlcal" The crowd burst into laughter. In spite of her anger, before she takes the turn, Chioma feels a tinge of pity for the woman who is disappointed by her only child, a daughter, who instead of being in school has become a street girl in America. She turns round and waves. The crowd cheers.

A Sort-of Marriage

She is just zipping her bag when her brother calls, "Chioma-a ... Chi Chi somebody here to see you." She goes to the living room where a man with some letters in his hand is waiting for her.

"I am sorry to bother you so early in the morning. I am Major Ken Ojezuwa, Victoria's father." He says getting up.
"Oh Vicky, was my class mate at the Mission School. I saw her yesterday."

"Yes, she told me that you will be traveling to the U.S. today. So, I wrote these letters. Will you be kind enough to dispatch them to my sons. This one is for my friend." Chioma accepts the three letters but refuses the money which the man offers her in lieu of postage stamps. He thanks her and wishes her a safe journey. As soon as he leaves Chioma comments, "This is the kind of thing that our Sister Principal criticises."

"What?" asks her brother.

"How our people do things. I mean, why can't he just post the letters here himself?"

"Maybe they are urgent."

"But Emeka, everybody knows there is the Speed-post which can get a letter anywhere in three days."

"Maybe it is too expensive for him."

"And I'm the one who will pay the postage now."

"You asked for it."

"Our people can be funny."

"One of those things Africans do."

Chioma is almost at the end of her journey. She is relaxed and happy. She looks out through the window of the plane and observes scattered moulds of cloud floating on what looks like a sea of golden haze. It looks so serene and beautiful. She has always observed the clouds from the ground and marvelled at their translucency and amoebic structure. But observing them now from above is another experience which she has never imagined its joy. She feels like a huge bird surveying the world. She feels so happy and free like the metal bird ferrying her to her destination. She now realises that she is learning a lot of things through her travel experience. She yawns as she recalls her experience with the woman in front of her at the American embassy and the hostess at the Nigerian Airways check-in counter. Tranquil and happy, she feels no anger or bitterness towards them because they are victims of oppressive economic structures that lure their loved ones to America.

"Their quarrel with me is a kind of misplaced aggression," she muses feeling sleepy. She recalls the man who nudged her to
He Wants to Marry Me Again . . .

move forward in the embassy and believes that he did not realise that an ominous machine or master is responsible for that crooked line which he was so eager to maintain. Chioma reclines her head by the window savouring the beauty of nature as sleep engulfs her.

Chioma is roused from sleep by the voice of the Air hostess reminding the passengers to fasten their seat belts in preparation for landing in Ithaca airport. She is still in a happy mood as the plane touches down and they disembark from the plane. Her happy mood soon turns to one of apprehension as she does not see her brother's friend who is expected to meet her at the airport. "Nigerians," she hisses, "Never time conscious."

She identifies her luggages, assembles them and waits for her contact.

She does not know when she dozes off again. It has become dark outside by the time she wakes. She is no longer apprehensive. She is really afraid now. She looks at her watch. It reads two hours. "So it is two o'clock in the morning and I am still here?" Chioma cannot believe it. All the other passengers had left. She looks at the man on the counter. He is still the same man who was there when she arrived. How could she have slept for so long, she wonders? It was still day light when she arrived. She panicks. She goes to the man at the counter. "Excuse me, please." The man is busy with the calculator. She waits so as not to disturb his calculation.

"Yeah, say what it is. Don't stand there staring at me," he shouts. Chioma is embarrassed. She would have told the man to go to hell, but she reckons that she needs his help.

"Please how can I get ... I mean, can you recommend a hotel that is safe for me to spend the night. A friend who is supposed to . . . ."

The man cuts in, "Which hotel?"

"I don't know." Chioma replies.

The man continues with his calculations. Just then, a vehicle pulls up. Relief! Chioma strongly feels that this is her contact. She goes outside to meet her. To her dismay, a man comes out from a small bus-like vehicle on which is written 'Airport Limousine'. She is disappointed. Almost tearfully she asks the man, "Please, can you take me to a hotel where I can spend the night?"
"What?"

"My friend who is supposed to ..." Again she goes on to explain her story at the end of which the man says, "Look in the directory over there and find any hotel of your choice." Chioma runs to the telephone booth and picks up the directory. She gets an idea. One of those letters she is carrying has an Ithaca address. She rummages through her bag, finds the letter, reads the name, opens the directory and looks for the name. She almost cries out in joy when she finds the name, OJEZUWA N.A. She does not know how to use the telephone. She reads the instruction on the telephone booth, '5 10 25 US coins only.' It makes little meaning to her. She does not know whether to put the three coins at the same time or just one of them. She goes back to the man who directed her to the telephone for assistance.

"How do I use the telephone, please."

"Just drop a quarter:" he answers. She pours out the few coins her brother had given her while doing a quick arithmetic of how many dimes or cents make a dollar which she learnt in school not too long ago. She is lucky. She finds a coin with the inscription, QUARTER DOLLAR. She drops it in the machine and dials.

"Chinekel" Chioma exclaims inwardly in surprise as it rings. Somebody answers. "Is it a woman's voice?" She wonders.

"Good evening. Is that Professor Ojezuwa's residence?"

"Yes." It is a woman's voice, Chioma confirms, probably White.

"Please, can I talk to him?" asks Chioma.

"Speaking."

"Oh! Madam." Chioma is surprised. She hurriedly explains, "My name is Chioma Njoku. I am a Nigerian just coming to the U.S. for the first time. Somebody is supposed to pick me up at the airport but she has not arrived yet. Could you, please recommend a hotel where I can put up for the night, somewhere that is safe and not too expensive."

"Where are you calling from?" That's definitely a White woman's voice.

"Ithaca Airport."

"I'll be there in twenty minutes." Relief. Joy. Gratitude. Chioma feels the three at once as she eagerly awaits Professor Ojezuwa. Her gratitude also extends to Vicky's father who gave her the letters and she thanks God for not making it possible for
him to send the letters by Speed-post.

"When did you say you arrived?"

"About six hours ago."

"What!"

"Yes!"

"It is now 8:00 p.m. This means that you arrived here by 2 o'clock in the afternoon." Chioma is confused.

"The plane was due to arrive here by 7:00 p.m."

"Then that should be an hour ago." Chioma looks at her watch again, puts it near her ear to check if it is ticking. The watch has never disappointed her. The professor is amused.

"Have you adjusted your watch since you arrived?" she asks Chioma.

"No Madam."

"Then, put it back six hours because Nigerian is six hours ahead of American time."

"I must look stupid, don't I?"

"No. It is normal for a new-comer." Silence. Chioma still feeling uncomfortable about her having to disturb the professor without prior warning almost unnecessarily ejaculates, "And to disturb you like this without any warning...I'm really sorry."

"Don't worry about it. It is one of those things. I'm used to your people. Afterall I was sort of married to one of them, a soldier who came here some years ago for a course." Chioma is shocked at the woman's Nigerian connection. And the sudden realisation that Major Ojezuwa could be her husband. She digs into her bag for the Professor's letter and vaguely hears her add, "And my two boys consider themselves Africans even though they were born here." She however hears the woman chuckle and use the common cliche. "One of those things Africans do."

**Gazing at America**

Chioma marvels at the glitters of America. Disciplined drivers of Ithaca command her respect. Eighteen libraries in one College alone, each bigger than what she had imagined! Computers and other machines: food machine, drink machine, laundry machine! All glare at her, sapping her pocket without a smile. Her class mates, all new and fast and busy in heavy coats and boots to defy the cold just as herself. Only the wooded land with its squirrels and deers reminds her of friendliness. She seeks to
understand her new environment, to woo her and conquer her. The television becomes her best friend taking the first place before her books and even the sisterly Professor.

Her eyes suffocate with screen tales, as she watches the feline noose of cowboys bore through eyes and nose. Yeah, even the anus of Sadam Hussein who still dares America with his yet indestructible life unlike rulers of nations that are rich in retreating warriors and fawning kings with bloated bellies. Those are nations rich in famished women and men seeking the stamp that would banish them from their motherland.

Her eyes marvel at America with drug and gun and poor people fighting civil wars with words and books, and even clubs calling the ghosts of Columbus who started it all and invoking the turtle which inhabited the land before Columbus. They invoke Malcolm X and and another King...

Tales of Afrocologist, Multicologist, Womanist and Humanist, all flood her ears with labels, labels without hands without eyes, labels that form a film through which her eyes seek to see:

The walls, The walls, And more walls.
Break them down! Let them fall apart...

She sees Anita Black and Clarence Black wear gloves, wear masks. They do not oscillate nor even gyrate. They plunge headlong into the arena, like modern gladiators seeking to please white masters and their manicured queens.

The arena is deserted.
Swept carcasses of fighters
Dumped by circus owners.
The arena is deserted.
But,
The smell of Blood!
Marshed souls
Of my father's children
demand full funeral rites
For a clean resurrection.

And Chioma continues gazing, even at herself, and she remembers the words of the hostess at the Nigerian Airways counter.

Ameri-cancer ... Asewo dollar.