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A Novel, *Pounds of Flesh*, and a Critical Commentary

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Abstract

A Novel, *Pounds of Flesh*, and a Critical Commentary

This study combines the writing of a novel, *Pounds of Flesh*, and a critical commentary on the novel. The narrative covers the experiences of West African migrant characters who leave home in search of better standards of living. It presents the dynamics of leaving home through the exploration of historical, socio-cultural and economic prisms of migration, a topical and controversial issue in contemporary social discourse.

To theorise and contextualise the novel, I found an appropriate tool in Sigmund Freud's notion of the uncanny. However, this concept is vast and imbricating, hence, I have limited myself to the uncanny motifs of 'home' and the 'unhomely.' The ambiguity and complexity of these terms, however, also touch on the issues of identity, another multivalent concept. To streamline these, I draw on my own experience as a 21st century transnational migrant, and a third-generation Nigerian writer.

Through the narrative of migrants' experiences interpolated by their points of view in *Pounds of Flesh*, the uncanniness in the migrant's quest - fears, uncertainties, estrangement, homesickness, loneliness, the insatiate yearnings, and confusion - is identified.

While avoiding the portrayal of the quest for 'home' as futile, I argue through the experiences of the migrant characters in *Pounds of Flesh*, that identifying 'home' and being at home are steeped in ambiguity and complexity, making the search for home unending.

Key words: uncanny, ambiguity, home, unhomeliness, identity, motifs, postcolonialism, migrant literature, Pidgin, voice.

Table of contents

<i>Pounds of Flesh</i>	1
Critical Commentary.....	333
Introduction	334
Chapter One: Writing <i>Pounds of Flesh</i>	340
Chapter Two: Home	355
Chapter Three: Leaving Home	366
Chapter Four: Identity	381
Conclusion	399
Bibliography	404

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Pounds of Flesh

Chapter 1

Laja's eyes moved from the shadow on the wall to see Fali, his father's other wife. She trotted, bucket in hand, from the rusted corrugated iron sheets bathroom into the house. He became afraid. His mother had told him and his siblings that Fali was not to be seen. Setting eyes on her was bad omen. Seeing her twice in a day was precursor to a chain of misfortunes. He looked towards Mother, bent over, stoking the fire between three big stones on which a steaming pot sat. She had not seen Fali. If she did, she would have stood up, hissed loud, and made three quick signs of the cross. One was for protection over her children; the second was for herself, and the third, to destroy evil powers that Fali must have left hovering in the atmosphere. Happy but still scared that he was the only one who saw Fali, Laja silently recited the *Hail Mary*.

It was late for supper, about 8.00 pm, but they had to wait for Mother to come back home from the market. Mother said Laja, being ten, was too young to cook. Toke, his sister, though twelve, was a bad cook. She burnt everything. Ola, their seven years old brother, was out of the question. Besides their ages, it would be inappropriate for the boys to cook. No boy cooked where there was a female to do it. On some days Mother would come home with bread and other ready-made food for them to eat. The children preferred that to waiting inside the smoke and soot-walled kitchen. But Mother often said ready-cooked food was tasteless and unhygienic and that she only bought them when she was too tired to cook.

The children sat on an old car back seat, watching as the flames of the paraffin lamp which lit the kitchen danced wildly to the dictates of the wind from the

frameless door and window. A moth flew in, hit the lamp's wick hard and fell to the floor. As it scrambled up into flight, Toke hit out with her left hand, bringing the insect down on the wick and snuffing out the lamp. A thick smoke oozed up from the lamp. Mother struck a match. Light came back. Everywhere looked brighter than before the lamp went out. Ola started coughing. Mother poured some water in a metal cup, gave it to him, then went out of the kitchen. Ola's bulging eyes looked watery. Mother sometimes called him frogeyes. She said he'd got Father's eyes; eyes which roved, never settled or satisfied with what was theirs.

"You wanted the fire. Let me help you," Toke said as she picked up the moth by its wings and put it on the naked flame. It started wriggling, struggling to escape. After a while, it became feeble. Toke shook her wrist in pain, dropping the insect. Laja grinned, happy that the fire had touched his sister's fingers. Toke picked the dead moth up with two pieces of stick and put it over the flame again. Soon, its limbs were all burnt, then the body started burning fast. The sticks caught fire after a while but were still at a reasonable length from Toke's fingers.

"What d'you enjoy in doing that? It's dead?" Laja said.

"Who told you I enjoy doing it?"

"Then why are you killing and burning an innocent butterfly?"

"Didn't you see it fly into the fire by itself?" Toke countered.

"But it was not...." Laja said.

"Who are you, anyway? Are you its family?" Toke said, turning to Laja with a sneer. "And it's a moth, not a butterfly, mourner."

Laja opened his mouth, looked towards Mother who had entered, and paused. He was pained. Toke always got the better of him with her quick thinking and ways with words.

“You’re only a mean witch.”

“Thank you. This is how we are going to roast you at the witches’ meeting tonight,” Toke said, raising her head to stare wildly at Laja.

“Mother! Did you hear what she said? Did you hear that? And she is giving me that witchy look again,” Laja said.

Mother did not respond. Silence bore into the night until there was a cackle from the fire.

“Get some water in the bucket and put it in the bathroom for me,” Mother said to Laja. He stood up, stamping his feet as he walked out of the kitchen, angry that she did not rebuke Toke. But her directive meant she would be spending the night in Father’s part of the house. She only had evening baths when she shared his room. Her absence would be an opportunity to get back at Toke. Laja nursed his revenge as they ate, through the time he did the dishes in the darkness outside while Toke and Mother tidied up in the kitchen.

The distended wooden steps creaked as they climbed upstairs, holding on to the greasy shaky banisters. Ola was afraid, he stood at the landing, looking up.

“All your father does is make empty promises. These stairs are long due for repairs, but he doesn’t touch anything until they fall apart, or his women friends tell

him to. I pray we won't be here when this house collapses on their heads," Mother said as she pulled the fearful Ola up with her.

She went back downstairs for her bath and later changed into her night dress. She left, telling Toke to take charge. Laja felt bitter whenever she gave such instructions. It was a licence for Toke to say or do whatever she wanted until Mother came back. He thought of the vulgar terms and names he would use against Toke; he must not allow her to have the upper hand again. Then he heard Mother's raised voice. He sprang up, opened the door, took a few steps toward Father's section, but stopped to listen again. Toke joined him. They stood leaning against the wall; ears strained. Mother was arguing that it was her turn to share Father's bed, but he was ordering her to leave.

"Go and concentrate on bringing up your children properly instead of trying to compete with a younger woman," Father said in his authoritarian voice.

"I'm not old. This haggard thing you call young is much older than me," Mother shouted back.

"Jealousy will soon kill you, stubborn woman," Father responded.

"A jealous woman is better than a reckless womaniser, an adulterer, who has no respect for family," Mother said. "I know you'll soon get tired of this vulture and chase her out."

A sound of scuffle followed.

"She's biting me; the witch has bitten me," Mother shouted. Toke pushed Laja aside and took quick steps along the corridor. He followed. They stopped before reaching Father's parlour. If they went in, it would be obvious why they came. Father would be furious and might beat them.

“That’s enough. I said enough! You’ve given her enough of a beating to last a lifetime,” they heard Father saying to Fali. They stood still.

Mother stormed into view. Her eyes widened as she saw them. Without a word, she pushed Laja on the back of his head towards their room. Toke followed, asking what happened. Inside the room, Mother removed her dress to reveal an oval of reddish bite marks on her left breast. “The witch has no strength but in her teeth. See how she’d bitten me!”

Toke exclaimed, then fetched a jar of *Tarzan* balm from a cupboard, scooped some, smeared it on the wound, then rubbed it in. Mother told her to be gentle while stating she was done with Father. “Even if we have to sleep in the open, we are leaving this man’s house tomorrow.”

Laja became confused and afraid. He’d heard that Osegun, the maddest woman in town, often attacked people on the streets at night. The *Oro* worshippers too killed homeless people for their human blood rituals at night. Even if they managed to leave the street and find a place to live, how would he cope in a new environment and with new neighbours? He didn’t want to leave. Unable to sleep for a long time, his mind became muddled with doubts and uncertainties. “With God, all things are possible,” he remembered the Reverend Father saying at the previous Sunday service at church. He prayed that Mother would change her mind. He dozed, then woke up to hear Mother packing things into bags and bowls.

Chapter 2

Mother must have worked all night packing their things. Downstairs, neighbours and passers-by stared at the clothes in bundles, household items in baskets, cardboard boxes, and in basins littering the ground at the back of the house. The box containing a set of expensive china, which Mother said her sister had given her, sat a little distance away from the others. It was her most valuable possession besides the purple velvet-covered tin box which contained some jewellery which she often boasted was worth a lot of money. Some of Laja's classmates passed by on their way to school. He would be the subject of gossips at school that day. A couple of neighbours came to offer a hand and talk to Mother.

“Did he actually ask you to leave for nowhere with these young innocent children?” Mama Bisi, a neighbour, asked.

“Even if he didn't say so verbally, have you seen him coming out to talk to his children, to say they must not leave?” Mother responded, raising her voice. Mama Bisi slowly walked away.

Only Mrs Coker, the tallest woman on the street whom children called giraffe behind her back, could make Mother change her mind. Laja was happy when she came. “I can't stand sharing a useless man with a witch,” Mother insisted. As she spoke, Mrs Coker nodded, pushing out her lips. But when Mother asked her to look after her children while she went to search for a place to rent, Mrs Coker refused, saying her husband might not want her involved in other people's domestic affairs. Laja became saddened as she walked away and it became obvious that they would leave. Hot, salty tears ran down his cheeks. He wiped them off before Mother could

see him. Toke kept grumbling, saying she wanted to go to school because she did not want to lose her place in the netball team. Mother shouted at her. “Go! Leave us here and let’s see where you return after school. Netball *ko*, mosquito net *ni*.”

Ola seemed awestruck. Or was it that he did he not know what was happening? Mother called a bread hawker who cut open a loaf and thinly spread some butter on both parts. Mother tore the loaf into three and thrust a piece into each child’s hands.

Mama *Supamarket*, who sold cigarettes, confectionery, and toiletries from a small wooden stall, agreed to keep an eye on them while Mother was away. They sat, huddled on a bench, and watched as other children bought sweets, biscuits, and nuts from the woman. She kept asking if they wanted anything to eat or drink. Toke answered for them, saying “No. Thank you Ma” on each occasion. They dared not collect or eat anything given by anyone outside their home. That was Mother’s Law. Going against it, she’d often warned, was giving her a good reason to skin the culprit alive. At about midday, Ola slept, crouched on the bench. He must have been hungry. Toke went to search through their things and brought back a pack of cards. As they played, Laja, who had been morose, cheered up.

Mother came back late afternoon looking spent but smiling. A cart-pusher, dressed in a faded short sleeved shirt and a pair of brown trousers, followed on her heels. She pointed him to their heap of things, and the man went to work, urgently loading them into his cart. Mother apologised for staying too long and thanked Mama *Supamarket* for keeping watch over them.

“You are now the man of the family. Take care of your mother,” Mama *Supamaket* said, rubbing the stumpy fingers of her right hand over Laja’s head as she pushed a heap of sweets into his hand. He glanced at Mother; she nodded with a smile. He put the sweets in his short’s pocket. “You will get some food when we get to the new house,” Mother said as they left, following the cartman.

Toke glanced back at the house from time to time, tears dropping from her eyes. The further they went, the smaller their sight of the house became, until it disappeared, swallowed by other houses. It was big enough for them. Its greyish colour; its smell; its screaming door hinges on which Father dropped jots of palm oil; the squeaky stairs. They knew its crannies, the secret places where cockroaches hid and the angles where spiders built their webs.

The cart’s wheels were of different shapes and sizes. While the one on the right side was wonky and shaking as if it would fall out any time, the left one was smaller and bald in the middle. They combined to create a disconnected wobbly movement which drove the cartman along as the top part of his body jerked forward and backwards. On slopes, he wrestled for control, pushing his back against the cart’s handle; on hills, as he pushed, his neck and left calf showed strained thick veins on the verge of bursting. From the Shell petrol station area, it was bliss for him as the wagon rolled towards Down Town where Mother said she’d found a room and parlour and paid a month’s rent.

As they approached Garage Road junction, Mother gave a late instruction to the cartman. He turned swiftly into Toyin Street but lost control. The carriage swung to the right, flipping its contents, and strewing them all over the dusty street. Laja’s book bag, which Mother had insisted he put in the cart, fell into the murky, stagnant waters of the side gutter. Mother hurried and grabbed it before it could take in much

water. She started wiping it with the edge of her wrapper. Laja joined Toke and the cartman to gather other things and put them back into the cart. Shards fell out of the china box as Mother opened it. “Hai! When will all this suffering end?” she said, her face turned skywards as if she sought an answer from the clouds. “When will I ever have a peaceful home of my own, and find rest?” Her voice was breaking, her eyes wet.

“Don't worry Mother, I will build you a house, a big house when I grow up,” Laja said. Mother spread out her hands, drew him close and patted his head. He smelled gutter water on her body.

The cartman kept apologising for what had happened till they came to the new street. Their new home was on the ground floor in an old storey building. They unpacked and arranged things late into the night. In the morning, Laja found himself huddled between Toke and Ola on a mat. He remembered the previous night, got up and started looking around the house. There were many cracks in the wall; one ran from the front window to the ceiling. Later in the afternoon, he saw lizards rushing in and out of the crevice from outside. Mother said she'd spent all her savings on getting the new place, and that she would hire a mason to cover the crack when she got back on her feet financially.

After supper on the evening of the second day in the new house, Mother called for the children's attention. “That adulterer lacks all the qualities of a father, don't ever refer to him as father in my presence again. Doing so is rejecting me as your mother, she said and looked from one child to another. “You don't have a choice,” she said, got up and walked away in quick steps.

After about a month, she stopped giving them money for lunch at school, saying she had no money. They took garri and groundnuts in small plastic packs with them.

For long after they'd left, Laja could not cut off the bond to their old house. Though he didn't have to pass through Owaluwa Street on his way from school, something always pulled him toward the longer route. He went to see the house just to feed his curiosity. Was it still standing? Could he see Father? Maybe if he saw him, he'd ask him where they lived and come to bring them back home. Just maybe. However, there was no change to the house, nor did he see anyone, but he kept passing in front of it even after he started secondary school.

Chapter 3

The landlady came one morning about six months into their stay on Toyin Street. After knocking and calling for about half an hour, she threatened to break down the door, thinking Mother was deliberately ignoring her. After more threats, she put a padlock on the door. On her way out, she was shocked to meet Mother and Laja coming from early morning Mass. Mother greeted her.

“This is not a day to greet but a day to pay up or pack out,” the landlady responded and followed them back into the house, asking for the rent arrears. She refused all pleas, saying Mother had defaulted on earlier promises. On seeing the strange padlock on the door, Mother turned to the landlady.

“Did you do this?”

“Pay me now, or the room stays locked!” the landlady shouted back.

“You put a padlock on my door ...!”

“You don’t have a door here. This is my house.”

“You locked innocent children inside because of your rent?”

“I don’t care! What did you expect after owing rents for three months?” the landlady shouted, pointing a shaky finger into Mother’s face.

“I will make you care,” Mother said. She put her Bible on the window sill, tightened the fold of her wrapper and moved towards the house owner.

“If you touch me, you will go to prison and ...,” the landlady started to warn.

“Did you say you don’t care what happens to my children?”

“Yes, I don’t, unless you ...”

“You’ll care when I use your head to open the door.”

Mother grabbed her by the neck and shoved her towards the door, pushing and hitting her. Their altercation woke Toke and Ola, who started crying inside the room. Laja was confused and started crying too. He did not want Mother to be hurt but was also afraid she would injure the other woman and be locked away in prison. Other tenants rushed in and rescued their proprietor from Mother’s claws.

“It is wrong to owe rent, but locking someone else’s door is wrong, even if you are the house owner. Locking children inside the room is even worse, it’s a criminal offence which you won’t be able to defend,” the man everyone called ‘Lawyer,’ told the landlady. Still, she refused to open the door, insisting on payment of the rent arrears or immediate eviction. Mother got an iron bar and smashed the door open. Toke was gasping, Ola had wet himself. Later that day, Mother went searching for another house to rent. She came back saying a friend had offered them an outhouse. The temporary stay lasted four months when Mother started complaining that her friend had changed towards her and their friendship was under strain. She found another house on Alhaji Sule Street and they moved again.

The rent was affordable, but the house came with the features of their last two houses and more. The rooms were windowless and always dark. Only adults used the bucket latrine to prevent it from filling up too soon; the children used a dunghill at the centre of the street. Laja soon learned to take stealthy steps to avoid digging his feet into the mounds of excreta covered with swarms of flies that rose at anyone’s approach, only to resettle on their feast almost immediately. Obese pigs stood at

close distances, grunting, waiting. As soon as someone got up, they would rush in, eager for a fresh meal. At times, there would be a stray or hungry dog trying to compete with them. Laja vowed never to eat pork.

He met Gani, his first Alhaji Street friend, on the dunghill.

“Come further here. There are ... there more open spots ... here,” Gani had called out, pointing from his squatting position. When they became better acquainted Laja asked why he preferred using the dunghill when there was a latrine in his house.

“I feel uncomfortable at home. It’s better here. You meet other children and ...,” he paused. “I really don’t know. I just feel freer there,” Gani said.

The street was named after his father, Alhaji Sule, who was nicknamed 777, after the registration number of his shiny black Mercedes. He did not allow anyone else to touch the car or get into it. He even washed it himself. His wives and children had a Peugeot station wagon car for their use. Anytime he drove down the street, children ran after him shouting: “Allergy 777! Allergy 777!” The car would slow down to a crawl and Alhaji would wave, smiling to reveal a couple of gold-plated teeth. “Allergy 777! Allergy 777!” the children would shout more. Habitually, he would roll down the windows and throw out sweets, for which children would struggle, pushing, falling, and trampling on others, to pick.

On one occasion, Mother came back home early from the market and found Laja and Ola with sweets in their hands. She smiled and quickened her footsteps into the house. Immediately they entered the house, she locked the door.

“So, after I warned you never to collect or eat *Saara*, evil food that rich people use to steal people’s destinies, you’ve graduated into begging sweets from ritualists on the streets?”

As she picked up the stick which she used to beat them, Laja and Ola cowered and pleaded. About three feet away from them, Mother paused and stared strangely at Laja, her arms folded across her chest. She stamped her right leg, then the left one. “And where were you when your brothers became street beggars?” she asked Toke who gazed at her for some time, then stretched out her left hand, a plucky look on her face. Mother’s eyes bulged. The stick fell from her hands. “Holy Mary! Unbelievable! No remorse; no fear?” Her eyes moved from Toke to Ola and rested on Laja, then back again. “Ha! So, just because I must go out to put food on the table and pay for our needs, you’ve all become gutter children who don't fear the cane? Eh? No need wasting my energy beating you?” She took a deep breath and gazed at the wall. Her eyes seemed to go through the wall, into an invisible distance. Tears dropped fast down her face. The children started crying too.

Laja could not stop going to Alhaji’s house. Besides the opportunity to meet Gani, his new friend, Alhaji was the only one who allowed children into his parlour to watch television on Saturday afternoon when popular soaps like the *New Cock Crow at Dawn* and *The Masquerade*, were aired. They would storm his house before 2.00 pm when he allowed them in. A boy of his choice always had the privilege of sitting with him on a big armchair while others sat on the floor. Alhaji would whisper to the chosen one, touch him all over and give him some coins after. If his eyes caught anyone staring, he would ask “Are you here to watch TV or to stare at me playing with my friend?”

Laja longed to be chosen as Alhaji’s friend for a day, but he was never picked. On some days, Alhaji sent the children out if he perceived a foul smell. “Did someone just pollute the air here?” he would say, lifting his face, twitching his nose,

and sniffing like a dog. “You dirty gutter children dare come here and fart after ingesting all the rubbish your parents call food? Out! Out!” He would wave the children toward the door, leaving only his friend for the day and Gani, curled up on a sofa, untroubled. Laja always wanted to tell the others that his father had a television set too, but what if they don’t believe him? And he didn’t want anyone asking him why he could not go and watch television in his father’s house.

Chapter 4

It was strange to Laja that Gani always had money. He hired bicycles which they rode around the streets after school and on weekends. Laja fell off on occasions but hid his injuries from Mother for the fear of the stick and the hot rag, which were the treatment for all injuries incurred by her children. He and Gani also played in the street's junior football team which never won anything. Their nightmare was the *Eleven Wise Boys* from Toyin Street. In one match, they scored twelve goals against Alhaji Sule Street and boasted after the match that they deliberately scored a dozen so that every player and the coach would have one each. Laja cried, wishing he'd not left Toyin Street. His consolation came during that year's Christmas and New Year's Eve wars when their street's cowboys' bullets and fireworks - *Bisco, Knockout, Bangers* - outlasted those of Toyin Street. For almost an hour they bombarded Toyin Street with fireworks without a response.

They both gained admission into the competitive Imade College after primary school. Another boy, Jude, became their close friend in Form 2. He was a boarding student and had come from Lagos. Everyone wanted to be his friend as he was the most streetwise boy in the school. He was friends with beautiful girls, knew the latest disco songs, and where the best parties would take place at the weekends. In Form 4, he became the biggest boy in the whole school. Many students called him *King of Kong* or *Hybrid*. If he got to hear it, he would pull the culprit up by their ears and warn them to desist from calling their 'father' names. "I love putting everyone in their caves," he often said.

The three of them were together at St. Louis Girls' School Sports Day when Laja met his first girlfriend. She looked smart in bright yellow T-shirt and pleated skirt.

“You de look dat girl somehow. You like am?” Jude said.

Laja smiled and looked away. He turned to look towards the girl again.

“It’s only that she looks like my mother,” he said.

“Na because she look like your mama or because you like am?” Jude said, winking at Laja. “No let shyness steal wetin you want from you. You be man,” Jude added. He walked briskly after the girl, passing through the colourful mass of students in uniforms. Laja stood with Gani under a pine tree and watched as Jude caught up with the girl and started talking to her. How did he do that? Where did the courage to walk up to some stranger and start talking to them so easily come from? Gani nudged Laja and pointed into the distance. As he turned, he bumped into a boy who stood for a moment, expecting an apology. When none came, he hissed and walked away. In the distance, Jude was beckoning. Laja strolled, his heart pounding, wondering what to say when he got there. He hadn’t had the experience before, but rejection would be unbearable, like a nail through his heart. Jude was always too hasty; he should have given him more time to prepare.

“Laja, I told this pretty young thing that you want to have a chat with her, right?” Jude said and left.

“Hello, I’m Laja. I saw you and”

“I’m Bola. I ... I ... I’m sorry I don’t want anything to do with friends of ... of ... Jude,” the girl said, taking a furtive look towards Jude who kept looking back. “I

agreed to speak with you because I'm afraid of him. Everyone is afraid of him," she added, rubbing her palms together and lowering her gaze. Laja was not sure of how to respond. In the distance, Jude and Gani were talking to a group of girls.

"Why... why are you afraid? He's a ...a ...good guy."

"I heard he and his friends are dangerous and are flirts," Bola said, a look of worry on her face.

"But I'm his friend and ... and I'm neither dangerous nor have any girlfriend," Laja said, with a confidence which being regarded as 'dangerous' seemed to have given him.

For a moment Bola's eyes went blank.

"If you'll be my friend... my girl ... I'll stop associating with anyone you don't want me to associate with," Laja said, trying to look and sound as innocent as he could.

Bola looked away and stood, quiet for a long time, with her indecisive contemplations almost readable in her eyes. "I think I'm too young to have a boyfriend ... and I'm afraid of my father. He'll kill me if ...if he sees me with a boy...."

"He won't. Don't worry, things will work out fine between us," Laja said.

They remained silent again, each waiting for the other to speak.

"You are charming, very beautiful," Laja said.

Bola's eyes gleamed shyly. She stared at Laja for seconds, then blinked rapidly before turning her face away.

“I need to join my housemates now,” Bola said, looking around her as if she just woke up from a sleep and didn’t know where she was. “I’ll speak with you later,” she said and took a few quick steps away before looking back to wave limply to Laja. He was enraptured in her smile as he watched her upper body and the lines of her starched pleated skirt struggling to stay straight against the pressures of her motion. He strode back towards his friends, elated.

“Lucky guy,” Gani said. “When are you seeing her again?”

Laja covered his mouth with his left palm. In his excitement, he’d not asked when and how he would see her again. He gaped but he could no longer see her in the distance.

“You no ask?” Jude sniggered. “Small things, dat one no be problem. Dis na her school; if we wan see her, we go find her.”

Laja was reassured but didn’t like Jude’s use of ‘we’, but he knew that Jude would be indispensable until he got better acquainted with Bola.

Imade College closed 30 minutes earlier than St. Louis. That gave Laja ample time to walk to the school gate and wait for Bola every weekday. After meeting her at school entrance, they would walk past his school to the gates of Government Technical School, where her father was a tutor. Initially, she was afraid someone would see them together and tell her father. After a couple of walks, she became so confident that she would allow him to hold her hand as they chatted. From their conversations he became convinced that she was smarter than him; that made him like her more.

“Those thirty minutes between our closing times is the reason we always perform better than your school in behaviour and in the external exams,” she’d responded when Laja said it was arrogance for her school to be open after the other schools closed.

“Or maybe you close later to allow all the bad boys get home because you are a girls’ school,” Laja said, laughing. But he knew she was right. Her school was better than every other school in town. In the previous year, they were named as one of the most outstanding schools in English Language in the state. His school always had bad results in the subject. He’d remembered the principal’s repetitive warning:

“You can’t go anywhere or amount to anything in life without passing English,” he often said during students’ assembly. “Stop speaking vernacular and practise English more. “Read it, write it, speak it.” He said it time and again that immediately he started saying, “read it,” the whole assembly would complete the “write it, speak it” part with him.

Everyone had thought the burden of English Language was over when Mr Robertson, a university exchange student from Scotland, arrived at Imade College. Surely, the students could not fail English Language again when they had a white man as their teacher. To accommodate him, two National Youth Service Corps teachers from the northern part of the country were evicted from the new school building into an old derelict house which they had to share with the chief cook, the potbellied Mr Omeke.

The school met all his needs and students were put on a rota to serve

Mr Robertson. He left before the results of the final year examinations class he taught were released. The school had one of the worst results in the English Language in many years.

Chapter 5

Walking for over an hour to the Technical College to see Bola at weekends and during holidays became part of Laja's routine. He would beg the gateman to inform Bola of his presence. She would then come out and they would walk away into the woods behind the staff quarters to talk excitedly for long. Then the inevitable pains of parting would almost sour the fun they'd had until the next time they met. When her parents were around or she was busy with a chore and could not come out to see her, Vic, her older sister, stood in for her. She always wore a smile, called him in-law, and chatted with him like an old friend. Bola told him all the good things she said about him and her about love affairs. He was as pained as Bola when Vic had to leave for London after persistent quarrelling with her parents.

Laja was shocked to see Bola sitting comfortably in the parlour with Toke when he came back from watching a football match at the open ground near the refuse dump one Sunday afternoon. Toke must have told Mother that Bola was her friend even though they'd not met before. But how come they were sitting together and chatting like old friends? As his eyes locked into Toke's for an explanation, Mother walked in, a bottle of *Fanta* in her hands. She gave it to Bola with a smile, asking her to feel at home. To Laja, it was like watching a scene with an expected but unpreventable tragic ending. He sat hunched up on the edge of the bench with Toke at the other edge, wondering what would happen next. Mother staying away from the parlour for such a long time in which Toke and Bola chatted, meant trouble.

“This might as well be you,’ Toke said to Bola, holding up an old yellowish monochrome picture which Mother said she’d taken when she visited to Lagos for the first time.

“Do I really look like that?” Bola said, turning to Laja with a smile. He frowned. She didn’t seem to notice that he was angry that she had dropped in on him.

“Yes. You look just like a mini-Mother,” Toke said. They talked about schools and the best places to make hair in town. For Laja, it didn’t feel normal and was lasting too long. Relief came when Bola stood up to go. Toke announced it to Mother who came out to say bye, telling Bola to say hello to her parents. “She seems a nice girl,” she said after Toke followed Bola out of the door.

Laja looked around. There was no one else in the room.

Toke came back indoors and insisted that he must join her to see Bola off, but Laja pointed toward Mother’s room.

“She knows already,’ Toke said, loud enough for Mother to hear. Laja got up and followed her.

“Mother knows everything about you and Bola,” Toke continued as soon as they went through the door.

“But ... but how?”

“This town is not as big as you think, and mothers do chat when they meet at the market and church. The important thing is that she seems to like her a lot,” Toke added as they reached Bola who was waiting in front of the house.

“I’m a lucky girl then,” Bola said.

After about half an hour standing beside the road, Toke flagged down a taxi. Bola got in and kept waving as the car pulled away, leaving Laja to wonder how she'd been able to charm her way into Toke and Mother.

"I think Mother likes her because they look alike," Toke said, as if she was reading his mind.

With Bola, Laja was like a pupil learning new things. Her confidence, charm, openness and generosity fed his love for her. She told him all about her family and the love they shared, despite her sister's trouble with their parents. Laja wished he had a family like hers. It made him hate Father more. If they'd been together he would have a better, stable family life than moving from place to place.

On his sixteenth birthday, she gave him a digital wristwatch.

"You didn't have to do this."

"What did I do?"

"This," he said, pointing at the watch, "and spending your money to buy different gifts for me."

"How many gifts have I bought you that you ...?"

"Lots - food, clothes, books, money, - lots. You even brought gifts for Toke and Ola when you came to our house."

"It is interesting that you are the one complaining while it is my money, my savings that I'm spending. I'm not complaining. Or am I?"

Laja felt a tingling in his throat, then his nose. To restrain the tears welling in his eyes, he kept quiet for a while, biting his lower lip. He'd never been shown love like that before.

“So, what did your dad give you for your birthday?”

Laja shrugged, thinking of what to say. He couldn't lie to her.

“I haven't seen him for a long time. Besides, we don't ... we rarely mark birthdays. Sometimes we even forgot our birthdays,” he said.

Bola sighed. “Maybe it's because you don't live together. My dad always asks us what we want for our birthdays and buys it for us.

“I thought gifts were supposed to be a surprise.”

“Yes. But is it not better to get someone what they really want than surprise them with what they don't want or like?”

“That's true. Well, thanks for this again,” Laja said, looking at the watch with admiration. “As long as my heart beats, like this watch, I'll always remember you.”

“I hope so,” she said, smiling broadly as she assisted him to strap the watch on.

“Don't just hope, believe so.”

“What is the difference?” she said, spreading out her arms.

“‘Hope,’ is wishing, ‘belief’ is certainty. The things I'm saying come from a deep conviction in me, with no doubts.”

“There goes the poet. It's okay, I'll keep on believing,” she said, leaning on him.

Her index finger ran down his face, then bored into his cheek as if she was trying to force a dimple into where there was none. "I'll love you forever," she added.

"Same with me. My love for you will never end. Like a plop on calm waters, it will ripple on and on."

"Really?"

"Yes. You have brought joy and completion into my life."

"Umph! Are you sure?"

"Of course. You are a crescent which emerged in the dark lonesome night of my life, you brought hope and unquenchable light."

"Ha! You now sound like Mr. Hembe, my Literature teacher, reading from *Anthology of African Poetry*."

"This is better than your teacher's. It is not from a book but from the heart; not from your teacher but a lover," Laja added and smiled. He'd surprised himself, wondering where the words rolling out from his lips came from.

"I know," she said with a smile. "I'm sorry for sounding as if I didn't trust you. I don't know where such thoughts come from all the time."

"Maybe it's a woman thing," Laja said, pulling her closer.

"Maybe," she said, rubbing her palm over his cheeks and pulling at them, one after the other.

"Stop pulling my cheeks like that. I'm not your baby," Laja said.

She chuckled and continued. When she stopped, he saw oil from his face all over her palm.

Laja raised her chin with his forefinger and kissed her. She responded passionately. Through the window, Gani's mum was visible, spreading clothes on a line. Laja stopped and moved away.

Chapter 6

Three weeks to the Christmas school break in their final year, Laja told Jude and Gani that he'd been saving up to buy a gift for Bola but hadn't got enough. They both laughed.

“This chap don dey in love with dat girl o,” Jude said.

“Of course. Wetin you de expect?” Laja responded.

Gani whispered into Jude's left ear. They laughed more. Jude stopped, his eyes went from Gani to Laja, as if weighing them up.

“Now dat you mentioned dis, me too don de tink how I fit make some quick quid,” Jude said. His eyes scanned the area, then he waved his friends to come closer. “If we fit get question papers to sell to desperate students for dis promotion exam time, we go get plenty money.”

“What?” Gani shouted. “Impossible!”

“Never say impossible,” Jude responded with a sneery look at Gani, who wanted to speak but waved a hand and kept silent.

“I saw the clerk rolling the papers inside VP office yesterday when I went to submit my assignment,” Laja said.

“I don offer the guy deal, but him tell me say he don seal and lock the papers inside principal office,” Jude said.

“So, how you wan ...” Laja started.

“Don’t say ‘you,’ say ‘we.’ We all dey together for dis, abi?” Jude said turning to look from Gani to Laja. One of the costs of being Jude’s friend was that he had to have his way most times, other people’s opinions counted little.

“Well, if una de fear, I fit do am alone. I go get the papers somehow and....”

“I de with you,” Laja said quickly. Allowing Jude to go it alone was likely to be the end of their friendship. He didn’t want it to end; it gave him influence and relevance. Gani too succumbed after a while.

On the chosen night, Jude climbed a ladder into the roof of the Administrative Block from the dark corridor near the stairway. He was to crawl from there to the principal’s office. Gani was to keep the ladder stable. Laja was the lookout. He was to distract and prevent the night guard, who would be sound asleep at about 10.00 pm, from coming upstairs. If he woke up and Laja could not stop him, he would whistle to warn the others.

Jude had accomplished his mission and was crawling back when a rotten roofing plank gave way. He fell through the asbestos sheets and landed on the floor. The noise was enough to wake the night guard who’d been snoring. Laja whistled several times. Gani ran down the stairs. Laja turned to run but stopped to see if Jude was okay. The night guard grabbed him and held tight to his trousers at the waist, threateningly wielding a machete. “I go cut you half if you try run. I don see your face; I know you,” he shouted repeatedly. His colleague, who must have heard him shouting, arrived, ran upstairs, and came down with Jude. The guards tied Laja and Jude’s wrists together and made them sit on the floor. The vice principal later arrived with a big flashlight which he shone into their eyes as he took their details. He then instructed that they be untied.

The news of their escapade spread through the night. In the morning, they were called out at the morning assembly. Action, the manic teacher who often boasted he could flog the whole school without breaking a sweat, was on hand to show off his flogging skills. Gani and Laja screamed as he delivered uncountable strokes which left furrowing patterns on their backs. A battle of wills took place between him and Jude. Much as the sweating teacher beat him, Jude did not make a sound until the principal asked him to stop. The principal then announced that they were suspended from school indefinitely.

Mother heard about what happened before Laja could summon the courage to tell her. She was devastated. "Is being excluded from school the expectation from someone who would build his mother a house and take care of his siblings?" she said. Laja made to look away, but Mother slapped him hard on the face. He staggered back. She charged at him, attempting to grab his arm. As he sidestepped, she lost her balance, almost falling over.

"You want to beat me, your mother?" she said, shaking with rage. "The next time you cause me pain by associating with children without proper upbringing, I'll strip naked and curse you with these breasts that you sucked," she added, slapping her chest. Laja moved back before she could reach him again. He did not want her to bite him. She'd bitten him once for not doing well in primary school and bit Toke on the neck for talking to a boy on the street on one occasion.

Jude's father, an ex-student of Imade College, came from Lagos and joined Alhaji Sule to appeal that their children be allowed back at school. The principal insisted that Laja must come with either of his parents too before there could be

further discussions. Jude's father asked Laja why his father was not present. He lied that he'd travelled. Another meeting was scheduled.

Laja knew he couldn't go to ask Father to attend the meeting; it was unimaginable. How would he explain his coming to seek his help after almost six years of not having anything to do with him? Asking Mother to go with him was also out of the question. She might create a scene. A few days before the meeting, Laja told Toke about the principal's demand.

"Don't worry. I'll tell Father, and he'll be there," she said with a smile.

"Tell Father? How are you going to do that?"

"Just leave it to me. I will," she added.

"We've not seen him for years. How are you going to ...? I mean...how...?"

Toke's smile did not wane. "Leave that to me. He'll be there," she said.

Father was sitting at a table when Laja entered. When he bowed to greet him, Father patted him on his head and left shoulder, asking how his siblings were. They sat, waiting for the others to arrive for the meeting.

"It's unfortunate that it took you reaping trouble to get across to me. Even then, you refused to come in person. What if your sister were like you? I could have refused to come as well, but I couldn't act like you. You have inherited your mother's stubbornness. You are only a child; and you'll learn with time."

After nearly two hours of threats by the principal and pleading by the fathers, who signed a bond of good behavior on their children's behalf, the principal agreed to allow them back because of their final exams after serving a string of punishments.

After Jude and Gani left with their fathers, Laja walked uncomfortably behind Father to the school gate, thanking him.

"I'm your father you don't have to thank me for doing my duty," Father said. "D'you know why the hermit crab changes its shell often?" he asked as they approached the gate. Laja shook his head, then cleared his throat: "No," he said.

"It's because the crab thinks that it has outgrown its current home and needs another to accommodate its new size," Father said and eased into a yellow and green taxi which hobbled away in thick smoke.

When the results of their final School Certificate examinations were released, Laja had two As and four credits. It was not good enough for Medicine, his first-choice course of study, but the University of Lagos offered him a place to study combined honors in Mathematics and Physics. Jude had five credits and got an offer at the University of Ilorin. Gani failed English Language and consequently could not get a university admission. He refused rewriting the subject, choosing to go to a school of nursing despite objections from his father who said nursing was for women.

Chapter 7

The heat of August and the winds of September were always precursors to the harmattan in November. It came spreading films of dust on everything and powdering people's faces grey and ghostly. Coughs and running noses were prevalent in that season of dry, cracked lips. Recalcitrant children, too busy with their hands at play, or tired of wiping their noses, sucked streams of mucus from their nostrils into their mouths. For Laja, the joy of being out of school after his final examinations had given way to deepening boredom of staying at home or loitering the streets. Sometimes, he visited Gani. Unlike him, he had a room to himself and his parents were neither fussy about how he spent his time nor bothered about who was with him.

One afternoon, Laja stood watching children trying to build and launch kites in the open space beside the house. They cut old newspapers into diamond shapes and held the frames together with twigs and broomsticks which they lay across the paper. They then stuck wings and thin tails to the kites with corn pap and leftover Eba, cassava paste. Then, strings went into the noses of the kites, tied to the sticks. The kites were then left to dry for a while before being taken to higher grounds for launching. On good days, a well-made kite would take off into the sky immediately or after a few attempts. Bad ones spun wildly around and nosedived to the ground. For lucky launchers, the higher their kites went, the more length of string was needed from a spindle to make them go farther.

One of the children completed his kite, heaved himself up and shouted, jolting Laja. He envied their freedom. Maybe no one questioned or beat them for being

outside their homes for too long like Mother did to him. But then, how many mothers were like Mother? His eyes went blank again. He'd been having such blankness since he started worrying about how to pay his fees and maintenance at university. Mother had been over the moon, vowing that she would do whatever was necessary to see him through but the more promises she made, the more Laja felt uncomfortable. Toke had dropped out of Owo College of Education because she could not afford to buy the things needed for her teaching practice. For a while now she had worn a pained cynical look on her face, slipping in and out of moodiness. Ola was too quiet, too complicated to understand, but he was not doing well at school. Laja suspected he could do better, that the lack at home must be affecting his study.

“What are you brooding about?” Toke said, startling Laja who'd not seen her approach. He shook his head.

“You are worried about missing your university offer, isn't it?” she said.

Laja nodded.

Toke continued. “It's an opportunity you shouldn't miss, but I don't think Mother can support you through. Forget about all her enthusiastic promises. She can't.”

Laja looked into her eyes. She'd just mentioned the fear that he didn't want to linger in his mind. “I learned I can defer the admission, get a job, then save up till next year.”

“No! Even if you get a job, how much will you be paid? That would be two of us out of school. It's not good!” Toke said, shaking her head.

Laja nodded again and took his gaze away from Toke. She stood for a while looking at him, then went into the house.

After about an hour, the kite-building boys shouted for joy as one of their kites started gaining height. Laja grinned and turned to enter the house, almost running into Toke who was coming through the door.

“I have some money,” she said excitedly.

“What? Where did you get money from?”

“I’ve been saving up for when I return to school. It’s not a lot but it could help you,” she added. Laja waited eagerly for what she would say next. It was unthinkable that anyone could have money saved in their house.

“Don’t worry, you won’t miss your admission. It’s only that you are being stubborn. Even then, you’ll go to university this year, believe me.” She sounded so convincing, like when she told him that Father would come to his school. “About how much d’you think you’ll need for the university, to start with?”

“I’m not sure. People say after registration, it’s accommodation that might require some chunk of money. If I get those two sorted” Laja said.

“Maybe you should go to Lagos and get a better idea of how much you’ll need, or”

“I don’t think it’s necessary. Travelling to Lagos for that purpose alone would cost a lot,” Laja said, trying to read her reaction. “With what I’ve been told, about one thousand five hundred thousand naira should cover initial payments and expenses, then”

“One thousand five hundred naira?” Toke eyes opened wider; her brows creased.

“Yes. But if”

“It’s all right. I was just wondering Don’t worry.” She dipped her right hand under her dress from the top, looked around and stepped back into the house. “Come inside. You don’t know who might be watching us.” Inside the parlour, she removed a roll of notes from her brassiere “This is 500 naira. Count it.” Laja’s hands shook as he collected the warm roll of notes and started counting.

“Keep it and let’s see what Mother will raise. If I’m able to get more, I’ll add to this and When is the resumption date?”

“Mid-November,” Laja said. “But where did you get all this money from?”

Toke’s brows raised. “D’you want to hear the truth?”

Laja waited, expecting to hear about her rich boyfriend.

“I’ve been saving some of the money Father has been giving me,” she said softly.

“Who?” Laja said. His grip around the money weakened and it fell.

“Father. I had to go to him after I left school and things were becoming very tough here. Where d’you think I found the money I sometimes use to buy groceries and feed the whole house?” Toke said. “I’m a girl, Laja, I have needs. It would be stupid to shun help from my own Father just because Mother said so. We need him for certain things in our lives, as you too know.”

Laja was angry. She’d betrayed the family. The silent conspiracy had been to prove to their father, a man who did not seem to care about them anymore, that they

could survive without him. Going behind their backs to collect money from him was not right. Laja kicked the money at Toke and marched out of the house, ignoring her call. Outside, he leaned against the wall, wondering what to do next. Alhaji's new car was driving past. No one ran after it or shouted his name. Times were changing.

"You must be realistic and make a choice, Laja. Let me know if you really don't want the money," Toke said from between the door posts.

"Did you tell him about ... about my university admission?"

"I did. I had to because he kept asking how you are doing. He was very happy but said if you had any regard for him, you'd come and tell him. It is important to let him know what is happening in our lives; we bear his name."

"So, did he give you the money for...?"

"No. It's my money. He gave me money from time to time and I've been saving, thinking I'll go back to school. But now I feel your education will be more important than mine. You are a man."

An uncomfortable silence hovered between them until Toke went back inside the house. Laja felt like an ingrate. She was putting her education on hold for him. And she'd just called him a man.

He sat at the doorway for long pondering over what she'd said. He struggled to accept that she was right. Even if she were, his fear of Mother's reaction made it wrong. It was predictable – fury. What was unimaginable was the extent she might take it. He wanted her to be happy but Father's recent intervention in his school case and what Toke had just said, showed that Father could still be helpful to them. In the absence of Father, he must act like the man in the family. He would choose what would be beneficial to everyone, including Mother.

Chapter 8

With 1250 naira - 500 naira each from Toke and Bola, and 250 naira from Mother, who promised to raise more money which she would find a way of sending to him in Lagos, Laja left home for university. After registration and paying for accommodation, he barely had enough left for maintenance, but the joy of being an undergraduate pushed his worries about survival to the background.

At his first class, the lecturer, a thin bearded man, spent about ten minutes in which he introduced himself and scared almost everyone.

“Grade A is for God; B is for me, and I’ll give it to whomever I so desire; C is for outstanding students who also buy my handouts,” he said and paused to look around. “Grade D belongs to diligent students who come to class regularly and submit course works in time. Grade E is for everyone else who worked hard. Make a choice,” he said and walked out of the class. Like others, Laja became anxious. They were not sure if the man was serious or joking. They gathered in groups after he left to discuss his strange announcement. A girl said she’d heard that he repeated the same lines to fresh undergraduates every year. They should not worry, his students often passed well.

After lectures on some evenings, he went to the university lagoon front. It was his first time seeing such mass of water. Fishermen in canoes threw worn spiderweb-like nets into the water for a catch. On the sandy bank, students swayed to music, cuddled or kissed their lovers. Some stood, looking into the horizon as if invoking the goddess of the sea, while a few others sat, poring over papers and books. At the far edge, toward the marshy path to the fishermen’s settlement, guys

puffed away. Their faces emerged and disappeared through whiffs of thick smoke with a skunky smell. Sea water continuously lapped the sandy hedges, making loud splashy sounds. Coconut trees, like soldiers, stood at attention, as if primed to stop the liquid invasion of the campus. In the far distance on the Mainland Bridge, tiny cars ran past. Farther, where the blanket of waters kissed the sea, the often-reddish evening setting sun, served as a beautiful backdrop.

He was missing Bola. He would invite her to visit sometime if she could convince her parents to allow her to go visit a friend. She could tell them that it was a female friend. He would take her to the sea front; they would cuddle and talk about their future.

One night, in July 1993, news broke that some soldiers had carried out a coup and sacked the government. The National Union of Students immediately called all students in higher institutions of learning to protest the toppling of democracy and the University of Lagos Students Union arranged a march into town the following day. By morning, an armoured tank appeared at the main gate. Anti-riot policemen in rumpled fatigues, some with dangling rifles, hovered around. They stopped everyone from getting out or going into the university grounds. "If you wan protest, make you go Abuja, the capital, dis na Lagos, you no fit cause wahala for here," an officer, who seemed to be the leader of the squad, shouted into a megaphone. Students who had wanted to embark on the protest went back and stood in pockets discussing the development. The day passed without classes but with different rumours about the coup and its plotters spreading.

At about midnight, notices, still smelling of fresh ink, slid in under the hostel doors. They conveyed a notice which read: *'Based on recent developments, all classes shall stop as a temporary measure to protect students and staff until certainty*

is restored in the country. The halls of residence shall remain open for students who cannot travel immediately. You are all advised not to travel far from Lagos as resumption could be at short notice.' It was the vice chancellor's statement closing the school.

At dawn, many students hurried out into the early morning mist with their luggage and bags for home. The policemen at the gate allowed them out in a file. Others, like Laja, who could not leave immediately, peeped through their windows, stretching, and yawning as they watched their mates leave.

In the days that followed Lagosians gathered around their radio and television sets to monitor news on the national broadcast stations which mostly played martial music. The take-over speech of the new government which called itself the Government of Discipline and Accountability, was played at thirty-minute intervals:

Fellow Nigerians, we know that as citizens of this great country you are tired of change, which has been frequent like the changing of sanitary pads by the Biblical woman with the issue of blood.

However, early this morning we, the Army of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, took over government to save our nation from complete disintegration. We cannot turn our eyes away from the brigandage of the political class who were holding this country at the jugular.

They contribute nothing to our common good but steal our commonwealth dry.

Hunger rules the land. Hardworking citizens cannot make ends meet because of hyper-inflation and our devalued currency. There

is infrastructural decay everywhere. Our hospitals have become places of quick deaths due to lack of drugs, equipment, and professionally trained personnel. Our major roads are no better than village footpaths and are now theatres of accidents and bloodshed.

Our civil servants have become uncivil and lacking in morals and professionalism. They do nothing but burst salary and wage bills at the edges while government offices go empty of anyone to render services. They report missing files all the time, do nothing but busy with gossipy nothingness. The self-proclaimed wise among them hawk condiments and fake jewellery on the offices' corridors, 'to make ends meet' they say. Yet, they collect full salaries at the end of every month. This new government shall not tolerate such acts anymore.

Like journalists who write lies, students have remained the same; uncivil and uncouth. They claim their teachers teach nothing, so they learn nothing. To keep busy, they form criminal groups to protect so-called interests and rights which they claimed they never had in the first place. Their gatherings transform into drug trances and armed cults that rob, maim, and kill at will. These are supposed to be leaders of tomorrow

News on the streets was that hundreds died in the fight between soldiers loyal to the old and new regimes. Newspapers carried bold and baiting headlines. It was reported that the former head of state crossed the border, disguised as a lady, into the

neighbouring country of Benin Republic. Army vehicles, some with blaring sirens, with soldiers hanging from trucks' tarpaulin and metal structures precariously, sped through the deserted belly of the roads. People stared at them, some cheered, others waved at them carefully, as if with awe. No one heeded the calls of some civil rights activists to protest what they called the rape of democracy.

Laja knew his family would be worried about him, but the phone shops were closed and there was no other means of communicating with them. He felt it was wrong for a group of people to hold everyone else in a country to ransom because of their lusts for power. Previous sacking of governments and promises of new dawns had taken lots of blood and waste but made the country worse. He wondered how those who took over always knew the secrets of their predecessors and where they'd hidden money and bought choice property abroad. It was like musical chairs among a group of friends, fooling everyone after exchanging batons violently. He wished there was a way he and others could make their feelings known.

The wait ended after nearly three weeks and school reopened. The campus quickly filled up and students' activities picked up. Laja was always surprised at the freedom everyone had to do what pleased them, and how boys and girls mingled. When he saw couples hand in hand, he felt lonely and wished his own girlfriend could visit him.

Toke's surprise visit wasn't what he'd imagined it would be. She came with a friend, Mary, who was overexcited that she was visiting the University of Lagos.

"I ...I didn't know you were coming..." Laja said.

“I didn’t plan it. A friend of mine at school was ill and her father came to bring her home to Lagos. Something said to me: Bola, there’s enough room in that car, why not join them and visit your boyfriend at no cost? With the thought still in my head, I found an accomplice in Mary who also wanted to come to Lagos.” Bola said.

“Your parents ... But what if I’d travelled home, elsewhere, or something...?”

“It would have been so disappointing. Thank God you are here. Good to see you,” Bola said, spreading out her hand and smiling towards her friend who seemed enthralled by her surroundings.

“I’ve always loved what I hear about this place. I applied for admission to come here twice but did not meet the cut off marks,” Mary said, looking around animatedly as they passed the Sports Centre to reach Café 2000.

Laja grinned but was worried that some guy might notice Mary’s excitement and shout ‘*bush meat!*’ a derogative term some guys called ladies who by their dressing and behaviour they believed came from outside the university.

“Is that a hall of residence?” Mary said, pointing at the Arts Faculty Building. “Where is Moremi Hall? Please, you must take us there,” she said, putting her palms together and pouting towards Laja, like a child begging for sweets.

“That’s no problem.” Laja said.

“I heard the reigning Most Beautiful Girl in Nigeria and other girls we see in magazines stay in that hall,” Mary said, turning from Laja to Bola who side-eyed her and asked: “Are we not beautiful?”

“I don’t mean it that way, Bola. “You know” Mary said.

“Don’t worry, we’ll go to there and every place you want to see on campus,” Laja said.

“Really? Wow! Unilag!” Mary said, giggling.

Laja wished she could stop her exuberance but didn't know how to say it politely. Didn't he too choose to come to Lagos because of the things he'd heard and pictures he'd seen? Bola too seemed overly excited.

It was a good thing he still had some money left from what Mother sent him via the Post Office. He must ensure that Bola enjoyed her visit. If only she had come alone. But her coming was a risk and a sacrifice which not many girls would make. She'd come to see him without the knowledge of her parents, and probably not anyone else besides Mary and her sister Victoria. She told her everything and she was the only one who knew him as her boyfriend in their family. Yet, while he could share his bed with her, the presence of Mary meant the need for an extra sleeping space. He would ask a roommate whom he was sure would not mind vacating his bed.

Mary stared at every girl in the restaurant while Bola asked questions about his study and how he coped on campus. When they finished eating, she had her purse out, ready to pay for their orders, Laja insisted on paying.

At the sea front, Mary jumped on seeing tiny red crabs emerging and disappearing into their holes. “They want to bite me!” she shouted.

“No. they don't. Don't lie against these innocent creatures. Madam,” Bola joked. But Mary was jittery and ran back to stand on the concrete stairs near the library, refusing to join them as they strolled near the water edges.

Laja threw pebbles into the water while Bola picked tiny shells which she said she would take back to her school. Mary waved at them every time they looked her way. They later had dinner, then, suya, skewed seasoned beef, and drinks at Moremi Hall. At Mary's request, they sat at the quadrangle in front of Henry Carr Hall and chatted for long before going to his room for the day.

As they parted at the motor park the following morning, Bola was emotional, saying she wished they could spend more longer.

“I go love o,” Mary said, teasing her friend. As their vehicle left, Laja waved happily, more convinced that he’d found a good selfless girl.

Chapter 9

After his first year at university, Laja spent most of the holiday working at *Ibru Fish*, offloading boxes of frozen fish from lorries into the cold-room or taking them out for customers. Mother did not like the job. She said those who worked in very cold places often died young. Laja said it was not true and that he needed the money. Though she stuck to her belief, she did not raise the issue anymore after he started contributing to the rent and was able to save some money for his school needs.

Laja was shocked to find Dr. Olivoli seated on the only armchair in the parlour after coming back from work one afternoon. A guy in his mid-twenties, in a flowery patterned shirt, was standing beside him. Mother sat with Toke on a bench, Ola reclined against the wall on a low stool. Laja's eyes dashed from Toke to Ola; theirs were inexpressive, giving no hint of what was happening.

“Good afternoon young man. How are you?” Dr. Olivoli said.

“I'm fine, thank you sir.”

He looked much older than the last time Laja saw him at the church compound. The mystery of his presence was quickly building fear within Laja. He knew Mother had been complaining of body weakness, but had she become so ill that a doctor had to come and check on her at home? When did they start doing that? It must be a serious case that couldn't wait. His imaginations scrambled over one another as he struggled to calm his befuddled mind.

The doctor turned to Mother. “Is that the last one who...”

“Yes...”

“He’s grown into a fine young man,” the doctor said.

Mother gave a wry smile. “He’s at university in Lagos.”

“That’s good. Brilliant. What do you study?” Dr Olivoli said, turning to Laja.

“Maths and Physics, sir.”

“That’s good. I’m so happy for you. Please take good care of your mother.”

Mother’s eyes turned and bore into the standing guy for some time. Then she patted a space on the bench. The guy did not react. From time to time, Laja saw her still looking, as if trying to catch the guy’s eyes. He felt embarrassed. Who was he? Laja put on a frown and stared at her, expecting her to see him and get the message to stop seeking the guy’s attention. The thought that the others knew what he didn’t know made him feel out of place.

“Did your mother tell you about me?” Dr Olivoli asked, his head leaning to the left, his eyes looking like those of a feared uncle aiming to extract the truth from a child. Laja did not know how to respond. Everybody in the town knew him, a young doctor from Ireland who’d come to work for the hospital established by the Catholic Church. He’d remained in the town, spoke the language almost fluently, and was given a chieftaincy title by the king. He had left a couple of years before to run another hospital in another town, Akure.

“Well, not that I did anything out of the ordinary. I mean, I was only doing my job and ... well, that’s not the real issue,” Dr Olivoli said and turned to Mother.

“I’d wanted to do this for some time but he,” the doctor pointed at the young man beside him, “didn’t want me to. But now that I’m going back to my country, I thought I just have to get it done.” He raised his head to look at the guy. “Andy,

well, your mother call you Eitem,” Dr Olivoli said, turned to Mother and chuckled. He turned his face back to the guy. “She was alone and helpless in the hospital when she gave birth to your sister. You were always crying, sticking to her without a breathing space, despite her poor health,”

Laja thought the doctor’s reminiscence was strange and interesting but that he was getting the characters wrong.

As he spoke, Dr Olivoli’s eyes moved from one person to another. “One day I decided to take him to my office to allow your mother some rest. He loved it there and for the remaining days she was in hospital, I took him to my office. His brilliance made me love him and we became friends. With your mother’s consent, he stayed back with me, I registered him at a school and since then, he’d been my son, my only one,” Dr Olivoli said, another smile contorting his unshaven face. Andy was not looking amused; Laja was confused, and he could read same on the faces of Toke and Ola.

Mother turned to the guy. “My mother wanted me to marry your father against my choice. I had you and left him because he didn’t love me or wanted me. I’m sorry.” She turned to Toke. “I returned to your father, but after discovering that I’d had him for another man, problems started. It got worse after I became pregnant with Ola and continued until we left his house.” She looked from Toke to Laja to Ola, and back to the Andy guy, as if shopping for sympathy, with spasms and tears.

“I don’t understand,” Toke said. “What’s all this about?”

“To let you know that you have a brother and that what happened was not your mother’s fault,” Dr Olivoli said. Toke’s brows were raised, she looked from one face to another.

The doctor continued. “Andy, this is your biological family. This is your mother, and these are your siblings.”

Laja wondered if his brother and sister heard the same words he’d just heard? He looked towards Mother. Fresh tears coursed over and around the dry marks the previous ones had left on her cheeks. Dr Olivoli’s wore a grin. Toke and Ola’s looked dumbstruck; their eyes skirted everyone else’s. Laja wished Mother or Dr. Olivoli could deny it all, say it was all a joke. Neither spoke. Mother started rubbing her left palm on her thighs, head bowed, staring at the floor. Laja had never seen her looking so pensive, so shamefaced. He knew then that it was all true.

Toke stood up and walked slowly, as if soulless, into the inner room. As Laja stomped to the front door, he heard Dr Olivoli shouting after him, “It’s not her fault!” How could she have kept such a secret from them after always telling them that they had no father or family but only each other to trust and depend on?

Laja wanted to go far away and never come back to the afternoon mess. He would have loved to go and see Bola, but how would he explain what he’d just discovered about his mother to her? He turned and walked towards Gani’s place. So, Father had a reason for his attitude towards mother after all. But why was Andy not happy to see his mother and them, his siblings? There were lots of things he was confused about. His strides weakened as he approached Gani’s.

Chapter 10

In his final year, the urge to complete his degree and get a job pressed harder but he couldn't do anything but wait.

“I can't imagine not being able to take care of my Mum and siblings after graduation. They are looking up to me,” he'd told his namesake, Laja, a law student he'd met at the Student Affairs office after seeing him highlighting his name on the accommodation list. He'd been surprised yet delighted to find someone else bearing his name on campus.

“I thought I was the only Laja on campus, now you've stolen my uniqueness,” he'd said as he introduced himself.

“I am the original Laja. Every other one is a counterfeit,” the other guy said. They'd laughed, exchanged contacts and met at the 2000 Café for a drink the following weekend.

“Come back to Lagos, after your Youth Service, man. It's the best place to get a job as quickly as possible,” the new guy had told Laja.

“I know, but I don't have a place to stay in Lagos.”

“That won't be a problem. I'll host you for some time,” he'd said.

“Thanks, Laja. You know what? It sounds strange calling out my own name when I call you, man.”

“Then call me 'original.' That would do.”

“No. I'll call you 'Baby lawyer,' I am the original Laja.”

“As your lordship pleases,” his new friend had said, bowing.

Laja returned home two days after completing his year of national service year. Mother looked at his khaki uniform admirably and hugged him. Toke managed a grin.

“Where is Ola?” Laja asked.

Mother sighed. Toke stood up and left the parlour. Laja turned to Mother, looking puzzled.

“Your brother is at the police station,” Mother said.

“Police station? Why?”

“He was arrested and detained for fighting, for fighting Toke’s boyfriend. He’d been there for four days.

“Toke’s boyfriend? How, why did he have to fight Toke’s boyfriend? Did the boy come here or what?”

“Your brother met him on the street with Toke and their argument led to a fight.”

“What’s his business fighting Toke’s boyfriend in the first place?”

“Because Toke is pregnant, and she was “

“Wait, did you say Toke is pregnant?”

“Yes. Your sister is pregnant. Ola got into trouble because he intervened when she was arguing with the boy who refused to own up,” Mother said.

Laja pointed his right hand toward the inner room and opened his mouth to speak but couldn’t. His hand came down, limp. He sat dejectedly on the bench. How could Toke have sold herself so cheaply? Truly, they’d been through tough times, but it would likely get tougher with her as a single parent. Could she not have looked for a responsible man if she could no longer wait? Now, she had not only brought shame to the family, but her action had led to Ola being locked up.

“Since we don’t have money for bail, I’ve gone to beg the boy’s mother. She said she’ll come here tomorrow and promised that she would tell the police to allow Ola come home,” Mother said, sighing deeply again.

Long into the night, Laja could not sleep. His plan to visit Bola in the morning and then travel to Lagos had to be put on hold. Around midnight, he wanted to go and talk to Toke, but he didn’t know what to say. It wasn’t until the early hours of the morning that he fell asleep. He was woken by a rap on the door.

“They are here. D’you want to come with us?” Mother said.

“Yes, I’ll love to.”

“But you are just waking up. Can’t keep them waiting.”

“It’s okay. I’ll freshen up when we come back,” Laja said as he got up, yawned, rubbed his face, and use his index finger to probe the corners of his eyes. He cleaned the finger on his jeans and ran his palms down over his shirt, then dashed to the backhouse and quickly brushed his teeth.

The two elegantly dressed women sitting in a black car seemed too busy talking about their travels and businesses to see Laja or respond to his greetings as he entered and sat at the back with Mother. The bigger of the women, whose neck looked like that of a naked neck chicken, drove to the police station. As the women breezed past the counter, the desk sergeant stood up. The women told him the Divisional Police Officer was expecting them. He allowed them in.

Ola came out, naked from the waist up. His face was puffy. A bundle containing his shirt and shoes was thrown at him. Mother hugged him and looked him all over; asking if he was okay. Tears started running down her face.

“If you come here next time, you go stay long and suffer well, well o,” the desk sergeant warned Ola. He picked a piece of paper and wrote with measured concentration, tracing every letter shape with the turning of his head and open-

mouthed. He gave the paper to Madam Naked Neck to sign. After that, she brought out some notes from a green purse and gave them to the sergeant who stiffened, his hands by his sides, his chest jutting out. “Shuun, Madam,” he said as he pocketed the money.

The woman turned to her friend. They both laughed. Madam Naked Neck gave Ola some money.

“You people can get a taxi home. We are not going your way. Okay?” she said and turned to Mother. “I’ve finalised arrangements with the hospital as we agreed. I’ll be at your place at about 8.00 pm. Please make sure she’s ready.”

As they walked out of the police station compound, Laja asked Mother:

“What appointment was she talking about?”

“Let’s leave this place first,” she said.

Laja turned to Ola. “Why did you do it, that’s not your nature, what happened?”

“I did what I needed to do,” Ola said, looking away from Laja. “These rich people think they can oppress whoever they want to.”

“Keep quiet! Did the boy force your sister? Blame your useless sister and not the boy,” Mother said. “She is the one who has brought shame and oppression on me and the family,” she added, hissed loud and quickened her footsteps. They crossed the road and waited under the shade of a mango tree for a taxi to take them home.

The two women came back in the evening. Mother, who had been checking the time and peeping through the window, heard a car hooting. She called Toke. Before she came out, Mother whispered to Laja: “They are going to remove the pregnancy.”

Laja feigned surprise. He’d known the truth when Naked Neck mentioned ‘hospital’ and asked Mother to get Toke ready. “But they can’t do this when”

“I’d opposed it, but your sister said she would not raise a rejected child outside wedlock. The boy’s mother said she’s only helping us, that there’s no proof that her son is responsible for the pregnancy,” Mother said.

“So, why do they want an abortion?”

“They are not our problem; poverty is. This is what happens when you don’t have money. Leave them to God.”

They squeezed into the back of a car which was smaller and older than the one they came with in the morning. Madam Naked Neck chatted loudly with her friend as she drove to City Specialist Hospital, a white edifice which dwarfed other buildings on Akure Road. The reception had large pictures and carvings hanging on the walls. A big television set, locked inside a metal cage up on the wall, was showing the closing credits of the soap, *The New Cock Crow At Dawn*, with its theme song: *Will he ever get there, will he ever make it? Will he ever hear the sound of cock crow at dawn?* The national news followed. Laja was drawn to the news about the National Youth Service Passing Out Parade from states around the country. Most of the pictures were blurry but they gave him goose pimples. The joy of being a university graduate suppressed the nauseous smell of disinfectant hanging in the air. He hated hospitals and prayed they wouldn’t stay too long.

About five minutes after Madam Naked Neck spoke with the receptionist, a lady dressed in a white uniform came out. The receptionist directed her to Madam Naked Neck who pointed at Toke. The nurse asked Toke to follow her. Mother stood up and held Toke’s hand, but the nurse said she could not go with them, and that Toke would be fine. She watched dejectedly as Toke was led through a side door and remained on her feet for the next hour, walking up and down the room, her arms behind her, muttering prayers. Madam Naked Neck and her friend joked and laughed loudly.

The creak of the side door was followed by a bang which attracted all attention. Toke, her right hand over the shoulder of a nurse, the left between her legs, was led into the hall. Another nurse followed, some papers and a plastic bag in her hand. Mother rushed and took over from the nurse supporting Toke. The other nurse gave the papers with her to the receptionist. She then walked across and gave the plastic bag to Madam Naked Neck who peered inside and quickly looked away. Her friend stole a look too and revulsed. Madam Naked Neck stood, walked up to Laja and thrust the bag into his hands. Laja looked into the bag. The sight of a big wrap of bloodied cotton wool sent a creepy sensation all over his body. He managed to control his anger and desisted from walking up to confront Madam Naked Neck. After leaving the small window in the wall, she strolled back to Laja and pushed a packet into his hand. It smelled of medicine.

After leaving the car park area, with Toke and Mother in front of him, Laja again looked inside the bag. A layer of thick cotton wool had slightly opened. Inside was something like the wrinkly baby lizards emerging from eggs and wriggling frantically when exposed to sunlight, which he'd seen as a child. This was only bigger and lifeless. As they drove off, Toke kept moaning in pain.

“You’ll be fine, dear,” Madam Naked Neck said.

“She seems a nice girl but the problem with young girls of today is that they don't know how to say “no,” her friend said.

“I know. But a decent girl does not say ‘yes’ to every boy and start looking for someone to pin her misdeeds on, you know?”

Mother hissed. “Madam, God will judge if you and your son have done the right thing, let’s leave it at that.”

The car came to a sudden stop, plunging everyone forward. “Woman!” Madam Naked Neck shouted, “you can’t seat in my car and curse me.”

“I’m not cursing you; I’m only saying that the truth and the blood of the innocent child which has just been denied life, shall be the judge between us.”

Madam Naked Neck turned to face Mother. “Your curse upon your head!”

“You will ...” Mother started but Laja pulled her hand hard. She stared angrily at him but stopped speaking.

Madam Naked Neck started the car drove slowly. No one spoke until they got to the bushes near the grounds where learner drivers practised. The car stopped.

“D’you want to throw that thing in the bush here or are you going home with it?” Madam Naked Neck said, gazing at Laja through the inner mirror and quickly looking away quickly as he stared back. Mother nudged him. Laja opened the door and made to cross the road towards the bushes, his grip tightening on the bag. The full beam of a speeding car bored into his eyes. The car hooted as it passed. He dashed across the road and swung with force. The bag flew high and landed in the middle of the bush with a swoosh. Laja rubbed his hands together and went back into the car.

“Thank you, my dear,” Madam Naked Neck said.

Toke moaned again. Laja’s wrist tightened against the tablets’ package.

Chapter 11

Akana Street in the middle of Old Oshodi in Lagos, was a sprawling settlement of mostly old buildings occupied by mostly peripatetic traders, low-income earners, and the jobless. Laja found the house number given to him on a storey building marked *Green Spot Inn*. It was neither painted green nor did it look like an inn by any means. He stepped over the overflowing gutter which ran through the street to the front of the house where a square-shaped metal kerosene tank stood on wobbly legs beside a shop. On three tables, basins of rice, beans, garri, yam powder, crayfish, and peppers struggled for space and attention. The fourth table had filled and half-filled jars and bottles of palm, coconut, and vegetable oils. Laja approached the woman who was spraying insecticides at flies around the tables and asked if she knew of any Dele living in the building

“Dele? Who wants him?” the woman asked, looking around suspiciously before her eyes settled on Laja again.

“He is my cousin ... my uncle; he knows I’ll be coming,” Laja said. Dele would be much older than him and older relatives were called uncles and aunties.

“Eh heen! You want Dele, the manager?”

“I don’t know if he’s a manager but”

“What does he look like? I mean ... can you describe him?”

“I don’t know, I ... I’ve not met him before.”

“Really?” the woman said, grinning and still looking at Laja and his bags suspiciously. “I am not sure you have come to the right place, but we do have one Dele, the manager here,” the woman said and called a little girl who was skipping.

“Go and see if you can find Manager and tell him he’s got a visitor from home.”

The girl skipped away toward a door leading into the main house. Laja thanked the woman. She brought out a wooden stool from under one of the tables, wiped it with the edge of her wrapper, and asked him to sit. Resting his legs was like heaven after walking from the bus stop, asking for directions, and searching for the address in the blazing sun. He'd come early because finding an address in that part of Lagos could take some time. He'd planned that if he found the place in good time, and if his uncle was not at home, he would wait. That would be better than becoming an object of suspicion if he had to knock on people's doors at night in an area notorious for 'necklace' burning of suspected thieves. With legs and hands tied, used tyres were put around the shoulders of suspected thieves and set ablaze.

If his cousin was a manager, shouldn't be at work at that time of the day? Maybe he was on leave, Laja reasoned, gazing at his dust-caked shoes. He looked up when the little girl approached, leading a man. For no reason, Laja had imagined him as a middle-aged man with a beard, but he looked quite different - stocky with a protruding belly held up by a brown belt. The tucking of his blue striped shirt into his black trousers, however, made him look awkwardly smart. His hairline was receding and there were bumps and dark patches around the edges of his face and jaw. His lips parted in a smile, his eyes glittering in excitement, Laja stood, greeted, and introduced himself.

"Ah! You are Auntie Tolani's son? You resemble am sha, looking Laja all over. How she dey?"

"She's fine and sent her regards," Laja said.

Uncle Dele thanked the woman and offered to assist with his luggage as he led the way to the main house.

"E dey hard to find dis place?"

"Not really," Laja said.

“Some people de complain say e dey difficult to find Akana just because dem miss di turning for di junction after di bus stop. Tank God sey you no miss am,” Uncle Dele said.

“E don tey wey I see your mama. I must find time go see am any time I travel home again. I dey surprise wen I hear sey she don get pikin wey don big like you and graduate from university. So wen dem tell me sey you wan come stay for Lagos, I say no problem, my house na your house.”

“Thank you, sir,” Laja said.

As they stepped into the corridor, the smell of dampness and rotten food accompanied them up the stairs. On the landing, Uncle Dele told Laja that a teacher and a Customs clearing agent were the other occupants on the floor and that they shared the toilet and kitchen. Immediately they entered the parlour, Uncle Dele opened a window and pulled the curtains.

“Most times I dey close di window so dat flies and di terrible smell from di gutter outside no go enter. I hope sey you no mind.”

“That’s no problem uncle, there are houseflies everywhere in Nigeria,” Laja said.

“No. Dis ones no be ordinary houseflies *o*, dem bi green and dem big pass houseflies,” Uncle Dele said. Laja looked shyly away from his glare. “They are toilet flies. Plenty house for dis street no get toilet, di landlords and tenants de pipe dem shit into di gutter. Na im de make di place smell like dis. E dey worse for afternoon wen sun commot. Shey you de smell am?”

Laja shook his head. It was only his first day and he didn’t want to tell his host that the smell was overwhelming.

From the kitchen windows, the backhouse was visible. During the evenings, teenage and middle-aged ladies wearing t-shirts and nightdresses loitered, smoking, and chatting loudly. At night, they wore skimpy dresses, skirts, bum shorts, and transparent clothes which showed their breasts and midriffs. With their faces heavily made up, they strutted the corridor and the front of the house, like caged animals slowly but desperately looking for ways to escape. They would pull their skirts down and pull the front of their blouses up every couple of minutes. Those who sat did so recklessly, displaying their naked inner legs and shoring up their breasts intermittently. Men, some of them looking furtively around, and others walking as if they had no care in the world, picked, and followed the ladies to their rooms at the back of the house. After some time, the ladies would come to recommence their parade; some of them would leave with men for the night.

Uncle Dele was the ladies' manager. He also collected rent for the landlord, signed on new tenants and ensured payment to one Madam Dee, who had control over the area the house was located. She was entitled to a percentage of what the girls earned and touted as having the most vicious enforcers in Lagos. She had the police on their payroll. Uncle Dele paid the police too. When they visited, they often parked their rickety patrol van a few houses away and walked down to meet him. He would hand them money sealed in an envelope. If they chose, they could spend time with any lady of their choice, on the house. The in-house bouncers who protected the ladies from drunk and aggressive clients, smoked and drank all day, and were only answerable to Uncle Dele.

“Tell me if you like any of di girls o. I go arrange am. Dem no go collect money from you,” Uncle Dele said to Laja with a smile one evening as a couple of

the ladies walked past the window of the small room which served as Uncle Dele's office. "Don't be shy. Abi you no get girlfriend?"

Laja smiled. It would be impolite to tell his host that all he urgently needed was a job, not sex with call girls.

"All of dem want make I be dem boyfriend, but e wrong make I do anytin with dem," he'd said as he gulped *Guinness* from the bottle. "Dis na business. If I start de touch di girls, na from dia wahala go start, no more business first," Uncle Dele added.

"You are right, uncle. It's like your capital in business; you don't consume it. You don't mix business with pleasure, though this is a business of pleasure," Laja responded.

"Yes. Capita! You de correct," Uncle Dele said, his face lit up as if he'd just found the word he'd spent ages looking for.

"I mean, you can't be sleeping with a woman and be asking for rent at the same time," Laja added.

"Ooho! True talk. You dey smart. It's unfortunately fortunate sey I no fit tell you make you join me for dis business as you be my brother and you don go university. If not, I for say make you come join me. I dey make money pass some graduate for here, I tell you," Uncle Dele said and shrugged.

"I know, Uncle. You are doing a good job of managing this place."

"Na so I tell the landlord. You no fit put many ashawo wey all kain men de visit, and be collecting rent witout wahala, if not for my good management," Uncle Dele said.

"That's true," Laja said, nodding.

Uncle Dele shifted in his seat. "Di manager wey de here before dey prison now."

"Prison! Why?"

“Ah! Na long story. Dem kill one girl, right inside her room, one of di rooms at di back dia,” Uncle Dele said, pointing his thumb towards the back of the house.

“Really?”

“Yes. Dem cut her breasts for money ritual. Nobody hear any shout or noise of struggle.”

“But how possible? Someone must have”

“Di excuse be sey, di music de loud, and dem tink sey di man de do extra rounds wen dem no see am come out.”

“How long will a man ...?”

“Don’t mind dem. Na di same question I ask. How long man dey last on top of woman wey nobody no fit go check wen dem no come out?” Uncle Dele said and took another a gulp from his drink, then belched. “Now, I don tell di guys, the bouncers, if any girl enter with man and dem no commot after 30 minutes, make dem go knock door and ask the girl wetin dey happen. If dem no hear anytin, make dem broke di door, enter. And make nobody leave until dem find the girl!” Uncle Dele said, with his voice rising.

“What about those who leave ... go home with the men?”

“I don warn dem, I tell dem sey make dem follow only regular customers, men wey dem know well and make dem de tell the bouncers di place wey dem de go,” Uncle Dele said, pulling his at left ear. As he did, his wristwatch jangled and slipped down towards his elbow.

Months of full-time job-hunting all over Lagos and the neighbouring Ogun State, with promises and disappointments, made Laja realise the importance of having someone like Uncle Dele supporting him. Not only was having a place to retire into after all the day’s stress a big relief, he would also have been grounded without the

stipends he got from him. His thought about the situation every evening after returning home, fuelled his desire to secure a job, any job as soon as it was possible. On days he had nowhere to go, he looked through newspapers for job advertisements, drafted different versions of his CV, and watched television.

He became friendly with Monica, one of the ladies who sometimes came into Uncle Dele's flat to watch television. She came one Sunday afternoon when Uncle Dele was out. Her neck and face were covered in some pungent-smelling substance.

“Wai you dey look me like dat. Na cream, na. You no like wetin you see?” Monica said, raising her brows.

“How I look you? I no see you before, na now I see sey you be like tolotolo,” Laja said.

“You de craze. Tolotolo no be turkey? And turkey na meat. Me, I be meat for men na,” Monica said, rubbing her face. “You no know sey Nigerian men like girls wey be like oyibo?”

“So, because you wan please men you must bleach your skin wit dis tin wey make you de smell like pit toilet?”

“Na you sabi. You too get bad mout. I no bleach, na tone I de tone.”

“Na true, toner. Fake oyibo.”

“Wetin you sabi? Dark girls no dey too get customers for here o,” Monica added, shaking her open palm. “If I no get customer, how I go survive, pay my rent, and save small money wey I wan use travel go Italy?” She said, tightening her wrapper around her body. “I hear say for Italy sef, if your skin no dey lait, like oyibo own, you no go get customer.”

“If dis chemical wey you take cover body kill you, men no go carry different women? My uncle no go collect rent from girls? If you die, life go continue.”

“Abeg leave me. You too de preach. I no go school. Dis na ashawo joint, no be school; no be church.”

Laja laughed. “But ashawo de go church nau.”

Monica laughed. “I know. Even ashawo dey be pastor sef,” Monica said, laughing.

“But church business dey different from ashawo business sha,” she added as she fiddled with the remote control. “Abeg put dis tin for better channel make I see fine men,” Monica said, turning and handing the remote control to Laja.

“Wit all di money wey you dey make for your business, why you no buy your own TV,” Laja said as he searched the channels.

“Leave dat one. You wan make all di girls come dey tanda for my small room to watch TV? You no like as I dey come here keep you company?”

Laja shrugged. “Me! No worry, I go soon get work.”

“Amen. If you get better work, no forget us o. People like you no dey remember dem friends wen God hear dem prayer.”

“Na you sabi, make I get work first,” Laja said.

They sat watching telly, but he could not concentrate. His mind flickered between the two interviews he would be having that week, and the comment Monica just made. He got up and left for the kitchen. After putting the pot on to boil rice, he sat on an old three-legged stool, wondering if truly he would want anything to do with Monica or any of the girls after getting a job.

When he got back to the room, Monica was asleep, her head slanted dangerously backwards, her mouth was wide open. Greenish veins were visible on parts of her neck and shoulders. Her wrapper was loose and had dropped off her chest to reveal a transparent nightgown which barely covered her breasts. Laja’s eyes moved between her and the television set for some time. Then his eyes settled on her cleavage; he took an eyeful, sat up on the sofa, then sat back. He picked up the

remote control and changed channels, thinking Monica would wake up. She didn't. He settled for a channel showing a musical. Again, he glanced at Monica, insensitive of her surrounding, looking so innocent; he imagined her sprawled on a bed, her breasts pointing upwards. She was beautiful and shouldn't be bleaching her body to attract customers for paid sex. She should be in school or in a decent business, or employed in a respectable job, not selling her body. But he too shouldn't be in such an environment; he didn't like it there but had to make do with what was available. Would Monica agree to have sex with him for free? If she did, would he do it, after promising Bola that he would not look at any other girl in Lagos?

A whiff of something burning made him spring to his feet. He hit his left leg against the centre table and brushed against the sofa as he scurried for the door. Monica jumped and muttered incoherently for a moment.

Chapter 12

Bola put on her earrings and started brushing her hair one Sunday afternoon at Gani's. The metal bed squeaked loudly as Laja, who was facing the wall, turned to look at her.

“Are you still going back to Lagos this evening?” Bola asked, checking her wristwatch. Laja yawned. “I must. I've got an interview tomorrow morning.” He turned again to face the wall.

Bola turned her face from side to side peering into a small mirror, patting and brushing her hair. The sound of bristle on wig always irritated Laja, but he didn't want to say anything. He'd told her he preferred her natural look, and that permed hair was full of damaging chemicals. She'd laughed, saying he didn't know what he really wanted, adding that no young woman wore natural hair anymore. Surprisingly, she'd cut her hair low about a month after their discussion. He'd praised her, saying she looked more beautiful. After some weeks, she started wearing wigs, complaining that natural hair was difficult to maintain. But he did not like the changing looks that the wigs gave her – Indian, Chinese, Caucasian - She looked strange, he'd said to her, almost adding that she looked like one of the girls at *Green Spot Inn* managed by Uncle Dele. He didn't want to hurt her feeling, especially since she'd stopped perming her hair because he didn't like it.

“I... I've got something to tell you,” she said, carefully tucking the mirror into her handbag.

Laja did not respond.

“Did you hear what I said?” She stretched over him to see his face.

“What ... what is it?” he said.

“I think, I might ... I could be ... pregnant.”

Laja sprang up. “What? What did you just say?”

“I was supposed to have my period two weeks ago but I ... I thought it was just a ...a ... you know?”

“I don’t know. Please stop this joke.”

“A joke? I’m not joking!” Bola said.

Laja moved to the edge of the bed. “But you can’t be pregnant. It’s unthinkable. You can’t”

“Yes, I can!”

“How? I don’t understand it.”

“Of course, you do,” Bola said, rubbing her forearms with her palm. “You sleep with me, don’t you? That’s how a girl becomes pregnant.”

“Is it?”

“Yes. Don’t be cheeky, please. This is no joke.”

“Are you serious?”

“I am. I can’t joke with something like this.”

Laja waited to hear her say she was joking, but only tears dropped from her face.

“This can’t be true!”

“Yes, it is!” Bola said, her red eyes glistening.

“But I thought, I thought you”

“Thought what?”

“I thought you were mature enough to”

“To do what?”

“To reason and take care of yourself, knowing that I’ve just completed National Service and got no job and no money? I don’t have money for abortion.”

“Who’s talking of abortion? My mother”

“Your mother knows already?”

“Yes No. I didn’t tell her. I don’t know how, but she seemed to know. She said I was looking different and that if I ever became pregnant, I should never consider an abortion. I think she knows but does not want to accept it.”

“You knew this and you... you still allow us to ... to make love today?”

“What difference does it make? You know I’ll always give you what you want.”

Laja stood up and walked to the window. As he opened it, some air rushed into the room, but it wasn’t enough to clear his head. Outside, two of Gani’s sisters, one of about Bola’s age, were chatting and laughing. He’d always felt uncomfortable every time he came with Bola. At times, his hands shook, and he would fumble as he inserted the spare key into the keyhole. He’d seen deep shyness in Bola’s eyes and her legs wobbling as she walked along. She’d said it was difficult coming there but that she did it for him and would do anything for him.

Now, he turned to look at her seated on the bed, tears running down her face. He walked towards to the bed and sat beside her.

“What can we do?”

“Nothing other than getting married.”

“Marr... what?”

“Married.”

“Seriously?” Laja said, a smile appeared on his face, turned into a grin, then disappeared.

“What else can we do in this situation? That’s the only thing possible. I can’t abort or have a child outside wedlock.”

“If I understand what you mean, then you can’t be serious,” Laja said, looking away.

Bola turned briskly to face him but could only see the side of his face. “Is that all you are going to say?”

“What d’you expect me to say? Would you get married and stay with me here,” Laja said, spreading out his arms, “in a friend’s room, or at my uncle’s place in Lagos?” It was the first time he’d look into her eyes without a softness in his heart. “A man without a job and a girl who is just completing a national diploma don’t get married. It will be disastrous. Don’t you understand?”

“When we get to that bridge, we’ll cross it. First things first.”

“There is no bridge to cross here, Bola. We’ll drown if we try crossing deep, bridgeless, unswimmable waters.”

Bola gazed at him as he spoke, her mouth partially opened. “I understand it’s a difficult situation, but I think my parents will be ready to assist us after”

“Never! I won’t subject myself to the ignominy of your parents ... ‘assisting’ in any way. I won’t do it.”

Bola stamped her left foot, folded her arms on her chest and looked away. “I know I sold myself cheap. My mother was right, a girl weighs less after a man gets what he wants from her. You’ve got all you wanted from me Now I’m left to pick the pieces.”

“Don’t go down that line just to make me feel bad, please. You should understand”

“Oh yes, I do. I now understand that you are like any other man, selfish.”

Laja sighed. “Selfish in what way? For not robbing a bank for an emergency wedding?”

Bola looked at him with raised brows and twitched lips. “You only talk about your situation. What about me? D’you for once consider what I’m going through and will still go through? The shame this brings me and my parents?”

“Your parents cannot dictate”

“No, they can’t. I’m only suggesting that they could be of help....”

“And I say ‘never!’” Laja said, stood up and started pacing the room.

“You are shouting at me?” The tone of her voice was more of regret than of a question.

“I’m sorry, but let’s be reasonable about this. You know I’ll do anything for you but....”

Bola nodded repeatedly. “I know. I know I’m unreasonable. No reasonable girl sells herself this cheap.” Her voice was soft but breaking. Carefully, she wiped her tears and put her things into her bag. Slowly, Laja sat on the bed and pulled her left arm, trying to make her face him. She turned away. “I should have known better,” she said and walked to the door.

“Bola!” Laja called, scrambling up from the of bed, half naked.

She did not answer but opened and shut the door before he could reach it, almost in his face. He hurried into his shirt and shoes, got to the door, and pulled the handle. Bola was already at the far end of the yard, almost exiting. His grip on the door handle eased. He took backward steps and collapsed on the bed. “If she walked out on you, then, she’ll have to walk back to you,” a voice inside him said. After about an hour of reminiscing on their relationship and thinking of what to do next, he got up and checked his watch. He had to get to Lagos before it was dark.

Chapter 13

In Lagos, early the following morning, he joined the long queue at the bus stop on his way for an interview as a teacher of Mathematics at a secondary school in the Apapa area of Lagos. There were fewer buses on the roads because many bus drivers had parked their vehicles in protest against police harassment and exploitation. On a stool inside the red kiosk backing the bus stop, a mini-bus driver gulped another shot of local gin and stretched his neck to the left, then to the right. He stood up and looked around the vehicle.

An Army private who had been drinking with the driver earlier, ordered a teenager down from the front seat. Was he not aware that front seats are often reserved for members of the Armed Forces? The teenager refused, claiming there was no reason for him to vacate his seat for anyone. The soldier looked at him pitifully, then chuckled.

“Why not allow the officer to sit there so that peace can reign. We’ll soon get to Mile 2,” the second passenger in the front seat, a woman, advised.

“No! Why d’you allow these soldiers to ride you all the time. Where are our human rights? The young man has a right to sit wherever he wants; after all, he was the first on that seat! He may be young but he’s one of the leaders of tomorrow,” a man who was sitting at the row behind the driver said to the woman.

The soldier took a couple of steps forward and unbuckled his belt. He swung it at the man, missing him by inches but hitting the arm of a girl sitting near him. She screamed.

“We de ride bloody civilians like you because you be horse. Stupid man, if you see Human Rights, you go know am? As you be lawyer, if dis your client be

leader of tomorrow, let him wait till tomorrow, this na today. And if you no mind your business, tomorrow go be too far for you.”

The man wanted to come down, but other passengers pleaded with him not to. The soldier pulled the young man down and took over his seat. The woman beside him smiled and turned to look at the man at the back row; the newspaper he was reading covered his face.

A lady walked towards the bus. As she got to the door, she instructed passengers in the middle row to create space for her. The driver approached and gave the lady a look of disapproval.

“You go pay double o,” he said, explaining in derision that he feared a weak tyre could burst with too much weight on it.

“Go tell that to your hungry mother, I’m big because I eat well,” the woman said. The driver shook his head and laughed, displaying stained brownish teeth.

The last passenger, carrying a bulging bag and wearing jeans, squeezed himself in. The driver jumped in, tied his door to the body of the bus with a cable and asked his conductor to give the bus a push. After about fifty metres the engine roared into life and the minibus started gaining speed before the conductor could enter. The driver hit hard on the brakes, throwing everyone forward on a couple of occasions. Still, his boy could not catch up but shouted ‘*Maalo Skoda,*’ telling the driver not to bother stopping.

When he finally caught up after about eighty metres, he hit the side of the bus with his fist, grabbed the roof edge with his left hand, hopped, stepped, and jumped into the bus. He pulled the door half-close, wedging his body between it and the passenger sitting closest to the exit. Then he opened the door wider, stepped carefully out and stayed glued to the side of the vehicle. His clothes, filled with air, were like a parachute about to take him up to the sky at any moment.

After about a mile, the bus started puffing and slowing down. The driver swore, saying an auto-mechanic had duped and dumped him. The vehicle finally lost power and rolled on slowly until it stopped some distance before the dreaded Cele bus stop where pickpocketing and mugging were commonplace. The conductor jumped down, hissed, and asked everyone to get down from the bus.

“Abeg make una come down, dis motor no fit go anywhere again.”

“Are you returning our fares then?” a passenger asked.

“Come down first nau. You no even pity us; na money you de ask. You know how much we go spend for dis problem?”

“What problem? Don’t deceive us, I know nothing is wrong with this vehicle. You only want to turn back and ferry other passengers and make more money. Please let me have my money back,” the man said.

“Mr man, na true I dey tell you. Dis bus get engine problem. I go arrange anoda bus for una. I no fit return your money.”

“How is your problem my business? And for how long will I have to wait for you to make that arrangement?” the man said.

“Okay o, siddon dia de waste your time,” the conductor said, then strolled off and crossed to the other side of the road.

Laja got down and started trekking to the next bus stop. He didn’t know if the conductor would refund their fares and did not want to waste time or get involved in an argument. The conductor strolled back with a piece of cable which he gave to the driver who was fiddling with the minibus engine. Laja walked faster, thinking if he got on the next bus, he would still make it to the interview in good time. When he looked back, he saw most of the other passengers filing toward the bus stop too, complaining and gesticulating angrily.

A drizzle started; he quickened his strides and reached the cover of the bus stop shed bearing the emblem of the Rotary Club, with the letters in bold red. A lady, exceptionally light in complexion, caught Laja's eyes. From time to time, she looked around, peeped into her handbag and pulled at her dress. A man in a three-piece suit with a briefcase hanging at his side, puffed away on a cigarette, seemingly unbothered about the nose-covering and coughing of other commuters. As a stick burned out, he lit another.

Laja felt he needed to ease himself but decided to hold it as he did not want to miss the next bus. In the distance, he heard a vehicle engine roaring to life and repeatedly throttling. It was the bus he was in. A couple of the passengers hurried back toward the earlier bus. Before they could reach it, the driver did a U-turn and sped off, driving against traffic. Laja felt more pressed. He got into the drizzle and walked down the swampy bush-path where tall elephant grass mingled with different shrubs to form a foliage that led to the lagoon which was known for swallowing pickpockets and other criminals under pursuit. The smell around him was sickening but he was too pressed to mind. He could see people through the hollows of the fancy bricks of the shed behind him. Further down, he found a convenient spot and quickly eased himself.

On his way back, he saw the lady at the shed, her dress pulled up, bent with parted legs, unleashing a torrent of urine. She saw him approaching and looked away. There was a rustle in the foliage on the other side. Toad-like, a man bopped up in squatting position, trousers down. He smiled at Laja who grinned in return and quickened his footsteps. The lady got into the shed after him, shaking her head to get water out of her permed hair. The man in a suit was still smoking. A *Moolue* bus, looking like a contraption of patched metal, glass, and plastic, with *Noah's Ark's* boldly written on its side, burst into sight. Laja and others rushed towards it. The bus

conductor, naked from the waist up, with bulging biceps, jumped down before the bus could come to a final halt. He flexed his chest of many scars, looked around the terminal and banged on the bus side, many times.

“Stop! *Duro*, pilot. Press am down one time or miss big money,” he shouted.

Spreading out his arms, Biceps blocked the path of the on-rushing commuters, urging them to allow those inside the bus to come down first. Satisfied, he announced the bus’s destination in a gritty voice, warning that the bus would not stop on the way. Within the mad rush, Laja got in, and scurried for the last empty seat before another man could reach it. His watch had almost fallen off in the struggle to get on the bus. He buckled it back on. More commuters tried to get into the packed bus but could not. Enraged, Biceps shouted at the standing passengers to move closer still and create space as his bus could take more. The bus surged forward in a forceful change of gear with a metallic roar. That did the job. As passengers were thrown back and forth, some space was miraculously created.

A few more people got in, flattened against others. Some stood on the step of the doorless bus, holding to the frame, the shorter ones, who couldn’t reach for any part of the bus, were held in place by the bodies of others. As he strolled along the vehicle, Biceps bought two sachets of water, swallowed the content of one in a couple of gulps and poured the other on his sweaty body. He managed to find himself a space to stand at the front doorstep as the bus rolled out of the bus stop into the service lane of the expressway and crawled along.

The lady from the shed stood between two men, holding on to the roof rail. Laja watched with interest as the man behind her kept pushing forward, his crotch firmly against her behind, the man in front kept pushing back, his back pressing hard on her breasts. She seemed to be playing along. At every jolt pressed and rocked against the men. Biceps called for fares. Before she could free a hand to get to her

bag, a voice behind said: “Don’t worry, I’ll pay for you.” She turned and smiled at the man, “Thank you very much.” The man smiled back. Laja checked his watch, then rummaged through his bag. He brought out a neatly folded piece of paper and squinted as he read it. Then he chuckled. He had misread the time on the letter of interview.

Just before Mile 2 Bus Stop, a scream rang through the bus, overpowering the vehicle’s groaning and the noisy conversations inside it. It came again. Urgent shuffles and an uproar of voices followed. Biceps, stamping, kicking, and elbowing, struggled to get through the tightly packed passengers to reach the source of commotion near the back door. Through the window, he saw Quickfeet, the multi-scarred mugger, jump down, run along the bus for a while, then cross the busy road to the other side of the road, clutching a black bag. His victim inside the bus, cried that she’d just been robbed of the high interest-yielding loan she’d got to start a business. Noisy sympathisers urged her to hold the bus driver and his conductor responsible. Why did they overload the bus? If it wasn’t a conspiracy, why did they allow a known criminal on the bus? The voice of the sweating driver, who was visibly shouting in response to the accusations, was muffled by the noises of the passengers and the old bus.

As the uproar was dying down, a mobile pharmacist who called himself Dr Pilipili, got up. He cleared his throat many times to gain attention and started greeting and praying for everyone in a deep voice. Digging into his bag, he brought out *Healitall*, an all-purpose medicine. He gave the expiry date and the price, which he claimed to have subsidised heavily because of the powers the manufacturers conferred on him. One after another, he brought out other sachets, packs of tablets, powders, and little bottles of syrup that he claimed healed sicknesses instantly. Only a few people were interested in buying his medicines. He became more invigorated,

vowing for the efficacy of his merchandise; frothy sputum gathered at both edges of his mouth.

Before he could stop, another man, who said he was an evangelist, started speaking. He greeted all passengers and called for shut eyes so that he could pray. Fresh from the Quickfeet experience, not many shut their eyes. Prayers over, he did his preaching, quoting from John 3:16 in the Bible: ‘For God so love the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him will not perish but gain everlasting life.’ He emphasised ‘whosoever’ and claimed that all were acceptable before God if they approached Him for the forgiveness of sins and salvation. “I worship at Golgotha Christ Church, Agege. Join us every 5.00 pm week-days for worship and 9.00 am on Sundays to see the miracles of Christ” Dr Pilipili too continued his marketing, trying to attract more customers. From the back door, Biceps banged at the bus, informing everyone to get ready to get down at the next stop. The preacher rounded off with another prayer and promised: “In my father’s house there are many rooms”

Laja struggled down the bus against those rushing to climb in and made for the pedestrian bridge to cross over to the other side where he would take another bus to Apapa. A man wearing jeans trousers and jacket pushed a wristwatch, which he claimed he wanted to sell at a give-away price, into his face. Laja raised his arm to show him that he had a wristwatch, but the man was not hindered. Laja hurried away. As he descended the bridge steps, he felt a touch on his left shoulder. He turned angrily, thinking the watch seller had caught up with him.

“Jude!” Laja shouted, grabbing his old friend in a hug. They back-patted and shook hands excitedly.

Jude looked at Laja all over. “My main man! How you dey? It’s been a loong time!”

“I know. It’s been a while,” Laja said. “How you dey?”

“I dey fine. What’s been up with you?”

“Man dey struggle to survive,” Laja replied. “But I hear sey you travel ... when you come back from Europe?”

Jude looked away briefly before turning to face Laja again. “Dat one don tey. Almost a year ago. I commot before completing my Youth Service and”

“Wetin you come back to dis country come do? I mean”

“My man, make I just say na long story. In short, make I say Europe na cold place, very cold place,” Jude said.

“Is it? So, wetin you de come do nau?”

Jude explained that he was on his own, running an education consultancy among other things. Jude gave Laja two of his business cards. He put one in his pocket, then scribbled his address at the back of the other one which he returned to Jude. “So, na Metro for Airport Road you de stay? Dat na wia rich and powerful de stay o!”

“Na lie. But na good place to breathe fresh air, even if person de struggle pay rent. You understand?” Jude responded.

“Na true. Fresh air de expensive for Lagos; no be for people like us we de stay Oshodi,” Laja said, laughing.

“No, man, dat no be true. So, where you de go?”

“I get interview for Apapa. I been tink say di time na 10.00 am only to discover inside bus sey na 1pm.”

“Dat na good sign sey dem go give you di job,” Jude said.

“I pray so o.”

They walked slowly as they discussed.

“How’s Gani? I hear sey him de work for one hospital for”

“Yes. But him don commot go South Africa.”

“Really? You get him number?”

Laja shook his head. “No. I never”

“No worry, I go call him sister and get di number,” Jude said.

At the foot of the bridge, Laja turned to Jude. “I go come visit you soon,” he said.

“No problem,” Jude said, grabbing and hugging Laja again.

He’d promised Jude to visit first. And he won’t do it until he got a job and left Uncle Dele’s place. It would be embarrassing for his friend to find out he stayed in a brothel.

As he sat in the bus heading towards Apapa, Laja pondered over Jude’s ‘long story.’ At the university, he’d heard the story of a guy who took the desert route journey through North Africa to Europe. His older brother, a Mass Communication undergraduate, had narrated how his brother joined others to travel for days to North Africa in the desperate bid to cross into Europe. He’d said, like cattle, his brother and others had changed hands from one agent and guard to another. They also met tale-bearers who told them discomfoting tales – exhaustion, hunger, thirsts, and of the most dreaded throat-slashing kidnappers, and rebels fighting against the governments in Algeria and Libya. Rebels raid! Rebels rape! Rebels rob! Rebels wring necks. Of course, rebels slash throats.

“They had to travel light and had nothing with them as they’d been assured that they would get whatever they wanted when they reached their destinations. At a resting spot, they paid professional eye-cleaners who used the tips of their tongues to scoop sand out of their eyes. Weird and expensive as it was, my brother said it gave them needed relief from the discomfort of red, prickling sand-filled, and itchy eyes.

“At one point, he said wanted to come back, but there was no way he could do it. He’d gone too far away from home, if was now like a mirage. Moreover, he could not afford the financial and health implication of turning back. He’d wept like a baby and regretted ever leaving home,” Laja recalled his hall mate saying about his brother.

“My brother said relief came when their guard pointed into the sunny hazy distance, telling them it was the border. They’d each set aside well-hidden \$1, 000 they would use to bribe the border guards and pay the smugglers who would take them in boats across the Mediterranean Sea to new lives in Europe. Then, like lightning on a rainless afternoon, he said rattles of gunfire shook them and their hopes. Their guard went dumb as some men in rag-tag uniform rushed towards them. He said he sank into the sand as others scattered everywhere. Some were shot dead; others captured, while some ran back into the endless depth of the desert. He succeeded in crossing from Libya into Canary Island on a dinghy, and then by boat into Spain where he sought asylum,” the narrator had said, saying he would never leave the known for the unknown.

Despite the story, Laja could still not understand why Jude, whom he knew for his doggedness and resilience, would get to Spain, then come back to Nigeria because ‘Europe is a cold place.’ He brought out Jude’s business card and read it all over, then glanced at his watch.

Chapter 14

Two weeks after getting a teaching job, Laja travelled home. Mother and Toke were elated. As usual, Ola was nonchalant.

“You know the Junaids have moved to Ibadan, don’t you?” Toke asked. Before Laja could answer, she continued. “Bola didn’t bother to come and tell us, and you didn’t either.” Her words took a while to make sense to him.

“The Junaids? Yes, ... I ... I knew but I didn’t know the move would be sudden and.... Who told you?”

“It’s a friend of mine who is a student at the technical college. She said her father got another job at Ibadan polytechnic.”

“Yes, he has. He did.”

“I’ll miss Bola. I hope she’ll come and visit us someday.”

“Yes. Maybe ... after a while,” Laja said, biting his lower lip.

“Are you sure everything is okay between you and her? You are not sounding convincing,” Toke said.

“I’m fine, we are fine,” Laja said and walked away from the parlour.

Inside the room, he fell dejectedly on the bed, pained but not surprised that he did not know about the move. It must be because there was no way Bola could get across to him in Lagos. But why didn’t she come to the house or send someone to tell Toke? Maybe she was still angry or didn’t want anyone to know about their argument or the pregnancy. Yes, the pregnancy. Was she still pregnant? He shouldn’t have stayed away for too long after what happened. It was not right to leave her alone in such a condition. But what else could he had done? He was scouting for a job and a letter would have taken over a month to reach her. He had

treated a nice, generous girl who lived for him in a bad way. Now, it was too late to tell Toke; he'd lied to her. It was good he'd secured a job; he must also secure his love. He must go and see her.

One of the security men at Ibadan Polytechnic gate directed him to the staff quarters. The gated houses were old but looked well maintained, with small gardens in front of each. Most of the flowers around the houses had grown too old to be beautiful. They'd become small trees, with few colourful leaves at the tips of their branches. After a couple of misses, he found the right house. Almost immediately after pressing the bell on the wall, there was a movement behind a window curtain. The sense of shock with which he'd received the news of her pregnancy, and of her relocation, was being replaced by curious anxiety of what to expect. He'd resolved that if she was not in, he would wait for her, however long it took. He must see her, talk to her, to ease off the pressure of guilt within him.

From the right edge of the bungalow, an elderly lady whom he believed must be the housekeeper, approached. He greeted her, introduced himself and asked to see Bola Junaid. Without an answer, the woman turned and started walking back into the house. After a few steps, she stopped.

“I'm sorry sir, what did you say your name is?”

“Laja,” he said. As she left, he could see her muttering his name, like a kindergarten child committing a poem to memory. He re-tucked his shirt in, adjusted his belt and brushed down his trousers with his palm. He held to the vertical metal rods of the gate, took in a deep breath, let it out slowly, and waited.

Footsteps. Bola approached, dragging flip-flopped feet on the concrete floor. A flush of excitement rushed over Laja as he stared into her face with a smile. She was expressionless.

“Hi,” she said. The coldness of her demeanour dampened his upbeat spirit. His eyes dashed to her tummy, but he saw no noticeable change. She held to the bars of the gate separating them and gazed at him.

“Hello, Bola. Are you okay?” Laja said.

“You can see I’m fine. What were you expecting to be wrong with me?”

“Nothing. It’s your body language. You don’t look happy to see me.”

“Really? Well,”

“And I didn’t ... didn’t know you were leaving for Ibadan,” he added quickly, expecting her to say she wanted to tell him but there was no way of contacting him.

“If you had shown any interest in knowing anything about me, you would have known,” she said, looking straight into his eyes, then turning to look at the window. “Why ... what d’you want here?”

“Calm down, please. I’m sorry about what happened and for not checking on you all this while. I’ve been in Lagos trying to secure a job and it’s been a gruelling experience.”

Again, a curtain was drawn at the window. Laja followed Bola’s gaze and saw a face staring at them.

“How is.... How are your parents?”

“They are fine,” she said abruptly.

For a moment, he stood looking at her, trying to gauge if she would change her hostile stance.

“Guess what,” he said, smiling. “I got a job!”

“Congratulations.”

He thought her ‘congratulations’ was bland and snappish.

“It’s a teaching job and I’m planning to”

“Is that what you came here to tell me?”

“No. I came to see how you are faring. I would have come to see you earlier, but I thought some good news would be good and help to heal the pain of the last time we met.”

Bola sniggered. “You think you can come at your convenience and ... and everything will be fine, just as they were after what you”

“I said I’m sorry.”

“That’s not enough, Laja. You treated me unfairly after everything we’ve shared. You told me I was flippant on an issue that touched on my life, and you proved by your action that I did not mean anything to you.”

“I’m sorry. It wasn’t meant to” He paused, trying to catch her eyes as she lifted her right leg, then changed to the left. She seemed a different person from the girl he’d known. “Bola, please be reasonable, I did not mean to”

“Isn’t that what I am trying to do? I’m trying to become reasonable and continue with my life without you after my period of stupidity.” Again, she turned to look towards the window, as if she needed approval from there to continue talking to him. “Thanks for coming and ... I need to rest my legs,” she said and turned to go.

As he watched her take slow but insidious steps away from him, a moment of beclouded thinking ran through him. He knew his source of joy was slipping away but did not know what to say or do to stop her. If she was only angry, it was justifiable and he would have understood it, but to be so recalcitrant made her strange.

“What about the baby! At least that”

Bola stopped, turned, and took some quick steps back to the gate. “Go on then, shout it out! Let the whole campus know that I made the greatest mistake of my life. Shout!” Her eyes were seething with resentment.

He regretted his action, but it had brought her back to talk to him. “Okay, I know all this is my fault. I’m sorry. Let’s talk about this, and ... and plan.... Please!”

Bola walked away toward the house without another word. The sound of her flippy floppy footsteps were ominous to Laja who watched open-mouthed in helplessness. His clenched fist hit the gate before he remembered that it was metal. He was deserving of the pain. If she had given him an inkling of this other side to her, maybe things would have been different between them. He would have better absorbed the shock of her other self. Without a buffer, he felt, down to his heart, that he’d just suffered a heavy blow from which he might not recover. He turned to leave.

“Is that the young man?” a male voice said through the window.

Laja halted and looked back to see that Bola, who was almost disappearing behind the building, had stopped too.

“Bola! I said is that your boyfriend?”

Bola stamped her feet. “Yes, Daddy.”

“Tell him to come in. I want a word with him.”

Laja wanted to walk away but thought it would be irresponsible to do so. It was also an opportunity for him to meet her parents, and maybe... maybe they could bring something different to the table. Moreover, whatever might happen could not be worse than the encounter he’d just had with Bola. He turned and walked back to the gate.

“But Dad, you can’t ...”

“Come in young man,” the voice said. “Oh, sorry, someone will come and open the gate for you.”

The lady who answered the bell earlier came and opened the gate. Laja followed her into the compound and into the house.

For a moment, he stood, hands behind his back, his eyes scanning the velvet-themed decor of the sitting room. An old boxy *National* television stood on four legs at a corner. Beside the set, on a well-polished table, a disk player balanced on top of a vinyl record player. On the huge wooden shelf to the right were books of varied sizes arranged in neat rows. A framed family picture sat in the middle, leaning on a vase from which plastic flowers sprouted. At the centre of the room, a bowl of plastic fruits – bananas, oranges, apples, and purple grapes – sat delicately on a table. Laja waited anxiously for his presence to be acknowledged as Bola's parents argued with their daughter.

“Shut up, young lady! You can't stay in my house, eat my food, and dictate to me,” Mr Junaid shouted at Bola.

“I'm not dictating to you, Dad, I'm only saying this is my life and I should be allowed to live it,” Bola said, crossing and uncrossing her legs on the sofa.

“Unfortunately, that so-called life of yours is contending with mine and I cannot stomach it anymore.”

“But”

“No buts! You are Junaid, I'm Junaid. I will not allow your Junaid to destroy mine.”

“How? Well, it's only a matter of time....”

“Of course, it is. You'll soon get stuck with one unfortunate man”

“No! Darling, calm down. Don't curse her, please,” Mrs Junaid said.

“How am I cursing her? All I'm saying is, enough of your two daughters ruining the name I toiled all my life to build. I worked hard to make and keep that name worthy for all of us.”

“Like all parents, darling. Just as any good father would do. Let's leave that and tackle what is before us now,” Mrs Junaid said.

“Okay. It’s okay if that’s all you’ll say to the shameful act of a girl we had so much trust and hope in. It’s okay!”

“I know. She made a mistake, like anyone else, and has accepted her fault, darling. She is still young and was misled. We all make mistakes.”

Laja was confounded. Bola had told him that her mother was a whimsical primary school teacher who always supported whatever her father did. She’d supported his sending her older sister, Vic, to London because they couldn’t tolerate her anymore. They’d claimed she was not doing well at school because she was not focused on study and was walking too close to the edges of promiscuity. The woman sitting in front of him now, with a balding head of scantily permed hair, was different from what he’d expected. She was assertive.

“You know why you are here, young man,” Mr Junaid’s voice jolted Laja. “There’s no need going over the shameful and appalling things you have put my daughter through. All I want to know is the plans you have for the baby when” Mr Junaid said, his eyes fixed on Laja.

“Which baby, darling? Who says there will be any baby?” Mrs Junaid interjected.

“Allow me, woman,” Mr Junaid said, his voice rising. “I said I want to know what your plans are. Or d’you just impregnate a girl and do nothing?” Mrs Junaid pointed at Bola derisively, clapped her hands and hissed. Laja could hear Bola’s faint sobbing.

“I believe you heard me, young man?” Mr Junaid said.

“Yes, sir. I am sorry for everything. I just ... like I told Bola, I just got a job in Lagos, and I”

“Getting a job in Lagos is not a ticket to heaven. What I want are practicalities ... the things you are putting in place for her and ... especially for your child.”

“We’ve not had the opportunity to sit down and talk ... but...”

“You are the man. You should have a plan ... your own plan!”

“I’m sorry sir, I was jobless and” Laja said, pulling at his fingers. His legs were becoming tired.

“But how do poor, jobless people get an erection?” Mr Junaid said, turning to his wife. “It amazes me. Look at him, recently jobless, voiceless, hopeless, yet”

Laja’s looked from the sweating Mr Junaid to Bola. “Sir, I may be poor but I’m not voiceless or hopeless, you are the one not allowing me to talk.”

Mr Junaid jumped to his feet and rushed towards Laja with a pointed finger. His wife held him. “Darling! Calm down. It is this shameless one who couldn’t keep her thighs together that we should blame!” Mrs Junaid said, side-eyeing her daughter. Bola got up and stormed towards the door.

“Come back here! Bola!” Mr Junaid shouted.

Bola exited and banged the door.

“Silly girl! You want to bring a baby into the world while you are still a baby yourself. *Omo jatijati*, useless girl,’ Mr Junaid said and slumped into the sofa beside his wife. Beads of sweat ran down his forehead; his jumper was wet on the chest and at the armpit. Mrs Junaid turned to Laja. “Laja, or whatever they call you, we worked hard to get to where we are today. We trained our children to be decent people. You have embarrassed and brought us shame.”

“You, you” Mr Junaid said, moving to the edge of his seat, then sitting back again, wiping his brow. Laja could hear his wheezing.

“Take it easy, darling, mind your high blood pressure,” Mrs Junaid said and started wiping her husband’s forehead with a napkin.

“I’m very sorry for all the pain I’ve caused your family, sir. All I can say is...is that I will take up the”

“Shut up!” Mr Junaid shouted. “Just shut up. You can’t fathom the shame and pain you have caused us. There is nothing you can do or say to make up for those. Nothing!”

Startled by his outburst at the very moment he was penitent, Laja became angry. He looked from Mr Junaid to his wife. “If you won’t allow me to talk, I might as well leave,” he said.

“Yes! Go, just go! I don’t ever want to see you near my daughter ... or near this house ever. Never!” Mr. Junaid said.

Two months later, Laja stopped at Ibadan on his way to Lagos, longing to see Bola. He’d found their number and called her house, but no one picked the phone. He would dare her father. The housekeeper came to the gate and told him that besides her, no one else was in. As he probed further, begging the woman for information about Bola, she told him she’d overheard Bola’s parents saying she’d lost her pregnancy and would be travelling out of the country to join her sister. She must have gone abroad, she said. Laja thanked the woman and stood dejected, wondering what to do. Could that be the end of their relationship? He wished he had another opportunity to apologise to Bola, even if they still had to go their separate ways. She’d been very good to him. That was not a good way to end a valuable relationship.

Chapter 15

After nearly a year squatting with Uncle Dele, Laja was beaming when he told his host that he would be leaving.

“Really? How have you managed to get two years rent deposit from your teacher salary?”

“I’d saved some money and I got a loan from the school to top it up,” Laja said.

“Good. And where is your new place?”

“It’s at Surulere, just about three kilometres from the school. I’ll be occupying a room in a three-bedroom flat.”

“Congratulations. This calls for a celebration. I’ll be there to warm the house with you when you are ready,” Uncle Dele said as he shook hands with Laja.

“Getting a place of your own is a major achievement for anyone in Lagos,” he added.

The following week, Laja went home to hear of Mother’s deteriorating health. She’d been complaining about pain on her left breast for some time. Toke had told him that on many occasions, she could not go to the market because of her illness. Efforts to make her go to the hospital were unsuccessful. She went to the chemist near the Motor Park and was given some tablets and a jar of balm to rub on the breast. The tablets would numb the pain, only for it to return with a searing viciousness in no time. On one occasion she’d come home saying that a prophet confirmed her fears - it was a witchcraft attack. The prophet had enumerated the things to bring so that he could fight the battle against the witches and restore her health. She bought the items

– candles, coconuts, a bundle of white cloth, a bottle of olive oil – among others.

There was also an amount of money to take along for the things the prophet said only he could procure. She went back with everything requested, convinced that the pains would cease. Months after, there was no improvement. Parts of the breast became swollen, and the pain increased.

“But why didn’t you tell me things were getting this bad before now?” Laja said, turning to face Toke, who sat limply on a bench.

“She warned me not to tell you; she didn’t want you to get worried. Moreover, you’ve not been home for some time now.”

“I was working weekdays and teaching extra-mural classes at weekends. I needed extra money to get accommodation and some other things,” Laja said.

After further discussion, they both agreed that Mother must go to the hospital for checks.

“Even if I go to the hospital, they won’t see anything. Can’t you see that this is the breast which your father’s concubine bit? Don’t you remember?” Mother said, looking from Laja to Toke. “This is not ordinary. That woman injected some witchy poison into my body,” she added.

After persistent appeal, she agreed to get a medical opinion. About a month after, Toke went with her to the hospital.

“A nurse said it was cancer even before Mother saw a doctor. The doctor asked us to come back the next day to see another doctor, a consultant. That one said he could not make a conclusive diagnosis until a test was carried out in Akure. We travelled to Akure two days after. They took some blood and cut a small part of her breast, then said they had to send it to Ibadan for tests before they could be sure of what the problem was,” Toke told Laja on the phone when he called.

A few weeks passed before he could talk to Toke again. She didn't have good news. It was cancer. He went home the following day. Mother seemed more stunned by the cost of the drugs that were prescribed than by the fact that she had cancer. She screamed at the chemist when she heard the prices of the tablets and refused to pay for them, saying her faith was strong enough for a miraculous healing. After Laja went and bought the drugs, she agreed to start using them. "I'm only going to use these things because you've spent a lot of money on them, they are not what I need. I've told you, this is a spiritual problem, it requires a spiritual solution," she insisted.

She grew leaner and frailer. Her once vibrant face, always shiny in the mornings when rubbed with coconut oil, was looking ashy. On a couple of occasions, she had to rush back from the market because she was feeling very ill. She spoke little; when she did, her voice was hoarse, almost inaudible. She frequented the latrine more, and when she wasn't quick enough, she vomited everywhere inside the house. A strange smell covered their home. Gradually, the number of days she went out reduced. Frustrated by not being able to do her buying and selling, she spent her days at home, singing, reading her Bible, and praying. Those were good days. At other times, she moaned in pain, her groaning searing into the hearts of everyone around her. When overwhelmed, they cried.

"I won't die," she said from time to time. "My God cannot allow a witch to have the best of me. Even if I die, it won't be because evil has triumphed over good, it will be because God wants me to come home and rest," she said on one occasion. "Then, all this burden will end, and you can use your money for better things."

Her words hurt him. She had no reason to feel bad or be ashamed that he was paying for her care. She was not a burden, but he wasn't sure how she would react if he told her. He didn't want to upset her more.

Chapter 16

The hubbub surrounding the landlord's visit stirred Laja up. There were loud discussions and sounds of sweeping and dragging of things all over the compound. Every tenant wanted to do things to impress the landlord on his visits. The wall clock showed 10.16 am when Laja got up, rubbed his itchy eyes with the back of his right palm. Red eyes stared back at him in the mirror and his head ached. As he approached the toilet, he saw Floxy, the sister of his flat mate, walking out of the bathroom. He tried to hide the turgidity between his legs without much success. It didn't matter; she had been in his room overnight.

It had taken longer for him to climax, but it was worth it. Her moaning, quivering, and stretching out before going limp, told him that she had orgasmed too. Love doesn't do that, he thought. If so, he would have seen Bola, whom he loved, reaching that peak many times. It was the power of two yearning bodies, willing to explore and explode together, which could make that happen, not the respect, fears or cares of love.

Back in his room, he sniffed out a T-shirt and a pair of jeans trousers from his dump of dirty clothes, put them on, and went outside to sit beside the metal barriers leading to the shared corridor of the flat.

The landlord had complained that it was rude for tenants to be in their rooms whenever he came on his bi-monthly inspections. Any tenant who felt too big to come out and show him some respect should be big enough to search for another accommodation or go build their own house. He arrived with an unusually lean entourage of two of his muscular boys. No one in the main house was owing; he inspected a few things and moved to the backhouse which was an arc of single

rooms. Room One was locked with a huge grey padlock. A note, saying the occupant of the room had travelled and would be back in a couple of months, was posted above the lock.

“When did this man travel?” the landlord asked. His question hung in the air as his eyes dashed through the faces of other tenants. “So, he thinks he’s wise, writing ‘two months’ which could be an eternity.” He peered into his notebook. “Three months arrears. I’ll teach him a lesson,” he said and turned to one of his assistants. “You, if we don’t see him coming to pay by Friday, come back here, cut off his padlock and put on a new one. Lock him out.” At the next door, after heavy bangings on the door, the head of a man with sleepy eyes appeared. He promised to pay his debt the following week.

“Haven’t you got a job yet? Well, you need to search harder. I know you’ve lived here longer than anyone, but you shouldn’t be owing rent. For now, I’ll take your words for it.” The man promptly shut his door. After moving from room to room, the landlord’s face wore a scowl. Only Franca, the tall, slim lady who said she worked nights at her Victoria Island office, was able to pay part of her rent arrears. She handed the landlord a ten-dollar bill. The landlord grinned, turned the note over, and raised it, squinting.

“It’s original, *oga* landlord. I can’t give you fake money. An American visitor to our office gave it to me,” Franca said.

“How much is its value in Naira?”

No one seemed to know.

“I will find out the exchange rate and let you know how much you still owe me,” the landlord said as he pocketed the note.

He called the tenants together and delivered his usual warnings: rents must be paid when due to avoid eviction; no tenant should host a visitor staying for more

than two days without permission. They must keep the property clean always, he added. A murmur rose. He put his finger to his lips. "I can see that the mango tree outside is fruiting. No one should pick any of its fruit, I've warned you about that before." The murmuring grew louder. He put his palm to his shin, shook his head and walked briskly away, his boys hurrying after him. As they passed him, Laja heard one of them reminding the landlord about telling his lawyer to issue quit notices to all the tenants. It was a usual ploy by Lagos landlords to send debtor tenants packing, and make others sign new agreements, with more deposits. Laja wondered how he would get money to pay if that happened. He yawned and went back indoors.

A sound of clanging metal hit a spot somewhere deep in Laja's head and kept reverberating. He rubbed his temple with his fingers. Another set of knocking, which shook the gate to its hinges, got him up from bed. It was past midday on the clock. Through the window, he saw someone standing by the door. He could not see the other person but knew it must be Jude. He picked his strewn clothes from the bed and floor and threw them on the wooden wall hanger, then kicked every other thing under the bed. He smoothed the bedsheet with his hands and released some puffs of air-freshener into the room, waving his hand round to spread the scent. The knocking persisted.

"Who is it?" he said, walking to the door.

"It is who it is," he heard Jude answering.

Laja smiled weakly and proceeded to open the door.

"Dis na prison cell or wetin? Why you lock yourself behind metal gate in front of door?"

"Na wetin Lagos armed robbers turn us into for around here o, prisoners."

“You dey lucky. Prison na guaranteed free food and accommodation,” Jude said. His companion, a man who looked to be in his late twenties, wearing a pair of glasses, chuckled.

“How you dey?” Jude greeted.

“I dey cool, like cucumber. You?” Laja responded, nodding at the other guy with Jude.

“I’m alright. Were you not expecting me? I called and told your school secretary to tell you I would come today.”

“She did. I overslept; I came in late last night and”

“Can’t cheat nature.? Where you go?”

“Na my colleagues de celebrate, I go enjoy wit dem.”

“Ah! You go body-shaking. I never see you dance before o,” Jude said as Laja led the way into his room. “Wetin dem de celebrate?”

“One was naming his child; the other was getting married.”

“Uhm. Lagosians too like party. They are like Siamese twins,” Jude’s friend said as Laja pointed his guests to the sofa and sat on the edge of his bed.

Jude put his right hand on the other guy’s shoulder. “This is Giripi, a friend, I call him GP.”

Laja nodded toward the guy again.

“GP, this is Laja, an old school mate and a good friend. I’ve told you about our escapades at school.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Giripi said, grabbing Laja’s outstretched hand in a firm handshake. After a few minutes, he turned to Jude. “D’you think the car is safe outside?”

“How do I know, man? Ask him,” Jude said, indicating Laja.

“You came with a car?” Laja asked.

“Yes, *my* car,” Giripi said, eyeing Jude.

“Who cares about who owns that old smoky jalopy Peugeot? You no de shame self”

“It should be safe; we don’t have cases of car-stealing around here. Na for night we no de sleep well because of burglars and robbers,” Laja said and stood up. “Wetin make I offer you guys?”

“Wetin you get?” Jude said.

“Beer dey. Whiskey dey, and ... some fruit juice if you”

“Beer’ll be fine, it’s a long weekend and we are just starting, nothing too hard,” Giripi said. Laja brought out three bottles of Heineken from his small fridge and put them on the centre table. From the top of the fridge, he picked two glasses.

“No worry about cup, abeg,” Jude said, “beer dey taste better from inside bottle.”

“Who talk am? Abeg allow teacher drink from him glass if he wants, man, he should know better than you,” Giripi said.

“Just shut up,” Jude said, giving Giripi a sneery look.

Laja grinned. “What do you do for a living?”

“I am a survivor,” Giripi said.

Laja sighed. “Aren’t we all? I mean wetin you de survive on?”

“On food and water, like everyone else,” Giripi said, bursting into laughter.

“Don’t be silly, GP,” Jude said.

Giripi turned to Laja, “Actually, I’m on my own. Or let me say I work with a couple of guys. We do stuff here and there.”

Laja pouted. “Self-employed. That’s great.”

“What’s great? Tell am wetin you and your brother de do, man!” Jude said.

“How dat one be your problem?”

‘I can’t sit here and listen to you call the ugly stuff you guys do ‘great’ and keep quiet. I don’t tell you many times.’”

“What’s wrong with you? What do you mean by ‘ugly stuff?’” Giripi said, mimicking Jude.

“So, what is it? Give me another name for the 419 that you do if not fraud,” Jude said, frowning at his friend.

“Na business, if you no get proper word to explain am. There are many dimensions to business with the aim of making profit,” Giripi said.

“I don’t understand. What are you guys up to?” Laja said, looking from Giripi to Jude.

“You be bastard. I de meet stranger for the first time, and you open your mouth like parrot, blabbing about my life? You de craze?” Giripi said to his friend.

“Oh, shut up! Dis na my guy, not a stranger. Which rubbish life you get?” Jude responded.

“Better than your own, at least.”

Laja wondered if the cat and mouse game he was witnessing between the friends was real. Could they be like this all day? Aside from guided talks in the staff room at the school, he’d no one to banter freely with in a long time. The voices of his guests were rising. They must have been drinking before coming to his place. He got up and increased the volume of the disk player which was playing *Beast of No Nation* by Fela Anikulapo-Kuti. The heavy drumbeats almost muffled the voices in the room.

“Do something about dead conscience man,” Jude continued.

“Which conscience you de talk about? Which conscience, what respect for your brain has a man who believes that you have an oil well in your backyard and you are so foolish and desperate to sell it at a give-away price? What conscience has

a man who believes you are on the verge of transferring millions of dollars which you will share equally with him into his bank account. All he would need do is pay a couple of hundreds into your account as processing fees, and boom, free millions.”

Giripi said, turning to Laja.

“I understand the point you are making but” Laja started.

“Who doesn’t know that individuals don’t sell oil wells in a country with functional government? But no, anything goes in the land of the wild monkeys.” As he spoke, Giripi gesticulated, moving all over the sofa.

“But two wrongs no fit become right? If dem....” Jude said.

“Shut up! Two negative things do create positives. Two stones de light fire; two of opposite sex de procreate. When someone treats you like shit, you too show dem sey you get brains, and balls too. You beat them for dem own game!”

“Even then, my take is that any business which is not clean is dangerous, and whoever is involved is a criminal and”

Giripi moved to the edge of his seat, picked up, then put his beer bottle down. “Don’t mind this mofo, my man. Right? Did he tell you about his experience in Europe when...?”

“No!” Jude said. “Make you tell am about your experience for white man land first”

“See dis foolish man o,” Giripi said, waving his hand from Laja to Jude, “Saudi Arabia na white man land?”

“Wetin be di difference? Di fact be sey you commot your country because you believe sey overseas, or overdessert, dey better.”

“But my own better now. I no go second-slavery journey like you, back to your conquerors, your masters in Europe,” Giripi said.

“Wetin you know? Na Arabs be di first slave dealers! Go study your history well,” Jude said, stood up and turned to Laja, “Abeg, show me your toilet.”

“Thank you, Mr Historic Toilet-goer,” Giripi said, picking his bottle and taking a long sip. Jude followed Laja outside the room.

“My man, forget Jude o, you need courage to make it in life, and courage mean say you go do anytin to become who you wan be,” Giripi said as soon as Laja entered the room again.

“Having money is good, but it is not everything. Is it?”

“No! Money is everything, my man. Poverty fit make person do crime to survive.”

“I know, but it is also good to be rich with peace in one’s heart,” Laja said as he squeezed past the bed and table to bring out another round of beers.

“That’s the problem, you can’t have peace when you don’t have money. Can you see the complexity?”

Jude entered, fumbling with his zipper.

“Here comes the white stooge,” Giripi said, playfully pulling at Jude’s trousers.

“I wish you were beheaded in Saudi Arabia,” Jude said.

“Wishes no be camels; you no fit ride dem. Na now I know sey your kind of friend na real enemy.”

Laja smiled. “So, wetin you de do for Saudi? How did you get in there?”

“I went on hajj and decided to stay back,” Giripi said and belched.

“On hajj? Were you ... are you a Moslem?”

“Not really, I” Giripi said, took a gulp from his bottle, as if he needed to oil his throat before continuing. “There is always a way if you persevere and have

the tools to create a way. I dressed like dem; go mosque with dem, and silently recited *The Lord is my Shepherd* when de recited dem own prayers and chants.”

Jude turned to Laja. “Desperados like him will do anything to get what they want. Imagine the son of a church catechist buying a hajj designee’s passport and claiming to be a staunch Moslem because he wan run commot for dis country.”

“Oh! Shut up. Didn’t you, the son of a chief, hawk drugs and run around Spain for months trying to avoid the police when your fake marriage to a whore was rendered asunder?” Giripi said.

“You dey craze, Alhaji Criminal!” Jude responded.

Giripi did not respond immediately. He fixed his gaze on the wall for minutes, sighed, and sipped his beer. “Contrary to what many believe, Saudi no be bad place o. The problem be sey we too dey many, too many. Guys did all the odd jobs – house cleaning, washed cars; porting jobs in the hotels – everything dirty but legal. But there were others who didn’t mind goring any ox’

“Like you? You suck, Alhaji!” Jude said as he stood up, stretched, checked his watch, and threw a playful punch at his friend. “If we don’t leave now, we will be late for our other appointments.”

Laja followed his guests out of the house. As they passed the main gate, Jude stopped.

“Just a minute, GP. Let me talk to my pal here.”

“If you take too long, I will leave you to trek home,” Giripi said and walked out of the gate.

“Laja, things are getting tough around her. I am planning to go back to Europe, and I need money.”

Before Laja could speak Jude continued. “There is a remedial and university preparatory school that I run. I want to sell it as soon as possible. Since you are a teacher, I believe you’d be able to manage it well and make a lot of money.”

Laja didn’t know how to respond immediately but from what he’d gathered teaching at a couple of extra-mural schools, the proprietors made good money.

“You dey interested?”

“Let me think about it and get back to you. Where di place dey and how much you wan sell am?”

“Na Apapa. For you, my paddy, na just one fifty. And that’s also because I want a quick sale.”

“Ha! One hundred and fifty thousand naira? Where d’you expect me to get that kind of money from?”

“I don’t know. Where d’you think I got the money to start it? By doing all it took, that’s how,” Jude said and took a couple of steps away. “And you go enter new agreement with the landlord o.”

“I’m Well, I’ve got your address, I go come see you, and we go talk more.”

“That must be as soon as possible. I know many people that will jump at the opportunity, and”

Laja did not want to make promises, knowing it would be difficult raising such an amount of money, but an avenue to earn extra money was tempting. “Okay, keep it for me, for old time’s sake. When I get the full details, I’ll see what I can arrange.”

Jude shrugged and left to join Giripi who was waiting in the car, a white Peugeot 505. Laja waved as they drove off in a cloud of smoke and dust.

Chapter 17

Two weeks after, Laja went home. A few minutes after arriving, Ola asked to speak to him alone. He was surprised. It must be important as Ola rarely had anything to discuss with him. Was it about Mother, or Toke? Has he found a girlfriend and needed advice? Maybe he wanted to perform better at school and needed guidance.

“Please, I want you to help me with fifty thousand naira,” Ola said immediately they entered their room. It was as if the words were hot, and he quickly spat them out of his mouth.

Laja chuckled. “Fifty thousand? That’s my salary for about six months!”

Ola looked away, as if he’d known he would be disappointed and was regretting asking.

“What do you want that type of money for? I mean, what ...”

“I want to get an invitation into the junior national team, and ... and a man who knows the coach said if I can get the money, he would help me to....”

Laja stared back and Ola. “The national team?”

“The junior national team. They select from every state....”

“But that’s a lot of money, and Even if you bribe the man, the coach, there is no guarantee that he would keep his promise,” Laja said. He was surprised that Ola was talking about the national team. He didn’t know that he was even good enough for a good club. All he wanted was for him to get good education and he’d regarded Ola’s commitment to football as something that would past.

“Please! Many players are doing it. It is a good avenue to get to a better club and opportunity to travel abroad.” Ola pleaded.

“Abroad?” Surprise pushed the word out of Laja’s mouth. So, Ola was not flippant, he had a plan with his football! “I’m sorry, I don’t have that type of money. I wish I could help.” He wanted to add that he would have loved to help if he could and that he was proud that Ola had such a good idea, but Ola stormed through the door.

The following morning, Laja opened his eyes to see that Ola’s mattress on the floor was empty. Where was he?

“You woke up late. He must have gone for his football practice,” Toke told him.

“Seems he’s bent on this football of his ...,” Laja said, stopping short of mentioning the request of his brother.

“That’s because he believes it’s the only opportunity he has in life. It’s good if that’s what he wants but he’s always coming home with injuries. He’s your only brother, talk to him.”

“Is he? What of our other brother ... your half-brother?” Laja asked.

Toke clapped. “Ha! That reminds me. Did Mother tell you that he came here?”

“Who?”

“Eyitemi, of course. He wants us to attend his wedding.”

“Really?”

“Yes, o.” I’d thought he would marry a white girl with the way he put up his nose when he came here,” Toke said.

“Eyitemi came to invite us to....”

“Yes. Ask Mother,” Toke said as Mother walked into the parlour, looking dour.

“Is it true ...?” Laja said and watched Mother who waved a hand in response. She moved one foot slowly after the other, as if reluctantly, toward the armchair which had become her reserved seat.

“He didn’t contact us since he came here acting like someone who didn’t want anything to do with us but now thinks we must come to his wedding?” Laja said, turning to Toke.

“I think he just wants to use us, to present us as his family before his in-laws, not to reconcile,” Toke said.

“He’s got family on his father’s side; they should attend his wedding, not us,” Laja said, stood up and left the room.

Outside, he felt the unexplainable aura which always made festive seasons feel different. On the street, a woman with a bag on her head, a baby on her back and a boy of about five, hurrying after her, walked up the road, holding a tied-up hen in her left hand. Laja recalled running after the Catholic church’s procession which imitated the passion of Jesus Christ as he carried his cross on the way to Golgotha at Easter celebrations when he was younger. Mock insults and beatings of ‘Jesus’ were a major part of the religious spectacle. In a particular year, some Moslem boys had infiltrated the procession and started beating the man who was playing Jesus for real. They’d beaten him so badly that he had to be taken to hospital and another Jesus volunteer took his place.

At those church processions, adherents shouted: ‘Behold, the lamb of God, who takes away the sins of humanity,’ at every point. Maybe Eyitemi deserved forgiveness too. But wrong had he done than finding himself in an unpleasant situation which he had no control over? Laja went back inside.

Mother sat looking forlorn. She’d changed so much. Her once loud unquestionable voice was now like the whimpering of a child.

“What d’you think about this situation, Mother?”

“What?” Mother said, turning suddenly to Laja, as if stirred from sleep.

“I said what is your opinion about this ... this Eyitemi marriage invitation ... situation?”

Mother sighed. A moment of silence followed.

“What can I say other than ... that ...that it would give me joy to see you attending? He is one of you, from this same womb of mine,” she said, slightly patting her tummy. Laja felt pity for her.

“Okay. We’ll do whatever you want, if it makes you happy. Not for him, but for you,” Laja said, turning and nodding toward Toke for support. She did not respond but stood up and stomped out of the room.

“Toke!” Laja called.

“I knew that would happen. She hasn’t told you the full story.”

“What story?”

Mother pouted, moved toward the edge of the armchair, and adjusted her wrapper between her legs. She grimaced and sat back again. Laja stared at her, eyebrows raised.

“You remember that boy who impregnated her?”

“Yes. Yes?”

“He wants to marry her now.”

“Marry who? Toke?”

“Yes. And she has agreed to it.”

“No!”

“Yes. I’ve told her to think deeply about it. A boy who denied making her pregnant, abandoned her, and whose mother treated us like nobodies, will not be a

reliable husband, but she won't listen to advice. She said I did worse and wasn't qualified to advise her."

"But he can't just walk in and out on her and"

Mother coughed. "Another problem is that the day his mother has chosen for the wedding, is the same day as Eyitemi's wedding."

"What? They can't treat her like a dog, then come back to pick and choose. Are they mad?"

"I told her that traditionally, it's the bride's family which makes major decisions in a wedding plan, but she said I don't know anything about marriage since I didn't have one and that she had already agreed to their plans."

"Agreed to what rubbish plans? That's not how things are done."

"According to her, the boy will be travelling abroad soon, so, his mother wants the wedding done quickly on the chosen date which they said they've already given to their invited guests"

"Without getting our consent?"

Toke burst into the parlour. "I don't need your consent or support. I am marrying the man I love and none of you can impose your ...your wish on us." She turned from Laja to Mother. "Were you thinking I'll continue my life this way, taking care of you here without any future." She twitched, blinked, and swallowed hard, trying to suppress her emotion, but she soon started to cry.

Laja did not think that she would want to set eyes on the boy and his parents after what she'd gone through. Saying that she did not want anyone's support pricked him. He'd thought Mother's illness was making them become closer again. However, after his experience with Bola and her family, he'd reached the conclusion that love and loving often preclude reason. Of course, the situation was totally different from that between him and Bola. He'd made a mistake but did everything

he could to rectify the situation, but her parents had made things worse. They stood by their daughter; he would stand by his sister too.

“He’s a good man. It’s only that his mother has been controlling him. We have agreed that we won’t let her continue,” Toke said, gasping.

“It’s okay. I was only surprised that with the way they treated us, especially you, when”

“But he has apologised. It was all because he was afraid of the responsibility of being a father, and instead of his mother encouraging him to be responsible, she asked him to deny me. That’s what happened,” Toke said. “Even now, the wedding is only because he insisted that he loves and wants to marry me. His mother does not want him to, but she has no choice when he stood his ground.”

“So, what happens after you get married since you said he’s traveling abroad.”

Toke turned to her brother. “I’ll stay here until he comes back to take me with him. I won’t ... I can’t live with his mother. She’s mean.”

Mother got up, her face contorting with every move. “So, it’s all his mother’s fault for denying and abandoning you, eh?” she said and chortled. “Look at me, ain’t I a good example of a woman who has been destroyed by love? Be careful.” As she exited, each of her footsteps seemed to be engraving her words on the floor of time.

Chapter 18

Jude asked Giripi to slow down as they approached a police checkpoint about ten miles before Ibadan Toll Gate. As they got closer, a policeman near the road beckoned them to drive on.

“They are showing me some respect,” Giripi said as he changed gear.

“Who you be? Why didn’t the other three who’d stopped us show you same respect? Can’t you see that they are more interested in the commercial bus behind us than some guys in an old car who would probably not *roger* but start speaking English to them?” Jude responded.

Laja and Uncle Dele, who were at the back of the car, looked behind to see the police officer in the middle of the road, directing a minibus to park.

“Fly in a spider’s web,” Jude said.

“He should have shown them the hand before they stopped him. He’ll have to pay more now that he’s made to park,” Uncle Dele said.

“You are right. He’s not smart,” Giripi agreed.

Uncle Dele stretched and yawned. “Yeah. He’ll be paying for not quickly showing the knuckle, for wasting police time, and for taking up a parking space which they would have used for other vehicles.”

“Bros, you seem to know these guys well,” Giripi said.

“Yes, I do. I work with people ... people who”

Laja’s heart skipped. He wanted to tell Uncle Dele to stop, that his friends did not necessarily have to know what he did for a living.

He had not planned to go to Owo for Toke's traditional wedding. When her boyfriend's family changed the date, he was relieved, and asked Jude, Giripi and Uncle Dele to come to Ibadan with him to witness Eyitemi's wedding.

Giripi braked hard to avoid hitting a young boy who dashed across the road, carrying a tower of bread loaves at Ibadan Toll Gate. Giripi rolled down the window. "Bastard!" he shouted.

Untroubled by the close shave, the boy threw a loaf of bread inside a Peugeot station wagon which was pulling into the road, then ran after it, pointing. A currency note flew out of the vehicle's window. The boy put his stock down and pursued the note which the wind was blowing here and there.

Giripi restarted the car which had stalled. "Underage hawkers everywhere," he said under his breath.

Jude hissed. "I wonder why their parents think the little money they make selling on the express road is more important than their children's lives."

"It's survival, my brother. D'you know that some of these kids provide for their families and sponsor themselves at school?" Uncle Dele said.

Giripi turned the inner mirror to catch a glimpse of Uncle Dele. "You're right, but why marry if you can't take care of your kids," he said and readjusted the mirror with his right hand as he changed to the faster lane.

"Take the bridge!" Laja said.

Giripi made a sharp swerve to the lane he'd just left and into the exit lane leading to the overhead bridge. A deep, train-like hooting and a rush of wind made them freeze as a truck zoomed closely past their car.

"You should have told me earlier. Making sharp turns like that is dangerous," Giripi said, "we are lucky that monster didn't crush us."

“I’m sorry. I told you we would climb the first overhead bridge after the Toll Gate.”

“And you expect me to keep that in the first burner of my head? Even if I did, I don’t know anywhere around here, man.”

“I’m sorry. Now, drive straight. This road should lead us to a place called Challenge, where the reception hall is located. It’s called Meridian Events Hall.”

The hall was almost half-full when they arrived. Uncle Dele wanted them to sit closer to the front row as members of the groom’s family, but Laja insisted they sat at one of the less filled middle rows. Front seats were mostly reserved for special guests, he didn’t want them to be asked to vacate their seats for others by ushers who did not know him. Moreover, he saw Mr. Junaid sitting together with Dr Olivoli, who looked uncomfortably funny in native attire. He was glad they didn’t seem to see him; he wouldn’t want to meet either of them.

All eyes turned to the back of the hall when the Master of Ceremony announced the arrival of ‘the latest couple in town - Mr. and Mrs. Olaposi.’ Laja returned to the *Ovation*, a celebrity magazine he was flipping through when he saw that the couple was still at the entrance of the hall. He’d always loved colourful people’s magazines. The pictures were so clear and detailed that he wondered which brand of camera was used in snapping them. He was the last to stand up in his row when the Master of Ceremony requested everyone to stand in honour of the approaching couple.

Laja felt a stirring as he saw Eyitemi looking dapper, grinning in a tuxedo but his footsteps were clumsy. If they were closer as brothers, he would probably be right behind him, dancing, and urging him on. His gaze turned to the bride. He

strained his eyes, looked away, then back. He couldn't believe it. The bride looked familiar.

“Bola?” Laja shouted before he could stop himself.

Eyes turned to the direction of the voice. Bola missed a step and stumbled. Eyitemi quickly grabbed her. The maid-of-honour pulled up her trailing dress and asked if she was okay. Mrs Junaid's stunned eyes locked into Laja's. She spoke a few words into her daughter's ears and rushed towards the front.

Laja sat dejectedly, supporting his head with his left hand. Almost immediately, Jude, who seemed to have identified the bride too, tapped him, “Yes. That's Bola nau? Your Bola! I thought ...”

Laja got up and made for the exit. Jude whispered to Giripi who got up and followed his friend.

“What's happening?” Uncle Dele asked repeatedly as he rushed after them.

“Is Laja okay? Talk to me.”

“He's fine, we just have to leave now,” Jude said.

Giripi opened the car's back door and Laja slouched in. It was steaming inside. Uncle Dele rolled down the window, still asking what had happened. Before they could move, Mrs. Junaid, accompanied by four other women, approached the car. She removed her falling headgear and tied it around her waist.

“You again? You thought you'd destroyed Bola's life, she picked up the pieces and you still came here to ruin her happy day? You are evil,” Mrs Junaid shouted, shaking her fist at Laja.

“Roll up the window, Bros!” Giripi said.

Uncle Dele was alarmed. “In this heat? Who is this woman and what is happening here?”

“Just do as he said and lock the door, Bros,” Jude shouted, “we’ll explain when we get out of here.”

Giripi tried to reverse but the women and onlookers had gathered around the car and some of them started hitting it. As he clutched and throttled at the same time, the noise sent the people scattering. He lunged the car forward, making Mrs Junaid and her friends jump back, cursing. With them out of the way, Giripi made a u-turn and sped towards the main road.

There was curious silence in the car as they drove along Challenge Road until they reached the roundabout on Lagos Road where Giripi stopped for fuel. Uncle Dele bought two bottles of water and gave one to Laja. Giripi returned and asked if anyone wanted soft drinks.

“Please let’s go. What I need now is a strong drink, not these soft stuffs,” Jude said. “You can stop anywhere you see a sign for hard stuff, man.”

After they drove for about five minutes, Giripi pulled up at a hotel. They went into the bar. Immediately they sat down, Uncle Dele turned to Laja. “But what happened. What is happening....”

Laja exhaled. “That was Eyitemi, my mother’s first son, my half-brother, getting married to my girl, Bola, the one I told you about. Uncle, my brother is getting married to my girlfriend,” Laja said, his voice shaky. “I mean not just any girl, but someone who” He stopped before he could say that she once carried his baby.

“That’s an abomination! But does she know? Does your brother know?” Uncle Dele said, turning from Laja to Jude, Giripi, and back to Laja.

“That was her mother harassing us,” Laja added.

“I’m saying, does your girlfriend and his ... her ... her husband ... your brother know?”

“I’m not sure. I don’t think so. I never knew I had a brother, and she never knew I had one before we”

“But ...but how on earth did they meet?”

Laja wanted to speak but stopped as a lady in white and black approached to take their orders. They all ordered beers.

“They must have met in London or Dublin. I really don’t know.

“Thank gracious your mother was not there to witness that. It’s unheard of, ridiculous.”

Laja wished Mother was there to witness what her past had brought upon his present, and that of her other son, Eyitemi. He wished she felt the pain he was feeling, that she was the one at the centre of the harassment from Bola’s mother and her retinue. It was hardly Eyitemi or Bola’s fault. Mother’s love triangle was the genesis of the confusion of today. Her fault was in not telling them, her children. If she had, he would have known that he had a brother called Eyitemi. Bola would have met him, or at least seen his picture. Mother’s openness would have stripped the past of its powers of shame and pain and prevent it from poisoning the present just as it had done.

The bartender brought their orders.

“You don’t need to brood about what has happened, man, that’s life for you,” Jude said across the table.

“What’s the big deal about a woman you said you’ve used all these years anyway? Your brother will be eating your leftover,” Giripi said.

Laja was disgusted. Though Giripi was only trying to make him feel better, limiting his relationship with Bola to sex and comparing it to food made him feel worse.

Uncle Dele poured the remaining beer in the bottle into his glass. “All I will say is that you must seek a way of making up with your brother. A woman can walk in and out of a man’s life any day, but one cannot acquire a brother in a day. Blood is thicker than water.”

Laja wanted to tell his uncle that though he and Eyitemi shared the same womb, they were never like brothers. Doing so, however, would mean telling stories which were better kept to himself.

As he narrated the incident at the wedding the following week at Owo, Mother’s mouth remained eagerly open. Toke sounded pained. “She was such a nice girl. How could she do such a thing?”

“But she didn’t know. It was not her fault,” Ola, who had grown fond of Bola, said.

Laja didn’t want the conversation to go too far as it would lead to Mother. She was already crying. “If you were meant to be together, nothing in the world would have separated you,” she said. For Laja, her comment was like poking at a healing wound. Besides the assumptions of fate, was there anything to prove that he and Bola were not meant to be together? And without the rupturing influence of Eyitemi, was there anything to disprove the possibility that Bola’s feelings might one day travel back to him? He couldn’t ask the questions on his mind. Mother was sick and it might hurt her if he challenged her reasoning.

The Ibadan incident haunted Laja for long. Could necessity be a cover for immorality? Who decides what counts as the immoral? Was ignorance, as proof of

innocence, good enough to assuage all hurts and push restitution aside? From the questions he asked, more emerged, to which he could not find satisfactory answers.

One afternoon, he stopped on the overhead bridge at Ilasa, and watched vehicles run past below on the expressway. For a moment, the unending traffic sounds seemed to race with the troubles in his troubled mind, From the chaos emerged an ease that he could not explain, but it was therapeutic enough as it took his mind off his troubles. The following day, a Saturday, he went again. From then, he went to the bridge anytime he was free and felt he needed the calm that the traffic noise gave him.

To the left of the bridge was *Champion House*, a three-storey publishing house. Beside the building, a string of shops selling food, drinks, water purifying chemicals and vehicle spare parts, stretched behind a refuse dump which took over half of the road when full. On the opposite side, to the right of the bridge, a road ran through dilapidated traders' shops, sheds, and stands of women who roasted yam, plantain, and maize. In the heat, the women used pieces of carboards to fan the embers, themselves, and to wave off flies which tried to perch on their merchandise. From to time to time, they used the edges of their wrappers to wipe sweat off their faces and necks. The road, which led to the Lagos University Teaching Hospital, also had a bye-pass to Mushin, an area known for bloody cult groups' clashes and many aspiring Fuji musicians.

One afternoon, a woman who displayed her wares on the bridge hissed and asked why Laja jumped over her goods to reach the bridge railings.

'Don't you know it is illegal to display your goods here on the bridge?' Laja said.

“So what? If you don’t want me to sell here, then give me money to rent a shop, Mr. Too-Know,” the woman responded.

“This is a pedestrian bridge, not a marketplace.”

“Who you be self? You be policeman, or council?” another woman, standing next to the first one said, eyeing Laja derisively.

Soon, some other women, moved closer and crowded around Laja. Was he ready to rent shops for them since he wanted them off the bridge? One asked.

“Does he look like someone who has enough money to take care of himself talk less of taking care of others?” a teenage girl among them replied.

“Na you sabi pass council wey dey collect money from us every day?” another woman, standing akimbo said. “Abi no be craze dey make person come here to come dey look express road?” She hissed and walked away to attend to a customer bent over her wares.

Laja looked on, realizing that he shouldn’t have started an argument with brusque Lagos’ street traders. He’d misjudged their reaction, thinking if he said they were breaking the law they would be afraid. If they’d bribed local council enforcers to allow them sell on the bridge, who was he to ask questions of them?

He stood uncomfortable, gazing at vehicles approaching and speeding past under the bridge, but seeing little. Deflated, he walked away in quick steps.

Kunmi, a teacher of Combined Sciences and a friend, had no consolation for him when Laja narrated the encounter the following day at work.

“If street vendors now insult you, then your situation is getting worse.”

“What situation?” Laja asked.

“The situation of your mental health. You sometimes talk to yourself and laugh for no reason. Has no one else told you about it? This is a typical depressive drift into insanity,” Kunmi said.

Laja stopped. “You are not saying I’m mad, are you?”

“You may call it whatever you want but you are not acting normal fighting women on the streets, man.”

“How many times? And what is ‘normal’ to you?”

“Well, normal as in normal, man. Not some funny excesses that defy reason and logic.”

Laja chuckled. “You’re using what I told you against me? Is putting unruly women in their place what you call a ‘fight?’ Or what is your definition....”

“That’s what I’m saying. Justifying strange actions against the whole reasonable world is what is called insanity!”

“Reasonable indeed! Ranting of a frustrated teacher?”

“Well, you better face reality before it’s too late, man. You are drifting, mentally!” Kunmi said as he entered the Staff Room and went to his seat.

Laja walked to the large timetable on the wall and scanned through, then took a cursory glare at Kunmi before sitting down. Could he be telling the truth? But he didn’t feel different or insane. Was he not possible to know if he were mad? He recalled that on his way home after the bridge encounter, he’d wondered why he went there in the first place. He could have gone elsewhere, somewhere quiet, and peaceful if he needed to clear his head.

Chapter 19

The throbbing music from within the house must have drowned the sound of the doorbell. Laja depressed the bell again. A young man in T-shirt opened the door and led into a compact living room. On a shelf, the source of the music, a compact disc player, sat innocently on a wooden shelf. The speakers on the floor were vibrating so much that a framed portrait of Jude and Giripi, leaning against the shelf seemed to be dancing to the music.

A football match had just finished on the *Flatron* television set in the middle of the shelf. The fans of the winners were celebrating, thrusting their faces into the camera.

“Na home teams de always win for Nigeria, or else di referee go enter trouble,” Jude said as he entered the room.

“Na so o! How you dey?” Laja said.

“I’m fine. How are you?”

“I dey okay, besides the hustle for survival.”

As they shook hands, Jude pulled Laja up from his seat and hugged him, patting him on the back. “I hope you don get over wetin happen dat day.”

Laja shrugged. “Wetin man go do? I no go fit de live for past nau. Thanks for going with me, and for all your kind words.”

“Small things. Wetin friends dey for?” Jude said as he reduced the volume of the music, ejected the playing CD, and slotted in Lagbaja’s *Baby Tani Ko Fe Wa*.

“Just move on, man. Na so life be.”

Laja exhaled loudly. ‘Plenty things to bother about for Lagos. If I no move, Lagos stress go move me.’

Jude smiled. "I know. Lagos na di world capital of stress."

"No wonder everyone wan check out," Laja said.

Jude cleared his throat. "But no be only stress, many people wan commot for different reasons."

The boy who opened the door earlier came in with a tray of drinks. One after another he placed them on a side table beside Laja.

"Thanks," he said, beaming. "Wow! How many I fit drink?"

"As many as you wish," Jude said, checking his watch. "Today na Saturday, the guys won't be at *The Consultancy* till about 1.00 pm. We've got some time to kill."

"But Lagos traffic is unpredictable; the earlier we leave the better."

"I know, but na straight bus from here. It's only about 11.30 now. Drink, man."

As Laja opened a bottle, the drink gushed out, splashing everywhere.

"You go de smell of beer for the rest of the day," Jude said and threw a napkin at Laja. He wiped his clothes and the table, then took a sip.

"You said people leave the country for other reasons ..."

"Yes. If na for Lagos stress alone, I for no commot Nigeria. It was more of pressure from people, especially my dad.

"Really?"

"Yes nau. Truly, after my younger brother commot, before his graduation, some of my friends follow. I started feeling lonely. But when my dad got involved, saying there was no hope for young men in this country, I come de think am. I say I no get money, he offered to sell his second house to raise some money. Considering how he loved that house; I knew he wanted me to go and wouldn't be happy if I didn't."

“He must have been expecting you to send some money home and that must have put more pressure on you...,” Laja said.

“Not really. Though I sent him a Mercedes, for him it wasn’t just about money, car or another house. It was more of a class thing. He wanted to be like some of his friends who had children abroad. When they meet, the talk about their children living among white people was a major topic. For them, it was status symbol,” Jude said as he opened another drink for himself.

“So, wetin really happen? I don hear different stories about”

“Like the story that I ran mad?”

“No! Not that”

“But I almost did, it’s nothing to be ashamed about. Every little frustration or depression is ‘madness’ in our society.”

“I know....”

“Imagine you leaving everything behind. Travel go another country go start all over again, the hassles, the discrimination and struggle for survival. Then, one day all your plans and hopes, crash right before you and you are not able to do anything to stop it.”

“Uhn! Na true. It is a terrible experience to go through. So, there was absolutely no way of staying back.”

“Stay back where? The moment they arrested us, they drove us around in something like a *Black Maria*, as if they wanted us to see Madrid very well for the last time. We ended up in a deportation camp where many others were waiting. Ordinarily, you could call a lawyer and papers could be filed that would keep you there for more time. In our case, it was different. The next morning, we were boarding a plane out of Spain!”

“*Lo-Ruhamah!* Operation No Mercy!”

Jude exhaled loudly. “Even those who had legal stay were not given the chance. One of my flat mates was shouting that he had a resident permit; they collected his passport and tore it into pieces before our very eyes.”

“That’s inhuman.”

“That’s what happens when you are unlucky enough to come across racist enforcement officers. Dem no go give you opportunity to prove anything.”

“What injustice!”

“Injustice? Worse happened to me here, in my own country.”

“How?”

Jude took another gulp from his beer bottle and ran his left hand over his head.

“After I landed in Lagos still wearing the pyjamas I was arrested in, Nigerian Immigration detain me for over one week.

“But why?”

“The bastards wanted dollars. I ask dem if na dollars dem de spend for Nigeria.”

“Dollar for what?”

“Bribe, of course. They said I could be jailed for shaming the country abroad. So, they wanted their share of the dollars I’d made.”

“Where dem think sey somebody we dem deport go get money bribe dem?”

“I tried to explain to them, but they wouldn’t reason with me. That was when I lost it. I couldn’t stand coming back to nothing only to get embroiled in blackmail. I wanted to beat all of them, make them feel the pain I carried. They took me somewhere, saying I needed psychiatric help. My dad later came to get me released. To this day he hasn’t told me how much he had to fork out to get me out.”

“Poor man.”

“I didn’t want anyone to know that I’d been deported. The plan was to hang out with my friends, contact some of the guys over there to sell some of my stuff, add some money to whatever they sent me, and go back to Europe or the US.”

“So, did they?”

“Ahh! Dat one na anoda story. I called many times, wrote letters, but never got one shirt back, not a peseta to this day. Guys can be mean, very mean. That’s the reality; dogs eat dead dogs, and sometimes dogs kill other dogs for food,” Jude said. He shook his beer bottle, then drained the remaining content.

“So, why are you planning to go again after all these”

“If you commot Nigeria and you come back, you no go fit into the setting here again, I tell you. Difficult to explain, but it’s the truth, you won’t just fit in,” Jude said, looking pensive. “Do you want more beer?”

“I don drink three already. You can’t kill me with beer, abeg,” Laja said looking at the clock.

Jude stood up. “I believe you’ve sorted out the money and other plans”

“E no dey easy. Even after selling some of my stuff, I couldn’t get all the money, but Uncle Dele, the man that went to Ibadan with us, has promised to lend me the remaining.”

Jude shrugged. “Okay. Let me dress up so that we go.”

They arrived at *The Consultancy*, a two-storey building on School Road in Ajegunle, just before 2 pm. Laja took in the surroundings as he followed Jude into the dark corridor leading to the stairs. Upstairs was better lit. Jude had explained that extra mural classes were held for students who’d failed the Junior or Senior school certificate examinations. Students preparing to write or rewrite the Joint Admissions

and Matriculations Board Examination (JAMB) for admissions into universities, polytechnics, and colleges of technology, also went through preparatory coaching. Most paid their fees monthly but few, with affluent parents or sponsors, paid fully on registration. Their fees, however, were only enough to pay the rent, staff, teachers, and keep the centre afloat. The most money came from ‘consultations’ with the computer and collating officers at the West African Examination Council (WAEC), and at the JAMB headquarters at Ikoyi who were on the payroll of *The Consultancy*. They gave high grades and scores which allowed *The Consultancy* candidates to secure admissions into higher institutions of the choice. The scores were also embedded into the organization records in case of any investigation.

Jude introduced Laja to Helen who was the administrative officer, receptionist, secretary, and the face of *The Consultancy*. She knew what to do and who to contact all over Lagos.

“She’s an asset and has been doing this for some time; she knows everyone and keeps her ears to the ground,” Jude told Laja.

There was also Emeka, a teacher of English Language and Literature from a school on the complex where Laja worked. Students called him *Orul* because of the way he pronounced ‘oral’ when teaching pronunciation. He’d been committed to *The Consultancy* and had shown interest in taking over until Jude asked Laja. There was also the cleaner, who kept grinning and genuflecting as she was introduced to Laja.

After leaving *The Consultancy*, Jude said they had to go meet a guy called Lati, whom he described as a ‘computer wizard’ on Lagos Island. He worked at WAEC but had a personal office at Oluwole where Jude said he made thousands of naira daily. “The guy is just good, men,” Jude had said, nodding his head in conviction.

The minibus they boarded ran into a long traffic jam on Apogbon Descent. Jude, with his shirt stuck to his back, kept moving his body, adjusting his sitting position, and fanning himself with a copy of *The Post Express* newspaper. The driver had removed his shirt and was cursing at everything and everyone as the vehicle inched on. The conductor's upper body gleamed; he had just a pair of boxers on. The body odour in the minibus was intermittently overpowered by the stench from the lagoon when the wind blew.

"Conductor, please open the windows wider, I am sweating terrible here," a lady requested.

"What? A charming lady like you can't be sweating," the driver said. He adjusted the inner mirror to see the lady. "Only horses sweat; men perspire, and ladies glow. You are only glowing, dear," the driver said, looking through the mirror to see the lady smiling.

"Should we get down and take Okada?" Laja asked Jude as many commercial motorcycles zigzagged past the minibus with skillful but dangerous manoeuvres.

"Okada *ke*? Those motorcyclists are too careless. You don't want to end at the orthopaedic hospital. Do you? We are almost there. Lati will understand," Jude said and resumed fanning himself.

"See them, see them! These are the people who complicate the traffic," a man sitting beside them said, indicating street hawkers who weaved around stagnant vehicles and ran after moving ones, to advertise and sell their wares. They displayed miniature TV antennae; loaves of bread; sachets of 'pure' water; car seat covers; CDs and DVDs; insecticides; mouse traps and rat poison. The classy among them, who gravitated towards expensive-looking cars, sold bottled water, tinned fish and vegetables, perfumes, imported underwear and glossy magazines. They pushed their wares through open windows or knocked on wound-up ones, smiling, and bowing.

“Pure water!” a lady in the minibus called out. Half a dozen young boys and girls rushed forward, chanting, “Yes? Pure water sir! Water Ma! This one *na* original! Mine is very cold, customer! NAFDAC certified spring water sir!” Others shouted, “Cold Coke and Fanta! Chilled juice. Yes?” Their persistence was pleasantly intimidating.

“If you pour water for my body, I go whack your face o!” Jude shouted at those near him by the window. None of the hawkers seemed to have heard his warning as they struggled to hand the lady a sachet of water through the window. An Iya Ibeji, begging with twin children, sweated it out among the traders with a crying, unkempt child of about a year, hanging from her side. The other child, strapped to her back, appeared dehydrated in the sweltering heat.

“They don’t look identical,” the woman who’d just bought water said, as she gulped and then threw the empty water container through the window. “I know twins don’t necessarily have to be identical, but these one don’t look alike in any way,” she added.

“People hire babies to beg for alms these days. You can’t trust anyone in Lagos,” a man at the back said.

The minibus passed a parked car, with its bonnet open and three men and a woman around it.

“Do you want to buy a drink?” Laja asked Jude, who was leaning to the left to reach his trousers’ pocket.

“Umh, but don’t worry,” Jude said as he struggled, bending from side to side. Laja brought out a note from his shirt pocket and pushed it into Jude’s hand. The hawkers swarmed around their window again as Jude called out. After pressing his palm hard against a couple of the bottles to check if they were cold, Jude took two bottles of Coca Cola from a teenage girl. Her clothes were so drenched and glued to

her body that everything she was wearing underneath her gown was visible. She jogged to keep pace with the minibus, delicately balancing her bowl of assorted drinks on her head. Jude asked her for change before giving her a fifty naira note. It took her hands about a minute of rummaging through a money purse tied around her waist to get the right change. As traffic started to flow better, the minibus gradually lost the hawkers on the approach to the access road to Marina.

“You see? Can you see that? The mad driver would have taken everyone in that bus down into the lagoon. That’s why the road is jammed,” the woman in the front row, a trail of water visible down the side of her mouth, said, pointing. A *Moolue* bus had rammed into the concrete partition between the road and the walkway. Only the iron rods from the cracked concrete were preventing it from reaching the walkway where some men stood, their fishing rods pointing into the lagoon about fifty metres below. One of them held up a string of shiny scrawny fish and a struggling crab: “Fresh fish! Fresh fish for sale!” he called out.

The bus discharged all passengers at Marina. Jude led Laja through the maze of the busy Lagos Island streets and soon they reached Oluwole. A couple of Area Boys appeared and swaggered along them, begging for money.

“Omo Queen. Oko Diana. Handsome boys, imported guys, something for your boys, Sirs,” they chorused. Jude increased his pace.

“Queen’s first son. Maradona’s brother! No yawa, no galala, you are the one, joo! Your enemies have been drowned in the lagoon, long time ago! Do as you use to do; settle your boys. We are for you any day, Baba!” they continued, in condescending persistence. A look of disdain appeared on Jude’s face. One of the praise singers put his knuckles together, the other raised his hands in theatrical obeisance. Laja took out two twenty-naira notes. As he was about handing them to

the boys, Jude snatched the money from him. He gave out only one and pushed the other back into Laja's hand.

“Thank you, real man,” one of the boys said to Laja. “More blessing, Sir. We'll meet again at the right place; the real place! Go on *soun*.”

Jude shook his head and smiled. The boys turned back and rushed toward a lady who was struggling with her baggage.

“You must have felt really good at being called the Queen's son by those jobless miscreants,” Jude teased.

Laja smiled. For him, it was not about feeling good. He'd heard a lot about the terrible things Lagos Island Area Boys do; he was afraid.

They passed people lining the road. “Yes? What d'you need? Yes? Driver's licence? Marriage and birth certificates? Banks statements? Original certificates?” they offered, demanding attention and custom. Laja wondered how they could offer fake documents openly and so brazenly.

Lati was not in. A muscular boy in a black vest offered to take them to Tinubu Street where he said Lati had gone to make an international phone call. As they followed him, many young boys greeted their guide, shouting ‘Jangula!’ He responded to some with a wave of hand; to some, he bowed. They found Lati under a derelict shop with people sitting on a long bench. He stood up, smiling broadly.

“So, it's you guys they said were looking for me?”

“Who ... who told you?” Jude asked.

“When people like you appear on the Island the way you look, asking for me, I get warned long before you can reach me,” Lati said, looking curiously at Laja, “Jude Baba!” he said, shaking hands with Jude.

“My man, which ones?”

“Nothing, nothing, we just dey.”

“Stop saying that *joo*, you know you can’t fool me. ‘Nothing, nothing’, yet you get plenty buses running from Ketu to Mile Two. ‘Nothing, nothing,’ yet your house sits *berekete* for Ojota. Your Okadas sleep for ground”

“Man *mi*, forget,” Lati said. “All dat one na God, na small things, nothing, nothing. I’m just hustling like everyone else. You’ve not even introduced your friend.”

“Sorry. This is Laja, the friend I told you about. He’s taking over *The Consultancy*.”

Lati gawked at Laja and squinted. “Any time, anything, better than original, my brother,” he said as he shook hands with Laja.

“This is the master artist, the computer genius,” Jude said turning to Laja. Lati chuckled. “It’s God, my man, nothing. It’s God.”

Back at Lati’s office, two other clients were waiting. He begged Jude and Laja to wait in another room while he attended to them. They passed an electricity generator and bent almost double through the metal frame of a door into a small dark room. The hum of an air conditioner explained why it was unusually cold in the room. Two computers sat in the middle of a table, surrounded by piles of paper. International passports of assorted colours were on a stool beside the table. Artists’ tools, stationery, stamps, and inking pads crowded an architect table at the edge of the room. Beside the sofa on which Jude and Laja sat, a pack of cigarettes, half-emptied bottle of Scottish Dry Gin, and dirty glass cups, struggled for space on a side table.

“This is his strong room where he does everything, rarely does he allow anyone to come in here,” Jude whispered to Laja.

After about ten minutes Jangula came in. He cleared the side table, pushed it between their seats and placed a big bowl of rice and spaghetti, topped with boiled

eggs and fried chicken on it. He dusted two plates and wiped the cutlery, then brought out drinks from a plastic bag. The chilled drinks excited Jude who opened one almost immediately. The aroma of the food overpowered the hitherto damp smell in the room. They ate silently. Laja took a malt drink while Jude sucked at another two-litre pack of *Five Alive* juice with a straw. About forty-five minutes later, Jangula appeared to clear the table.

Lati later came in, full of apologies. He threw a sheaf of notes on his table. "I'm sorry *o*, those clients had an urgent"

"Don't worry, we understand," Jude said, pointing at the money on the table.

"That is nothing, it's been a dull day today," Lati said, picked and tucked the notes away inside a drawer.

They chatted about Jude's travel plans and developments at *The Consultancy*. Lati promised to continue his relationship with *The Consultancy* the way it was with Jude. As they were leaving, Lati slipped a business card describing himself as a graphic artist and facilitator into Laja's hand.

As they walked to the Bus Stop Laja tried to catch Jude's eyes.

"Seems the people and processes involved in this business make it look very risky," Laja said

Jude hissed. "No. It seems you are too holy to make it in Lagos. D'you think people get rich by being cowardly, or through miserable teachers' salaries? They take risks to make it big."

"I know, but...." Laja stopped, not sure of how to put his fears across without sounding unappreciative or offensive.

Jude did not say anything, nor did they exchange another word until they parted ways.

For Laja, it was not the fear of taking worthwhile risks that bothered him, it was the danger of getting involved in any venture that involved faking documents. Even so, he'd become too involved and must subsume his fears under the expectation of being able afford the things he wanted and change the story of lack in his family. From Uncle Dele, he borrowed one hundred naira, and added the money he made from the sale of some of his electronics to pay Jude and become the owner of *The Consultancy*.

Jude left for South Africa.

Chapter 20

Madam V-Boot's perfume announced her presence before Laja saw her. It was about six months after he took over *The Consultancy*. The woman wore a fitted skirt suit and led a girl in a pair of jeans and T-shirt. He'd seen her car, the latest brand of Mercedes, as it parked on the street through his office window.

"My dear, I want her to do Medicine," Madam V-Boot said after introducing herself and her daughter.

"How many times have you written the exam now?" Madam V-Boot asked. The girl frowned without uttering a word.

"She has written many times and failed but I still want her to study Medicine. I know she can do it."

"I'm sorry Ma, that would depend on her interests and what she did at school, so that ..."

"That school is very good, one of the best private schools in Lagos, I don't know how she failed and failed," Madam V-Boot said, turning to eye her daughter.

"I meant the subjects she did at" Laja said.

Madam V-Boot dipped her hand into her bag and threw some papers on the table before Laja. He read through each one, making notes.

"It seems that she has ..." Laja started, sighing and carefully going through the papers again. "She only passed one Science subject, Ma."

"My dear, does it matter? I was told you know how to fix these things, that's why I'm here," Madam V-Boot said.

"Yes, that is not a problem, I was thinking that a candidate"

“I am willing to pay whatever you charge, just get me what I want,” she added and adjusted her huge shiny necklace.

“It is not just a matter of money, Ma. We don’t want to get someone into university who will not”

“Okay, okay, Law, or Mass Communication! With any of that, at least she would still get something to do with her life. What d’you think?”

“That would be fine, especially with the combination of subjects she’s done here,” Laja said, indicating the papers in his hand.

“Law or Mass Communication. Okay?” the older woman shouted into her daughter’s face.

“Yes, Mummy.”

“My dear, I trust you will sort her out for me. Her father is very angry and confused about what to do with her,” she said, opened her bag and brought out a bundle of new notes. “You want a deposit?”

Laja nodded and called Helen who came in almost immediately and asked the woman and her daughter to follow her.

After they’d left, Helen came in and put a piece of paper on Laja’s table.

“What! Why did you charge them this much?”

“She’s a rich woman, she doesn’t mind. Did you hear her complaining?” Helen said and walked away before Laja could speak.

Almost five months after, at about 5.00 pm, Helen’s scream and the sound of crashing furniture brought Laja to his feet. He hurried to the door. As he opened it, something hit his chest; its force threw him back inside his office, doubled against his table. He staggered up to see two men in Army uniform.

“Na you be criminal director wey de chop people money, eh?” the shorter of the two men, with dark red eyes asked. Laja’s lips quavered but he became relieved that they were not robbers.

“Who are you and what ... which money are you talking about?” Laja mumbled, holding his chest.

“Na thunder go kill you,” the first soldier responded, spread out his left palm and pushed it hard into Laja’s face.

Before he could regain his balance, the man hit him on the right side of his face. The other soldier followed with a kick to his shin. The force brought Laja down. He rolled into a foetal curve, and wiped blood from his mouth.

“Please sir, sirs, I What have I done wrong?” he said and raised his palm to make the men see the blood.

“You go know, who no know must know,” Red Eyes said as he threw and hit Laja on the head with a duster he’d picked from the bookshelf. “Get up! 1... 2 ...” Laja struggled to his feet before the third count.

“Put your hands on your head,” the taller soldier ordered. “You go vomit *oga* money wey you chop, bastard.”

Red Eyes started searching and throwing things all over the office. “Now, get up and march downstairs,” he shouted, giving another blow to Laja’s mid-riff.

“Hands on your head, march! 1... 2 ... 3...,” Red Eyes started counting as he followed Laja out of the office. Helen’s table lay on its side, papers and stationery scattered everywhere. She must have run away.

Downstairs, a small crowd had gathered.

“This way!” Red Eyes shouted. Laja raised his head to see a car in front of him. The soldier opened a back door and pushed Laja in. The taller soldier, who was already at the wheel, revved the car as his colleague eased into the seat beside him.

He shot the car into gear and skidded to the right, whipping up a cloud of dust. Some kids in the crowd cheered and waved. It was the first time Laja had ridden in a car as comfortable and nice smelling as a new Mercedes. It was Madam V-Boot's car. He recalled their meeting and her desperation to get her daughter into university and became very afraid. The girl could not gain a university place because *The Consultancy's* agent at JAMB got transferred before the admission exams. All other efforts to get her a place had failed.

The car joined Apapa Road and descended the bridge into Mile Two. Traffic was building up between Mazamaza and Festac Gate. Red Eyes reached under his seat, brought a leather whip and stretched his hand out of the window.

"You for use belt nau," his colleague, who was hooting continuously, said. Red Eyes dropped the whip and took the Army belt on the dashboard. He rolled down his side window and heaved the upper part of his body out to sit on the car door frame. Holding on to the roof with his left hand, he started flailing the belt with his right hand. The driver of the car beside them swerved into another car on the right as the belt hit his wing mirror. Other drivers tried to make way for the Mercedes as much as they could. In doing so, many more bumped into other cars, some crashed into the side barriers.

"Please sirs, let me go, I'll refund the money. Please," Laja pleaded again, but the men were too busy to respond. Soon, the Mercedes was out of the jam that had seemed impenetrable.

"Bloody civilians," Red Eyes muttered as he eased himself back into his seat, breathing heavily. The car sped down the road to Ojoo Cantonment. At the gate, a sentry stood like a sculpture as another soldier approached and peered into the car, then waved it on. The car waltzed through the grounds and finally stopped before an old warehouse. The soldiers pulled Laja out and led him into the building. A stale

smell filled the damp dark space, partitioned into smaller enclosures. Red Eyes pushed Laja into one of the rooms. The door clicked.

“Sir, please pardon me. I’ll return all the money,” Laja shouted. The men did not respond but slammed the main door and left.

He slouched into the bare dusty floor, wishing it was a dream and wondering how long it would last. He believed that Madam V-Boot would let him out after reaching a refund agreement with her. But what if she didn’t come? He wanted to think, to plan, but he was panicking, his thoughts scattered. Much as he tried to calm himself, he could not still his rising fears. He felt pressure in his bladder and called out, knowing that no one would respond. But he called again, and again. Then his head began to ache. He had to damn the consequence. He got up and moved to the furthest corner of the room. As the urine poured out, his pains eased.

No one came the entire day.

The Consultancy had been doing well, getting many students to achieve good school certificate results and helping twelve to gain admission into universities within six months. He’d paid back the money he borrowed from Uncle Dele, replaced the electronics he sold with new ones, bought a used car, and had some saving. He wondered what happened to Helen. He didn’t want to think about what would happen to *The Consultancy*, and the students. Most of them would go away, some would come to ask for refunds. It was all over.

The following morning, he heard movements and was curious. Had they come to set him free? The door opened slightly, someone pushed a loaf of bread and bottle of water through, then shut the door and turned the key.

“Hey! Help me, please. I am feeling sick. I’m asthmatic; I need medical attention! Pleeease!” he shouted, pulling at the door. As the footsteps faded, he sat into the dusty floor again.

He was sure Madam V-Boot could not take him to court because there was no evidence of their dealings. If she went ahead, she too would be liable for seeking doctored results for her daughter. She could only use her position as an Army’s officer’s wife to assault him the way her boys were doing, unless the police got involved and found documents or any form of communication with the guys at WAEC or JAMB, or the stamps which Lati had made for *The Consultancy*. Those alone, bearing the names and insignia of some government ministries and parastatals, would earn him a long time in jail. His only hope was that Helen would have lived up to her reputation and kept the incriminating stuff out of sight.

In the afternoon of the third day in the dark stuffy room, Red Eyes appeared, a streak of light fell on his left boot as he moved closer. Laja lifted his head, squinted and yawned.

“Stand up! Foolish man! You don’t shit for here? Why dis place de smell like dis? You dey lucky did time, next time you fit die for here, so, be careful when you deal with the military,” Red Eyes said.

As Laja struggled up, a cramp tore at his intestines. The soldier made to kick him from behind, but Laja turned, their eyes met, and he stopped.

“Get out! Bloody thief!” Red Eyes said before locking the door. Laja followed, brushing dust off his clothes. The light outside was dazzling. He saw Red Eyes drive away in an Army green Land Rover. Laja wondered how he would get home. With dust all over him, everyone would likely run away, thinking he was insane. Looking around, he didn’t see anyone to ask for help or a place he could get

water. The couple of notes and coins in his pocket were his only hope. He saw houses about two hundred metres away and quickened his steps.

He lifted his head and saw two hazy figures were walking towards him. When the distance between them reduced he saw them clearly. Helen and Emeka!

“Hello, how are you?” they chorused.

“Ha! How did you ... where d’you guys drop from?”

“The soldiers directed us here. Are you okay?” Helen asked.

“I’m fine. It’s terrible in there,” Laja said, pointing at the warehouse. Good to see sunshine again. But how did you guys manage to”

“We paid to bail you out, of course. How else?” Emeka said, smiling, and looking at Helen.

“What are you talking about?” Laja asked, turning to Helen.

“D’you think you got out just like that? We had to pay back the fees, N15,000, and N10,000 bribe to the soldiers,” Helen said.

“How d’you mean?”

“I mean we came begging and they insisted they would not allow you out until we gave”

“They were bent on keeping you here for a long time, man,” Emeka added.

“You mean you ... you paid back the fees to Madam V-Boot, and” Laja paused, scratching his buttocks. “Did they find the stamps or anything incriminating?”

“No,” Helen said.

“So why did you have to pay any other money after returning the fees?” Helen did not answer. She folded and unfolded her arms across her chest, over the strap of her black handbag. The wind started playing with her permed hair, and she

put the loose strands back into place from time to time. Emeka had walked slightly ahead, stealing looks back at them.

“So, where did you get money from?”

“I sold some things in the office and borrowed from Emeka to complete it,” Helen blurted.

“You sold things in the office to give money to soldiers for beating and detaining me?” Laja said. He did not believe her claim of collecting money from Emeka. He’d always suspected that if she had her way, she would kick him out to run *The Consultancy* with Emeka, her boyfriend.

“You don’t seem to appreciate what we’ve been through to get you out of that place. Do you?”

“I appreciate your getting me out but what I don’t appreciate is what has gone into doing so.”

Helen turned, hissed, and walked away. Stunned by her act, Laja stopped and watched as she quickened her steps. Her heels sank into the sand, making her walk awkward and slowing her down.

Didn’t she realise that they could not take the case further, that what Madam V-Boot wanted from them was illegal in the first place? Did she think that the woman would want anybody else, besides her brute emissaries, to know what transpired between them? The distance between him, Helen and Emeka increased as he walked behind them to the gate, asking himself if he’d overreacted.

After visiting *The Consultancy* a few days later, Laja knew his predicament had sounded its death knell. By the time he stepped out, he was thinking of how to sell the furniture and equipment that were left.

“Getting buyers no be problem,” Lati assured him after he narrated what had happened. “Wetin be your next plan,” Lati asked.

“I no know. I dey confused,” Laja said.

Lati was quiet for some time. “If you want my honest advice, I go sey, raise some money and check out of dis country.”

Laja smiled.

“Na true I tell you *o*. I dey advise you like brother, because Jude, your friend, be like my brother. Dis na better time to check out. Naira don wowo, e no get value again. If you go abroad, work like one year, change your money to Naira, you don make am for life, I tell you.”

“I know, but I ...I” Laja wasn’t sure of what to do next or how to explain it to Lati.

“Na true I dey tell you. I get plenty guys for abroad and I know wetin de happen,” Lati said.

Laja thought Lati spoke convincingly, but why had he not travelled abroad himself if it was so rosy overseas.

“Think am *o*. And if na something wey you wan try, let me know quick, I get some hot stuff now.”

“What stuff?”

“I fit get you South Africa visa and I get one a British P wey I”

“Wetin be dat?”

“British passport.

“Ho!” Laja said and smiled. He’d heard of the risks involved in travelling out without genuine papers and wouldn’t want to take risks if he considered travelling abroad.

“Thanks, my man. I no plan to go anywhere. I go make am for dis country,” he said.

Lati shot out his right hand and shook hands with Laja. “No problem. But if you change your mind, I dey for you anytime.”

“Thank you. Abeg, help me find quick market for stuff.”

“No problem. Trust me. Shey you still de use dat your school phone?”

“Yes.”

“I go hala you, say like three four days from now,” Lati said.

As he left, Laja kept looking around apprehensively. He could not afford to give any money to Area Boys.

The following Monday at school, Kunmi, approached and sat on the table beside Laja as he read the vice principal’s query asking him to explain his absence from school without permission. He quickly folded the letter.

“How are you feeling? Did the soldiers torture you?”

“How did you ...?”

Kunmi guffawed. “It’s not a secret, is it? It’s all over town. In fact, it was a student who told me that she saw you being beaten and taken away in a car by soldiers.”

Laja did not know how to respond. He opened the letter he was reading again. There was no way he could reply to the query without mentioning the incident. Explaining his personal life outside the school to anyone, especially the vice principal, was not what he wanted to do. Nor did he want the school to take him through the disciplinary route, to suspend, or recommend him for dismissal from service. It seemed his world was running away from him and much as he ran, he could not catch up. Love had failed him, so had business. Now his job was at risk.

He could not put himself in the frame of mind to attend classes. Disorientated, he left for home at Long Break.

In the following days, he slept little and was always feeling tired. He was too confused to know what to do. With his experience searching for a job, he knew there was nowhere to get another job quickly. If he was sacked at the school, how would he pay rent and buy his mother's medicines?

After another sleepless night one Sunday, he decided to leave Nigeria. He had to do it, for his sanity and for his sick mother. How to do it, and where he would head to, were questions he had no answer. Asking Lati for help was out of the question, he'd boasted that he didn't have to leave Nigeria; that he would make it there. He would do it himself.

Chapter 21

A day before his appointment, Laja checked and rechecked the documents he got from a clerk at the Surulere Post Office who told him that they were genuine application support documents and that he'd provided similar ones for many successful visa applicants. Post office staff were known to make lots of money stealing and selling contents of foreign letters – visitors' invitation letters, schools' admission letters, conference invites, hotel bookings invoices - to desperate visa applicants. They would then go and bribe Nigerian Immigration officials to get passports matching the identities on the documents.

Reaching the Marina offices of the British High Commission was a smooth ride if one left the Mainland at about 5.00 am before the Lagos Island roads became clogged. Getting a space on the winding consular services queue even that early was a gamble but Laja, who refused the offer of a space at a price, was No. 34 on the appointment line. From time to time, pugnacious Area Boys broke the queue as they shunted for their customers, to the dismay of everyone.

After submitting his application and supporting documents on the ground floor, he was instructed to go to the third floor and wait to be called.

“Are you okay?” the consulate official asked immediately he entered the cubicle. Laja nodded and managed a smile. The man collected his other documents and went out. He came back to ask questions.

“You've applied for a visitor's visa to the UK ...

“Yes...yes,” Laja said

“Why do you want to go to the UK?”

“To visit my uncle” Laja answered.

“Who is he? Where does he live? What does he do? When last did you meet him? Who is paying for your trip? What do you do?” the man assailed him with questions. Laja had rehearsed answers with the Post Office man but now the questions sounded more as if they were meant to test his mental stability and suitability to go to the United Kingdom than questions of his intentions.

As he spoke, the man picked and checked his responses against the supporting documents and made notes. The Post Office man had told him that getting a visa was more a question of luck than of telling the truth, and that consular officers were often too busy to verify documents. The officer went behind the cubicle again and came back after about five minutes.

“I am afraid”

Immediately he heard the phrase, Laja switched off. He barely heard the reasons for the refusal which the officer mentioned.

As he sat, waiting for the letter of refusal, he saw lucky applicants came out of the cubicles smiling and jumping for joy; a couple of others came out frowning, downcast. One wept openly, his right hand shook as he collected the letter, having known its content. Laja took the stairs down and walked out of the building, his mind clogged.

“You should try again as you now have experience and stand a good chance. All we need do is tackle these few reasons for refusal. If we do that, they’ll issue you your visa,” the Post Office man said after reading the letter of rejection and highlighting specific phrases with a red marker.

“Or I could get you a seaman’s passport. You’ll travel by sea to Liberia, then join people being taken to America as war refugees. The problem with that is many people have been thrown into the sea by some crazy sailors, or by pirates,” the man

said, staring at Laja who had not respond to his earlier suggestions. “If you can’t afford what I’m suggesting, I will advise you go register at *Goethe Institut* to learn *Deutche*, German language. After that you can apply to go to Germany. The problem here is that the learning takes a long time, a full year.”

Laja stared at the man. Was he invoking fear with the other options to make him cough out money for another application? “I don’t really think I want to travel out anymore,” he said.

The school was starting a disciplinary process against him. Negligence, and ‘not responding to an official query’ had become added to questions of his absenteeism and his ‘suspected unprofessional acts which could bring disrepute to the teaching profession.’ And the vice principal was going to be among the internal panel to question him. Without a second thought, Laja picked up a pen a wrote a letter of resignation. It wasn’t until he was on the canoe, over the lagoon on his way home, that he realised the enormity of what he’d done - he no longer has any source of income.

The following morning, he decided to pay Lati a visit.

“I know sey you go come back,” Lati said. “I still get dat British passport, but like I tell you, you no go fit use am from here. I go get you Southy visa, then”

“Ha!” Laja exclaimed.

“Don’t worry, na non-appearance, original. From Southy you go use the BP enter UK.”

“Why can’t I travel to the UK from here?”

“Plenty witches and wizards dey for that Murtala Mohammed Airport. Dem go collect money and still give you plenty wahala as a first-time traveller. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“I know. I know. But I don’t have anyone that I can”

“Dat one no be problem. I get people for Southy, for Europe, America, anywhere. Na complete package I go arrange for you. My guys go welcome you, arrange job, accommodation and everything you need.”

The mention of ‘package’ made Laja’s heart skip. His decision had been so sudden that he’d given little thought to the issue of financing his desire. “Wetin dis package go cost?”

“Just one fifty,” Lati blurted out.

“One hundred and fifty thousand naira? Haba!”

“Na because say na you. Ask your friend, him pay me 100 just for Southy.”

Lati said.

“150 dey too much. You know my story nau,” Laja said, trying to catch Lati’s eyes.

“Dat’s why I wan do am for dat price for you,” Lati said and turned away, clicking at his computer.

“Abeg nau. You”

Lati did not look up. “My brother, na 250 - 350 job I wan do for you for 150, I no go do am for one kobo less.”

It became obvious to him that Lati would not budge and agree to a lesser price. Three hundred and fifty thousand naira was a lot of money, but it would be worth it if things went as said and he got into Europe. “So, I go add 50 to di money we de your hand?”

“No o. Na 80 I tell you sey I sell the stuff nau!” Lati said. “Your balance na 70. If you bring 20 add to wetin de my hand, then when your visa come out, you go pay the balance of 50.”

As he walked through Oluwole, Laja did a mental calculation. The sale of his car and electronics would pay for the travel and still leave him some money for Mother. He was sure Uncle Dele would be willing to loan him more money as well, if necessary. No amount was too much for him to restart his life in a new place with better opportunities.

Mother was not easily convinced. “Why do you want to go into the unknown when you have everything you need here!” she said, surprise on her face. “Who do you know abroad that you will stay with there, in a far away place?”

“I will meet people. There will be many young people like me there.”

“But you have a job here. How...?”

“Mother, I lost my job. Even if I get another one, the salary won’t be enough to sustain me and” He didn’t want to mention the need to take care of her. She might become angry and forbid him travelling because of her needs. She might stop collecting anything from him.

“If anything happens, who will help? Who will you run to?” Mother said, her eyes looking wild and pained.

“Nothing will happen Mother, everything will be fine. I will be fine.”

Part 2

Chapter 22

Overwhelmed with a sudden rush of fear and uncertainty, Laja wanted to be quiet as the hours counted down. But he'd told Floxy, whose brother was away, that he would be travelling. They chatted into the night and ended up spending the together.

"I can't live abroad. I'll just go on holiday with my family and come back," she said.

"I know one of my brother's friends, a bank manager, who took stole the bank's money and travelled abroad. He came back with nothing and was arrested when he got here."

Laja grunted.

"People say it's too cold over there, like living inside a freezer. How do people survive in that type of place?" Floxy continued. She propped herself up and lay her head on Laja's chest. "Are you tired?"

"No. Why?"

"You have not been speaking. Didn't you hear what I said."

"I heard you. Human beings learn to adapt and survive where they find themselves. People from other places come here and withstand our hot weather too," Laja said.

"I know. I mean real abroad," Floxy said.

"Abroad is not just one place; some countries in what you call 'real abroad' are very warm too."

“Really?” Floxy said, then snuggled closer to him. For long, she did not speak, and he prayed that she would remain that way till morning.

He took in air deeply and exhaled, wishing he could sleep.

“When are you coming back?”

He turned his back. “I don’t know. “Unlike Mother, he didn’t owe Floxy any explanation.

“So, you are not planning to come back?”

“How do you mean? I”

“I mean many Nigerians who travel abroad don’t come back. If you have a plan to come back, then you’d know when you hope to be back.”

“I’ll be back, only that I don’t know when.”

“Uhm,” she snickered.

Laja sat up. “You don’t understand. I’m leaving for a place I’ve not been before and don’t know what to expect. Planning anything or making decisions now is difficult. D’you understand?” he said. He felt his answer was not just for Floxy, he also needed to gear himself for the unknown.

In the early hours of the morning, he got up carefully to avoid waking her, got up and started checking his documents against a list that he’d drawn up. Lati had told him that as a visitor, he was not supposed to have any documents about work or study with him as they could arouse suspicion about his intentions. He’d carefully sewn the British passport he bought into the bottom one of his bags.

The day crawled on till about 4. pm when time seemed to be flying as he became more anxious. By 6 pm he was ready for his 10 pm flight. Floxy leaned against him in the taxi to the airport. The more he felt uncertain about the future, the more he felt lonely and the more he was happy that she was with him. As he entered the immigration check area, she said, "Please don't forget me." He didn't know how to respond. Saying he wouldn't forget her would mean that there was a relationship between them, and that he owed her loyalty. He didn't want to commit himself to that. As he was about disappearing into the boarding area, he turned to see her. She seemed to be crying but raised and waved a limp hand. He waved back.

He got a window seat. As he sat in the plane, Floxy's waving hand kept engaging his memory. Besides the anxiety of the unknown that he was venturing into, he was worried about how Mother would feel after she learn he'd left. He was becoming strange to himself; he needed to breathe some fresh air in a new environment. He didn't want to think about all that had been his life that he was leaving behind. They didn't matter anymore. What mattered now was the journey he was embarking on. Now that he was on the verge of that new life, he wondered why fear kept bouncing round the walls of his mind.

As he looked around, shifting his focus from one passenger to another; all he saw was confidence on their faces. Was he the only first-time traveller on the plane? The man to sit beside him came in and met his 'hello' with a snappy 'hi' and a nod. He oozed confidence, carefully arranging his things before putting his hand luggage away. It was as if he lived on the plane.

“Hi. I’m Hendrik. Going to South Africa too?” he said to Laja when he finally sat down.

“Yes,” Laja responded. Then he thought he did not introduce himself. “I’m Laja. Happy to meet you.”

“Pleased to meet you too. On a business trip?”

His new jacket must have fooled Hendrik.

“No. Just visiting.”

“Many people from your country visit South Africa these days. Don’t they? Have you got family there?”

“No. I have a friend”

The man again nodded as Laja spoke. “Yes, yes. Are you staying long? I mean when are you coming back?”

“I plan to spend about two weeks”

“Really? That would be unique of you,” the man said.

Not knowing how to respond, Laja bit his lower lip.

His anxiety continued running with the whine of the plane’s wings, then to its wheels as the plane taxied. Then into the cockpit, to come out as a voice which jolted him. It was the captain welcoming everyone on board. Laja wanted to pinch himself. No need; it was real. He was on a plane, leaving Nigeria.

From the window he saw Lagos getting smaller as the plane gained height. He became emotional, struggling to push back reflections and thoughts that he was flying over everything he’d ever been in over twenty-five years. Faces and places

flitted through his mind. They kept changing, then merging, only to disperse again. Past to present, present to blank future. The known, the unknown; the never-will-be-known. His mother; his sister; his brother; The Adulterer, his father, then most recently, Floxy. Maybe if Bola

The in-flight entertainment cackled and came on with a video of African Big Five – the African buffalo, lion, elephant, leopard, and rhino. Laja was enthused by the elevation of the animals to continental glory rather than at the mercy of a hungry, ragged hunter's old gun, poisoned arrows or dexterity at trapping. Why should thousands of kilogrammes of meat roam freely in the name of conservation and reserves for tourism while people died of hunger? The elephant on the screen lifted its trunk and trumpeted in symphony with a sound. It was Hendrik's snoring. So easily, so soon?

“Would you like a drink, sir? Wine, beer, or juice? Wine, beer or juice, sir?”

Laja turned to look at the seat behind him, then turned to the hostess with a smile.

“Me?”

The lady smiled back. “Yes, please.”

“Juice... juice,” Laja said. He knew food was served on flights, but he was not sure drinks, besides water, were free. Juice would be affordable. He would have loved to have beer, get semi-drunk to push away all the clutter of uncertainties in his head, but he had to be careful how he spent the \$500 he had on him.

The food trolley came about half an hour later.

“Chicken or beef? Excuse me! Chicken or beef, sir?”

“Chicken,” Laja said, then struggled to unclasp the fold-way table at the back of the seat before him. He placed the little tray on the table, opened the foil container, and ate the cold meal slowly, self-consciously. As a hostess was passing, Hendrik rustled, opening his eyes almost immediately. He lifted his hand. The lady halted and smiled at him.

“What would you like to have, sir? I didn’t want to disturb you.”

“Wine, please,” Hendrik said and yawned.

“White or red?”

“Red. And some lime, please.”

The hostess fished out a miniature bottle of red wine and a can of lime juice from her trolley. As she made to hand them over, Hendrik raised two fingers. She bent over and brought out another set of the order, putting them on the table that the man had pulled into place.

“And can I have real lime please, the fruit, not these,” Hendrik said, giving back the lime cans.

“I am afraid we don’t serve that sir; we’ve got only oranges.”

“Never mind,” Hendrik said, collecting the lime cans.

Most passengers returned to concentrate on the screens; some others were positioning themselves more comfortably to sleep. A little cute white girl ran ahead of her mother who was trying to stop her, heading toward the back. An approaching hostess stopped to make way for the little girl. Hendrik saw her and raised his hand.

“How can I help you, sir?”

Hendrik pointed at the empty containers on the table and raised two fingers. The attendant smiled, picked up the empties and left. Soon she emerged with another set of drinks for Hendrik.

The beauty of Johannesburg captivated Laja as the plane descended. On landing, the cold July air that hit him made him feel that truly, he was in a new environment. Inside the hall, a bulky immigration officer collected his documents and started looking through. He paused, turned the passport on its side, stared into Laja's face, and made a note on a pad. "Where are you from?"

"Lagos," Laja said, wondering why the man was asking after obviously seeing his passport.

"Is this the first time you are travelling outside Nigeria?"

Laja nodded. The man opened the passport picture page, raised it, then placed it in front of a light on his table.

"Please wait here," the man said and disappeared into an office. Laja wondered why he was the only one who had his passport collected and had to wait. He wanted to hold on to Lati's assurances that every document he'd given him was foolproof. If the 'witches' at the Lagos airport, as Lati called them, could not stop him, no one would stop him here. Yet, he became apprehensive as he watched the other passengers on the same flight with him clearing security.

The officer appeared in the distance and walked to his desk, clutching Laja's passport. He picked a stamp and hit the passport as if in anger. He then slipped it under an arc opening under the glass of the cubicle.

“Where are you going from here?”

“A friend is coming to pick me.”

“Okay, go and sit there and wait for your friend,” the man said, pointing to a set of seats. Relieved, Laja located a phone booth. He walked down the hall and spotted a shop which had a call point. A yawning man in a creased shirt asked him: “Local or international?”

“Local, “ Laja said.

“Use number 2,” the man said, amidst another yawn.

Laja brought out his diary and leafed through. He found a number and dialled it. The phone rang out without a response. On redialling, a voice machine prompted him to leave a message. He replaced the handle and waited for a couple of minutes before dialling again. After the fourth call, a sleepy voice came through the line. “Who is this?”

“It’s me ... Laja ... from Nigeria ... from Lati, the guy”

“Oh! Laja ... Laja. Yes. You’ve landed?”

“Yes, at about 5.00am ... there was a bit of delay at immigration, and I’ve been....”

“Okay. Okay. Someone will come and pick you up in ... let’s say 30 minutes. Okay? Just wait at Arrival. How are you dressed? I mean, what are you wearing?”

Laja told him.

“He’ll find you. Thirty, forty minutes. Okay?”

Laja thanked the shopkeeper and returned to the waiting area.

The aluminum seat was cold, but it was welcome ease for his legs which were aching. He would fly First Class someday where he would have enough space for his legs. On the wall, the clock read 6. 45 am. He frowned and checked his watch, then turned its knob to reflect the South African time of an hour ahead of Lagos. He'd given the wrong information on the phone but the guy he spoke with would understand.

After about forty minutes, a lady with jutting hips approached and asked who he was waiting for. Laja said his friend was on his way.

“Why not call him again. You can't just wait here. You need to know how far away he is. Have you got a number?” the lady said, stretching out her left hand. Laja opened his diary, scribbled the number on a piece of paper and handed it to the lady.

“Money?”

Surprised, Laja carefully peeled out a \$10 note from the money inside his jacket pocket.

“Let me go and call him, I'll be back soon.”

As he watched her go, Laja recalled the night before and Floxy's words, 'please don't forget me.' Would they ever meet again? His eyes caught the toilets signage on the wall; he wondered who designed the image of the little man and woman. As he read the other signages, one after another, he challenged himself to think about different meanings the words and symbols on them could have. He lost interest on seeing that the clock read 8.15 am. How long more would he have to wait? The voices of the passenger information announcers were becoming very distant, and soothing, like a lullaby.

“You must be Laja from the description I got,” Laja opened his eyes to see a lanky guy in a black overall and face cap standing over him.

“Yes,” Laja said, scrambling up and yawning with a huge sense of relief.

“I am Wale. I’m sorry to have kept you waiting.”

“It’s okay,” Laja said, yawning again.

“The flight must have come in a bit earlier than scheduled, I thought ... but it doesn’t matter,” Wale said. “Can I have your passport so that I settle with these people. You are okay for now, but we must start preparing for when you want to leave SA.” After collecting the passport, Wale walked briskly down the hall. After about fifteen metres, he turned and came back.

“I won’t be long. Have you got any money on you?”

Laja brought out the change the shopkeeper had given him. “How much?”

“Make it thirty dollars,” Wale said.

Laja put the South African note and coins back in his pocket and brought out his wallet, wondering why he was being asked for money after Lati told him he wouldn’t need to pay for anything on arrival.

The lady Laja who promised to go make a call came back almost at the same as Wale was coming back.

“I can’t get your friend. Or did you say your brother?” the lady said, waving the piece of paper in her hand.

“He is here already,” Laja said, pointing at Wale.

“Is this your brother? This silly boy?”

Wale turned, patted the lady’s behind and threw his arm around her. She giggled.

“You! You left the other time and did not come back as promised.”

“Who says? Ask those on duty that day, they’ll tell you I came back but you’d left.”

“All right. What do you have for me?”

“A lot, just come and visit me. I won’t disappoint you.”

“Silly boy, you know what I mean.”

“I have spoken to your colleagues in the office. This is my brother.”

“You must have a million brothers. What about those, don’t you know them?” she said, pointing at the other two men sitting in the hall.

Wale shrugged. “No, but let’s see if I can make a couple of dollars from them.” He walked briskly across the floor and chatted to the men. After a while, one of them with bushy Afro hairstyle, wearing brown shirt and jeans gave Wale his passport and followed him to the desk. Wale pulled the lady aside, and they headed for an adjacent office. Laja remembered that she had not returned the money he gave her. Did it take \$10 to make an unsuccessful call?

When they came out of the office, the lady handed some forms to Wale which he completed quickly. She stamped the new man’s passport and handed it back, telling him to go with Wale. As they walked down the hall, Wale bantered with many of the staff; he seemed to know everyone at the airport. They got to the parking area and drove off. After about twenty minutes, they arrived at a filling station. The other man, who said he was from The Gambia, asked to disembark to find his way to his friend’s.

“Are you sure you’ll be okay on your own?” Wale said.

“I’ve got his phone number, I’ll call him from here,” the man replied, pointing at a telephone box.

Wale watched the man from the car mirror as they drove off. “He’s afraid. He must have been told to trust no one in Jo’burg.”

Laja struggled to keep awake till they pulled into a driveway. The house’s beautiful appearance was missing inside. The lounge was scruffy. A 20-inch sat on a stool at an angle. Two well-worn sofas and an old ironing board covered with a blanket completed the furniture. After putting his bags down, Wale led him into the garden where four guys, dressed in winter jackets and woolly hats, stood around two others seated at a small table, playing a game of draughts. Bottles of drinks littered the ground. Wale introduced Laja. The guys’ responses were nonchalant, almost cold, – a nod, a wave, a ‘hi.’

A lady of about middle age, who had been talking to another guy near the window, joined them. She welcomed Laja and asked if he was married. The guys laughed. One of them asked why she was always asking the same question of every new arrival. “Mama, are you desperate to find a man or to go to Europe?” he said. The lady hissed and walked away.

Back inside the house, Wale showed Laja an inner room. It was a jungle of clutter. Clothes, boxes, blankets, books, newspapers, and magazines covered the floor and every available surface.

“You will sleep here with the other guys till you leave. There are only two rooms here. I use one and this in the second,” Wale said, smiling. “Feel at home. If you need anything, ask me or any of the guys you’ve met. They are all like you, biding their time until they can get out of this AIDS-ridden country. I promised Lati that I’ll get you into Ireland or England within two weeks, just relax. Yeah?” Wale said and left the room.

Laja felt weak and wished he could have a hot drink but didn't know who to ask. He removed his jacket, folded it, and put his bags beside the mass of others at a corner of the room. There was no bed. Most of the floor was covered with blankets and a heap of bedsheets. Something must be wrong. He'd imagined a warm bath and a soft bed on arrival, not a bedroom without a bed in a smelly house. After looking around for a long time, he removed his shoes, pulled his smaller bag closer, then stretched out, putting his head on the bag.

Chapter 23

The sun was already inching away into the cloud, and darkness was gradually taking over when Laja woke up. He stood by the window, watching the guys in the garden. They were still chatting loudly, some drinking, one was smoking. Laja coughed. All eyes turned towards him.

“I hope you are not feeling cold?” one of guys said. “Dis one wey you no get jacket so.”

Not knowing what to say in response, Laja smiled. He didn't need to be told. He must get a thick jacket for himself.

As the guys trooped into the lounge, one of them, who had introduced himself as Romanus, asked Laja: “How is it back home?”

“Well, I don't know how long you left but nothing much has changed, things are getting worse. In fact, the”

“Wat kain question be dat, Roma? You see somebody wey just leave Nigeria come here, you de ask ‘how home?’ If home better, him go come here?” someone said before Laja could continue.

“Good or bad o, e go tey before I go fit go to dat country,” one of the guys on the draughts board said.

One after another, they narrated their experiences and swore not to return to Nigeria unless it was unavoidably necessary, or they'd made loads of money. The country was rotten and undeserving to of a home. Romanus, who said he was earning a good salary in an oil company before he resigned and left, claimed that

most people, like himself, left Nigeria because of greed. “I believe say I go don de earn plenty dollars by now. If many people know sey tings no dey easy outside dem no go leave Nigeria. Wai I go leave my wife wit three children come de do village teacher for Southy? Abeg, home na home,” Romanus said.

“But Nigeria no be home, my broda, na prison,” another guy said.

Tony, whose name Laja remembered because he was the tallest among the guys, stood up and shut the window. “My mama go cry if she see me like this. My wife must be cursing me. Six months don pass for here, yet, I never see green light.”

Laja was shocked to hear that anyone could be stuck in South Africa for six months without hope of leaving. The mention of ‘mama’ brought Mother to his mind; he almost became teary. He steeled himself by quickly occupying his mind with another thought, of the happiness to come.

Wale breezed in at about 6.30 pm and threw a KFC pack at Laja and another guy called Nicholas. He told the other guys that someone called Uncle 10 Million was in trouble again. Another noisy debate ensued. The said man was too old to be living outside Nigeria and should go back home, they concluded.

“He’s always said all he wanted was 10 million naira and he would go back home. If you guys can’t give him that cash, you should leave the man alone, abeg,” Romanus said.

Laja clutched the food bag as if trying to preserve the aroma of the chicken inside. He was hungry, but the people around, the atmosphere, and the things he’d heard since his arrival, dampened his enthusiasm about arriving in South Africa.

“Goodnight, guys. Please make sure you don’t leave the heaters on till morning; switch them off when the room is warm enough. Those shit consume electricity like water,” Wale said and left, followed by his assistant, Kunle.

Romanus, who lived in another house, left too. About an hour after, the guys ended

their games and one after another went into the bedroom. Laja stood at the door and watched as six guys took their positions on the floor, wrapping blankets around themselves. Why was no one interested in switching on the television to watch anything? It must be broken, he thought. The afternoon nap had refreshed him, and he was not ready to sleep. He went back and sat on one of the sofas. It smelled horrible but there was nowhere else to go. Had he made the right choice? His contemplations narrowed into his immediate past, thoughts he wanted to avoid. The lounge was becoming very cold. He stood up and went inside bedroom.

“Can I sleep here?” he said pointing at the little space near the wall.

“No problem, anywhere you like,” Tony answered. “I hope you are not disappointed with the state of this place. It’s because people are always coming and going. It’s like a transit camp.”

“Thanks,” Laja said and squeezed himself into the tiny space between someone and the wall. He’d thought it would be warmer in the room, but the cold came through the wall and penetrated his clothes into his bones. Only two bars were aglow out of the small electric heater’s four bars. He sat up and rummaged through his bag for two more shirts. After removing his jacket, he put two shirts over the one he was wearing, then struggled to put his jacket back on. He removed his socks from inside his shoes and put them on.

“Why did you come in winter?” a voice from the floor said. Laja turned to the direction of the voice.

“I didn’t know it was”

“What about you? You know wetin winter be before you run commot for Nigeria?” Tony responded.

“I was only being considerate, seeing that this guy is freezing,” the first voice said.

“That’s not how to be considerate. If you really are, then give him your blanket,” another voice said.

Laja pulled his jacket tighter around him, forcefully buttoned it to his neck, and lay back on the floor.

Soon after, a couple of the guys started snoring. Laja wished he could fall asleep too and was happy when he started feeling drowsy. But it wasn’t too long that he was woken up by the biting cold. He got up and tiptoed, trying hard not to step on others, and made for the lounge. The blanket on the ironing board smelled and was not as big as he’d imagined, but it was long enough to cover his waist to his feet. Its smell became more pronounced when he covered his body with it. Soon, his mouth was filled with saliva, which he kept swallowing as he did not want to leave the room again for fear of stepping on someone or waking them up.

A crawling sensation started spreading to other parts of his body. He hit at a spot on his stomach, felt wetness and held his hand to his nose. It smelled bed-
buggy. He was shocked, sat up quickly and took the blanket back to the lounge. Now he knew why no one else had picked it before him. The bugs must have spread all over the sleeping area. He slumped into the lounge sofa he sat on earlier, wondering what his future held.

Aches to his legs and waist woke him up. He folded his hands across his chest and walked back into the bedroom. The space against the wall had been covered. He found another opening between two guys and carefully eased himself in.

“Get up! Get up, guys. Dis no be charity home,” Laja heard. He thought he was dreaming but opened his eyes when the voice became louder.

“Get up guys! It’s time to contribute money for electricity. Come on, guys!” Kunle was standing over them, wearing pyjamas.

Nicholas jerked up from sleep and gave Kunle a couple of crumpled notes. Others followed suit but for Tony, who seemed to be sleeping through it all. Kunle kicked him on his side twice. Tony yelled and sat up, frowning, looking around with bloodshot eyes. Finally, his sight settled on Kunle.

“Na you kick me?”

“Why you de pretend sey you no hear wetin I talk? I de collect money for electricity.”

“Is that why you kicked me like a dog?”

“Okay, sorry. I just wan wake you up to collect your contribution.”

“I no get money,” Tony said and lay down again.

Kunle shook his head. “Then make you pack your tings and go lodge for hotel o. This place no be charity, we de pay rent and bills.”

Laja sat up, looking befuddled.

“Don’t worry, mister, Wale will take care of your end,” Kunle said to him.

The others went back to lay down, but Laja sat up. His eyes were heavy, his body itched, but not knowing what would come next, bothered him more.

Every passing day, Laja hated the house more. Only Roma was friendly; everyone else was desperate and self-centred. The thoughts of sleeping on the floor, which made his body ache all over, was terrorising; having to depend on KFC, which Wale gave him twice a day, made him feel like a prisoner. Nor did he like having to spend part of the little money he had left on snacks and drinks to supplement the KFC.

“How much d’you think I can get for my return ticket?” he asked Wale one afternoon.

Wale’s eyes widened. “Which ticket?”

“My return ticket, Lati told me I could sell it and”

Wale turned to Kunle who was beside him: “See dis guy o! D’you know how much I spent at the airport before they let you in?” Wale said.

“I thought Lati paid....”

“No. Lati has not paid the balance of your package into my account yet. I’ve been spending my money on you.”

“But you collected some money from me at the airport....” Laja started.

Wale snorted. “\$20?”

“It was \$30.”

“So? You think \$30 is what clears a first-time traveller from Nigeria into South Africa from Jan Smuts? I only collected that to add to what I had on me,” Wale said, turning to Kunle who chuckled.

“This is what he does, man, don’t argue with him,” Kunle said.

“I’m not arguing with him, I’m only saying that if I have my ticket, I’ll be able to” Laja said, struggling not to raise his voice.

“Where d’you think I’ve been getting the money to take care of you and your bills?” Wale said.

Laja was confused. Wale was telling him a different story from that of ‘a total package’ which Lati had sold to him. “Lati told me I was paying to cover everything. Well, I guess I was foolish, but you shouldn’t have sold my return ticket without telling me.”

“You gave it to me, just like every other person here, it’s part of the process. Ask them.”

Laja felt exploited. He’d bought the more expensive South African Airways return ticket on Lati’s advice that immigration officials would believe he would be returning to Nigeria. He’d also assured him that he would be able to sell the return part after getting into South Africa. To think he’d been played made him feel angry but powerless. “Is there a way I can call Lati, please?”

“If you must make a call, remind me before we go to bed, but you must be brief because the call is going to be on my bill, and it won’t change anything. I’ve treated you better than all the other guys here,” Wale said.

He’d not intended calling anyone until he was settled at his ultimate destination, but that evening, Laja called Uncle Dele and spoke in the best cheery tone he could muster.

“Let me know whenever you need to make any other call,” Wale said. “And please never touch the house phone. It is very hot the way it is. If you just lift the handset, you’ll get the police crawling all over this place,” he added.

Besides getting drinks and few groceries from the local stores, the guys rarely went anywhere. The fear of coming in contact with the police or getting arrested, for those whose papers had run out, kept them around the house, chatting, and playing games. There was also the persistent apprehension that immigration officials might come and raid the house if Wale did not give enough bribes to the right people. Laja got up every morning hoping it would be the day to leave. It wouldn't take him five minutes to get ready if Wale asked him to.

“I know you must be feeling that it's taking too long for you to leave, but I don't want us to take chances. I've not applied for your visa because I still need some documents from the university that I want to use for your application. I'm hoping a response will come this week, or next. Once I get that, I'll put in your application. With the right documents, I'm sure that within the next month you'll be out of my hands and into Heathrow,” Wale said to Laja one afternoon. It wasn't the news he'd expected.

“I thought I was supposed to use the British passport from here and”

“That was the plan but... there are issues.... Let's leave that for now.”

But Laja wanted clarity. “Besides the payment for getting me here, I paid Lati specially for that passport in the hope that I'll use it to travel from here.”

“I know. You can still use it but not from here. You won't understand the complexities, but believe me, it is in your own interest.”

As weeks passed, Laja and Tony became the oldest members in the house. Even new arrivals who felt they'd stayed too long moaned about their disappointments and frustrations. But Wale always pointed at the guys who'd left,

and the number of those arriving the house as evidence of his successes and the trust many people had in him.

Laja woke up late every morning feeling weak and lethargic. Worse still, Wale had cut the supply of KFC to once a day, telling Laja to check in the kitchen for any food he could find and cook.

“Why not get a job for the time being,” Romanus said to him one Saturday afternoon. “It will keep you engaged and take your mind off the weariness of waiting.”

“A job? Where ... what job can I get,” Laja asked with rousing but cautious interest.

“You can become a security guard. But you’ll need some training which is the route to the easiest job you can get here in Jo’burg. It’s what many Nigerian guys do.”

“But I can’t. I’ve never....”

“Of course, I know it’s the uneducated and old people who are security guards in Nigeria, but you have to start shedding some of those home mentalities. When you leave home, survival comes first, not status.”

“But I don’t have lots of money. Isn’t there something else I can do without some form of training?”

“The security man job is the easiest to find, and the experience might help you when you eventually leave here. You aren’t going to find a white-collar job in

Europe. I hope you know that?” Romanus added, looking into his face. “I’m sorry, but”

“No need to be sorry for anything. I understand. I’d heard different stories about surviving abroad from people, including from a close friend before I decided to leave Nigeria. The problem is that I didn’t think or expect that the realities would start unfolding so close to home here in South Africa,” Laja said.

“That’s life. You must be hopeful, though, as you stand by your dreams,” Romanus said.

Wale looked astonished when Laja told him he wanted to get a job. “I do understand the boredom, but there are issues here. First, you could get arrested. Second, it is senseless starting a job you might leave within days, a week, or a month.”

“I know, but I need something to engage my mind, anything to keep me busy.”

“Okay. But if you must work, don’t even think of a security guard job. It’s the most dangerous job here. This is Jo’burg, with the highest crime rates in the world; people get shot every minute and”

“I know,” Laja said, looking befuddled. “I just need something to ... you know?”

Wale nodded and stared at him for a while. Then he stood up, took a couple of steps, then turned back to Laja. “Are you serious about”

“Yes. I’m very serious about it, please.”

“Okay. I’ll ask a friend if he could engage you with something ...probably not the security guard stuff, until I get you sorted. Yeah?’

“Thanks,” Laja said and walked to the garden.

Chapter 24

Chima Onigwe owned a big shop in Hillbrow. He, with his staff sold, repaired, and refurbished mobile phones. They also provided secretarial and internet services.

Behind the small window opening into the main shop, a couple of staff attended to *totsis*, Jo'burg street boys, who came offering watches, phones, iPods, DVD players, and laptops for sale at ridiculously cheap prices. Sometimes they brought in bank cards for which they wanted immediate cash, saying it was not their problem if the gadgets didn't work, or if the cards had no money value.

“We are thieves, not geeks,” one of them, Thabo, often said. Always high, looking unkempt and smelling drunk, he would stroll in sometimes asking for money without bringing in anything. Strangely, there was always money for him. A member of staff told Laja, after he started working there, that Thabo was protection for the store.

“That guy just came out of prison for murdering a white couple on their farmland. He could be extremely dangerous if he doesn't get what he wants,” the lady staff said told Laja.

Four weeks after resumed work, Chima asked Laja to start work as his special assistant cum proofreader. The office was a more sophisticated version of Lati's at Oluwole. It combined a mini printing press and a replica consular office, passports office, drivers' licensing office, a travel agency, and a foreign exchange bureau. In there, Chima spent most afternoons producing all sorts of documents. Wale's warning that “whatever you see at Chima's stays at Chima's and with you, never to be divulged to anyone,” now made more sense to him.

Commuting to the shop for work was education for him too. He learned a lot about the racial divide in South Africa through observing and listening to people talk in the minibuses. He'd heard arguments that black South Africans were not fully liberated yet, that most were too uneducated; many, especially men, were too psychologically damaged to hold positions of responsibility. That was why many preferred to work underground, in the mines. Some roamed the streets of Johannesburg and other cities, doing drugs, getting drunk, and committing crimes. The white people, of British lineage, and the German-Dutch Boers farmers, till ruled through their hold on the economy. They had support from their ancestral homes in Europe, and around the world. Political power was good, but to many black people in the taxis, it was a fluke.

Laja was fazed to see guns everywhere; hearing gunshots many times in a day and seeing someone who was shot bleeding by the roadside. How could he have known that anyone, including Jo'burg mini-bus conductors had mobile phones which were a preserve of the wealthy, who flaunted them in loud conversations, back home in Lagos? He watched ordinary people sipped fresh milk from bottles on the streets and inside the taxis. Besides the affluent using milk for tea and custard, He's only seen the sick, the very ill, drinking undiluted milk in Nigeria.

The weekly R150 Chima paid enabled him to replenish the toiletries which no one bothered about when they finished. Having an income again was liberating. He also bought foodstuff to prepare meals instead of the fast food he'd lived on for so long.

As time passed, however, the fear of being stranded in Johannesburg and forced to go back to Lagos when his visa expired, became overwhelming. There was also the danger of being at Chima's. One morning, the South African Police came

and searched the shop for almost two hours. They threatened everyone, asking for information which no one seemed to have. Chima had been tipped off a day earlier and had removed lots of things from his office. Still, he was arrested, handcuffed, and pushed towards a South Africa Police Service van.

“Make una no close shop o. I go soon come back,” he said as he entered the vehicle. Truly, he came back a couple of hours later, saying he’d settled the police and they would not come near the shop in the next six months.

Romanus was not surprised when Laja told him what had happened. “They raid him from time to time when they need money. They will never find anything incriminating in that place. The guy covers his back and is good at what he does.”

“I know. He’s good, really good,” Laja said.

For a long time, they were quiet. Then Romanus raised his head. “Can I tell you a truth?” he paused, looking Laja straight in the eyes. “I think Chima is the guy who can help you get out of here as soon as possible,” He reduced his voice to a whisper. “When Wale is not able to get guys sent off to Europe within a month, there must be a problem. He won’t tell you. There must be something he’s finding difficult about your case. How long have you been here now?”

“Almost four months and ...”

“Something is not right. Don’t ask him, talk to Chima to see if he knows anything about your case. Wale tells him everything,” Romanus said.

Laja scratched his head. “Thanks. I’ve been suspecting there is a problem too. It’s only Tony and I remaining out of the people that arrived here at about the same time.”

“I know. Talk to Chima and express your concern. He could be of help.”

Chima tapped at his computer keyboard and peered into its screen for long without a response as Laja spoke. They were all the same, Laja thought, unbothered about the pains of others besides the money they made. Chima was not interested in his affair; he stopped talking.

“I de hear you o. You say Wale de disappoint you. You don pay am?” Chima said. Laja stirred. “Yes. I paid for the whole package from Nigeria to the UK. Lati, di guy for Lagos, tell me sey everything go don dey ready wen I get here. Wale even take my return ticket join.”

“Hhm. Wale na big boy for Jo’burg ...” Chima said, turning to face Laja. “He don tell me about your case before you come here but ... make I see di documents wey you get first, den I go see wetin I fit do.”

The following day, Laja unzipped his jacket and handed the British passport Lati had sold him to Chima. “My Nigerian passport dey with Wale.”

Chima flipped through, then put the passport under a microscope on his table.

“Na this tin you wan use travel from here?”

“Yes. Lati say Wale go tell me when coast clear and I go use am enter UK.”

Chima smiled. “I for say make you no try use this thing enter Europe o. You fit use am inside Africa but if you take am go any entry point for Europe, alarm go blow.”

Laja’s stomach dropped. “But ... I paid a lot of money for the passport, believing the guy was trustworthy.”

“Maybe him too no know. Anyway, na money business. People wey de tell true no plenty for business. Dog de chop dog well for Nigeria, even anywhere in the world for dis kain business,” Chima said as he handed the passport back and turned to face his computer screen.

Laja put the passport back into an inner pocket. “What do I do now?” he said, sitting down and propping his head in his right hand. He soon felt hot and removed his jacket. “I’m confused.”

“Don’t worry. I go talk to Wale first. You be nice guy, I go see wetin I fit do. Yah?”

“Thanks,” Laja said, downcast. Discovering that the passport he’d paid so much for was a dud was a rude shock. What if he’d not heeded Romanus’ advice? He would still have believed he had a genuine document and get into trouble when he used it. But was Chima sure?

Two days later Chima said to him: “I fit arrange something for you on your Nigerian passport wey you go fit use enter UK....”

“Really? I’ll be ever”

“Calm down. He go cost you money.”

Laja gasped. “I know, Wale will”

“Wale? Where Wale go get di money? You wan go wait for Wale own or you wan listen make I talk?”

“I’m sorry, but I no get any money for” Laja started, swallowing hard

“You too de jump. Cool down. I know sey you no get money now. I don de tink am since yesterday because I wan help you,” Chima said, giving Laja an eyeful

and removing his glasses. “You go dey pay me small every month when you start work for England. My guy for London go arrange work and where you go stay. But na 3.5.”

“Sorry?”

“I mean £3, 500.”

Laja’s shook; he felt weak. “My God! Where I fit get dat kain money after I don pay for everything and dem even take my return ticket join?”

“Abeg, that one no concern me. If you want this arrangement, based on trust, I go start work now and, like say two or three weeks, you go commot here. Trust me,” Chima said.

The words: ‘You go commot here, leaving South Africa,’ were all he needed. But he told Chima a lot of money was involved and he needed time to consider the offer. After about an hour, he told Chima he’d agreed to the deal.

“You sure say you don think well? I no wan”

“Yes. Nothing much to think about really. I no go fail you. Abeg, help me.”

Chima smiled. “Don’t worry. I no de talk wetin I no fit do.”

Four weeks after, Chima handed Laja his Nigerian passport with a UK Study Visa stamped on it. There was also a university admission letter with other supporting documents. Almost breathless with joy and amazement, Laja scanned through the documents open-mouthed. He’d had his doubts, despite Chima’s reputation. It usually took over a year to process a foreign university admission; he’d got one within weeks. How it was done did not matter anymore. Desperate to leave

Johannesburg, his hope must rest on the trust that Chima had got him original documents. If trust failed him again, he was ready to face the consequences.

Bulawayo in Yeovil, the bar to which Wale often arranged send-off parties for his clients, wore a drab and dour look. It smelled terribly.

Laja ordered a can of juice but the other guys insisted he must have something stronger to celebrate his leaving.

“You want me to be drunk on the plane?” he said, beaming.

“You won’t get drunk taking a beer. Will you? We are celebrating you, man,” Wale said. There was a tinge of relief in his voice.

“Don’t worry, even if you are drunk, you are on a night flight. By morning when you get to Heathrow, you’ll be sober,” Romanus added.

“No. I don’t want to be intoxicated at any point of the journey, today or tomorrow,” Laja said, then ordered a bottle of Redd’s. He twisted the cap open and took a long gulp.

The other guys chatted loudly, sharing their experiences and what they would do when they left South Africa. Intermittently, they infused Nigerian languages into their discussions. They ordered drinks as if they wanted to punish Wale by making him pay for their frustrations. But Wale seemed unperturbed. As the guys drank and chatted, Laja smiled and nodded from time to time, but he was too anxious, too preoccupied with questions evolving and expanding in his head. Would the flight be smooth? Would he get through immigration successfully? What if no one came to

meet him at the airport as Chima promised? How long would it take before he gets a job?

What a place for a send-off! Laja thought as he and others filed out of the bar and walked to Wale's car after about an hour later. Young wheelbarrow pushers, whom the bar often contracted to ferry very drunk customers home, surrounded them, asking if they needed their services. Wale asked if they could transport someone to London. The boys said they could; the five guys laughed. They got into the car and rode into the gleamy lights of Johannesburg night towards Jan Smuts Airport.

“What's next?” Laja asked Romanus who sat next to him in the car.

Romanus sighed. “My brother, I don't know. I'm afraid and confused about what next, but I have come too far to go back. I can't go back home the way I am,” Romanus said.

Laja nodded. Romanus had been the friendliest to him. He was full of ideas, encouragement, and fruitful advice, but uncertain about what to do about his own life. Laja would miss him. He himself did not know what lay in wait, but he had to move on with his own fate.

Chapter 25

Laja had reasons to fear as the plane landed and the passengers started trooping out. Heathrow was a giant beast, chewing, swallowing, and spitting out migrants from its enormous belly round the clock. Outside, something hit him. It was not the chilly weather; he'd had a fair share of that in Johannesburg. The aura was hard to explain. It made him feel out of place when he was almost reaching the place he'd spent months longing for. He prayed silently as he walked into the main building. If only he could cross Immigration without a hitch, then a new chapter of his life would begin.

That no one seemed to have any interest in him became another anxiety. 'Just comport yourself. They are watching you,' he said to himself. Suddenly, all the sordid tales he'd heard about migrants' experiences at Heathrow disappeared as he was stamped in and heard 'welcome to the UK.' First, he walked slowly, then faster, thinking he might be called back. He wanted to look back but dared not. What if

At the Gate 5 Arrival Lounge, he called the number Chima had given him. The voice at the other end asked him to describe what he was wearing, promising that someone would come to pick him in about an hour. He'd sat for too long in the plane, and with a new-found confidence, he walked up and down the lounge. After about two hours, a young man, in a woolly hat, black jacket and Jordan sneakers, walked towards him.

"You must be Laja, I'm Mike," he said, grabbing Laja's hand in a warm handshake. "Welcome to London. Chuks said you were to arrive in the afternoon. Did you change your flight?"

“No, my flight came as scheduled.”

“Someone else was to come and meet you, but because of the change, I had to cancel my shift this morning to come here.”

“Oh. Thank you.”

“I hope your bags are not too heavy because we are taking the train,” Mike said.

The train was prompt and neat but as it moved and sped on, the whizz made Laja struggle to keep his eyes opened. He would have loved to awake chatting with someone, talk about London and the United Kingdom, about hope and the opportunities available to him, and more. But he didn't want to be seen as overexcited or too desperate. Moreover, other passengers would be listening in; he didn't think being a JJC, a naïve new arrival, was a badge of honour. Mike had switched into a sullenness which surprised him. His not saying anything to him, made Laja's decision easy.

Later, as he dragged his bigger bag up and down the stairs to the platform at the Heathrow Express stop, he understood why Mike had asked if his bags were heavy.

“We've got a station to go before reaching home,” Mike said to him inside a near-empty tube coach they boarded. “What were you doing in South Africa?” Mike said out of the blue.

“Nothing for a long time. Then, I assisted someone at his shop for a few weeks just before I left,” Laja said, suspecting that Mike knew his story.

“I can bet you won't lack work in England,” Mike said, a smile on his face.

From Peckham Rye Station, their final stop, the walk to the house was took about five minutes but it laborious for Laja who could not match Mike's long strides. A man in white shirt and jeans with a baseball cap opened the door of 15 Bibury Close to them.

"I am Chuks, welcome to London," the man said, shooting out his hand for a shake. He almost fitted the mental image Laja had of him, tall, big, and bearded. A slender, dressed up lady, sat on a sofa in the lounge. "That's my girlfriend Amara," Chuks said.

Laja nodded towards the lady who smiled back.

"How are you," Chuks said, pointing Laja to a seat.

"I'm fine, thank you."

"Wetin full your bag like dis? You pack clothes and shoes come England?" Chuk's asked, glancing at Laja's big bag.

"Not really. It's mostly books."

"Books? Na book you come read for here? You really wan go school or you wan make money?" Chuks said, chuckling.

Mike and Amara laughed. Laja grinned, feeling embarrassed. He'd bought the mostly used books and packed them in the bag, as advised by the guys in Jo'burg, to make suspicious immigration officers believe that he was truly coming to study.

"Would you like a cup of tea ...or coffee?" Amara asked.

"No. Not now, thank you," Laja said.

"Chima no send me anything?" Chuks asked.

Laja dipped his left hand into his jacket and brought out a tiny key. He opened the big bag, lifted the contents, and from the bottom, he brought out a big book. From its centre, he tore off a page, and carefully removed an envelope which Chuks opened. Inside was a smaller envelope. As he ripped it, two bank cards dropped to the floor. He peered inside the envelope, then picked up the cards and scrutinised them.

“Na only debit cards Chima send me? I been tink say na credit cards him mention nau,” Chuks said and shrugged. “Amara, you go any safe ATM go try these cards later, abeg.”

“No problem,” Amara said.

“You are welcome again,” Chuks said to Laja. “Make I tell you now, you no go fit stay for London o. London don full, overfull sef. In fact, plenty people de move go outside London go look for work nowadays.”

“And survival is cheaper, and you are safer outside London,” Amara added, “nobody go stop and ask you for your papers.”

“Na true but no be dat one we de talk. The guy get study visa. How many people get resident permit for England sef?” Chuks said as his phone rang. “Yes? Hello! Who be dis?” He stood up and went into an adjacent room. After a couple of minutes, he came out.

“Na di guy wey go accommodate you and help you find work, call me so. I hope sey you get some money with you?”

“Yes. But it’s not much ...,” Laja said.

“You need to pay rent deposit. Dem no de negotiate dat one. The guy mentioned something like twenty-five or thirty pounds per week.”

Laja kept nodding as Chuks spoke, wondering when demands for money from him would stop.

“I know sey you don tire, we go de talk more later,” Chuks said and turned to Mike. “Make him go rest for your room.”

Laja followed Mike, pulling his bag across the corridor into a room with walls covered with posters of footballers and half-naked women. He had a shower and slept off almost as soon as he hit the bed.

Chuks woke him up at about 7pm, asking if he would like to go watch a Nigerian movie with him and Amara. He would have loved to sleep more but he didn't have a choice than to go with them. Mike had left for work, and he wouldn't feel comfortable staying alone in the house of people he'd just met. He dressed up quickly.

“The place is just about five minutes' walk from here, what do” Chuks said Amara who wanted them to take the car.

“My heels, they'll get damaged,” Amara said.

Chuks chuckled. “Must you wear heels all the time? Why not put on something comfortable? We are literally going next door.”

Amara stopped brushing her hair to gaze at Chuks. “You are a man, you won't understand.”

Chuks laughed. “My brother, abeg let's go,” he said to Laja.

Outside, Amara insisted on Chuks holding her hand as they walked to the cinema.

The congregation of so many loud-speaking black people inside the dark cinema, surprised Laja. The different languages some spoke showed that they were mostly Nigerians. Watching *Living in Bondage*, a 1993 movie on the wide screen was a different experience from the first time he watched it on a DVD player at Gani's house. Unlike then, he didn't believe a man using his wife for rituals to become rich was plausible, neither did he think the movie portrayed African traditional practices in good light. He heard Amara cursing, saying the world was filled with bad men. Chuks repeatedly whispered that 'it's only a movie.'

On their way back, back home from Peckham Multiplex, Laja had a sense of familiarity. He'd heard that Peckham was like the teeming Oshodi market in Lagos, where Lagosians said the dead often come to trade with the living. He saw glimpses of Ojuelegba, the sung-about Lagos melting point of confusion and chaos; and of the bustling part of Obalende on Lagos Island. There was the briskness, restlessness and the hustle and bustle of Lagos night. Many shadowy and well-lit faces bore stress and frustration as they passed by. He had not imagined the possibility of such a similarity with Lagos until he found himself in the middle of it.

Chuks must have read his mind. "You see as Peckham be like Lagos?"

"I was just wondering too," Laja said, after nodding.

Chuks spoke again. "Anybody don lost for your family before?"

"No," Laja answered, surprised by Chuks' question.

"Fine. I for say make you look well, you fit find someone wey don lost long time here inside Peckham o. Even people wey don die before dey here."

"Ha, Chuks!" Amara said, elbowing her boyfriend on his side.

“Na true I de talk nau. Where you think sey all these people come from? Many of the Papa Londoner and Mama Londoner wey don tey for London be dead people wey come back o.”

“Hhm! Story master. Abeg, talk better; buy suya make we chop,” Amara said.

They stopped at a stand and Chuks bought skewered chicken and beef with drinks worth £25. After they walked a few steps, he stopped and turned back.

“Make we buy your own for you, my brother. Dis woman fit finish all this suya before we reach house,” he said to Laja.

They went back to the stand and Chuks bought £5 worth of suya for Laja. On their way, Amara opened the meat parcel and started eating. She chewed so loudly that it irritated Laja. He wondered why Chuks, his left hand around Amara’s waist, did not tell her to chew gently. Was it that he did not hear it or that he wasn’t irritated by what he heard? A walking gap soon grew between him and the couple. Watching them from behind, he remembered Bola. He wished they were still together. They’d grown now and would be able to hold hands without fear.

Early in the morning the door opened and Chuks came in. He gave a card in blue and red colours to Laja. “Dat na National Insurance number wey you go use when your student visa go expire. Indy na your name now o. You still get long time. Stand in front mirror make you practise well.”

Laja smiled, thanked Chuks, and put the card into his inner jacket pocket. He was confident he wouldn’t need to use it. His permit would be renewed in his real name.

Chapter 26

The following morning, at Liverpool Street Station, Mike helped Laja to lift one of his bags over the turnstiles. After buying his ticket, they joined other passengers staring at the stretch of platform display group of screens.

“There should be a train for Colchester in about 30 minutes. Get to the platform there,” Mike said, pointing to the place marked Platform 11. “After crossing the barrier, you’ll see your train on the platform. Don’t get on the wrong train; ask if you are not sure about anything. Okay?”

“Yes. Thanks,” Laja said.

“I’ve got to leave now. I have an appointment this morning,” Mike said as they shook hands and he patted Laja on the back. “Call the phone number Chuks gave you when you arrive,” Mike added, then walked away quickly. Laja wanted to thank him again and say he would give him a ring, but Mike was in a hurry; he merged into the antsy crowd and disappeared. He didn’t seem cut out for niceties and friendliness.

On the right of the station, people gathered around kiosks of hot drinks, snacks, and stationeries. Laja joined a queue and got himself a cup of white coffee without sugar. He’d always had his hot drinks with sugar but said ‘no’ because the man before him said same. He didn’t know why he did it, but he was in a new environment now and he must stop being timid and start being assertive.

The train was warming up on the platform when he entered. About 15 minutes later, the train left the station slowly, passing other trains, then gaining

speed. Laja felt a huge lessening of the uncertainty and predominant fear that plagued him up to Heathrow. He wanted to be happier, but he could not draw out more from within him. The earlier feeling of bleakness at Mike's departure came back. It must be something that came with him to England. Or could it be because he thought everyone but himself knew where they were going and what to expect?

He'd realized that the difficult challenges in life were not about the individuals involved but about the things they had or did not have. Life was about resources. For him it all boiled down to money. Lots of money. If Father had enough money, he would not have let them leave his house. If he wanted to marry another wife and Mother resisted it, he'd have built them a separate house like many rich people did. Even Mother would probably not have moved out but concentrate on raising them, her children, in affluence. For her cancer, she would be having the best medical attention. Toke would have completed at teachers' college and got a job. Ola might have loved school or had all he needed to develop his football interest. Coming to England was his opportunity to acquire the weapons to fight poverty. But he must have a plan. Every time he attempted to create a mind map, he got confused or distracted by something or someone.

"May I see your ticket, sir?"

It was the ticket inspector. He punched a hole in Laja's ticket and moved on. For some time, Laja looked at the ticket and the hole, which had cut off a couple of the numbers on the ticket.

His new host was waiting at the train station and approached with a smile, stretching out his right hand.

“You must be Laja. I’m Sam. How are you?”

“Yes, sir. I’m Laja. I’m fine. I was just thinking of how to call you.”

“Chuks gave me your description and said you would be arriving at about now, so I thought it would be good to come in good time and pick you up,” the man said. He was sturdy and wore a black jacket under which the collar of a blue shirt peeped. A sprinkle of grey hair at his temple showed he was older than Laja had expected. He decided he would call him ‘uncle.’ It was unAfrican to address older people directly by name.

Uncle Sam’s car was small but neat and smelled of lemon. Laja tried to capture landmarks that could guide a stranger as they drove home, but it was difficult. He didn’t have to be in a hurry; he would learn how to navigate the town later. When the car pulled into the drive of 10 Meadow Hill, he felt euphoric. He was going to start a new life in a new home, a new town and country.

“This room is the smallest, but I believe it will serve your purpose. The others are occupied by me and two other guys you’ll meet later. There is also Ben, the landlord’s son,” Uncle Sam said, pointing up. A single-sized bed took about three quarters of the room. A metal frame wardrobe covered with tarpaulin and a dressing table with a cracked mirror were on the other side. Uncle Sam showed Laja the bathroom and toilet and the communal kitchen downstairs. They ended up in the lounge.

“I’ll collect your personal details to complete a tenancy agreement form later,” Uncle Sam said, gazing at Laja as if weighing him up. He then went into the kitchen and came back with two cans of Coca Cola.

“So, what are your plans?” Uncle Sam said, pushing a can into Laja’s hand.

“Uncle, all I want is to work and start paying my debts as soon as possible.

“Chuks told me”

“It’s not just Chuks and his friend. I borrowed a lot of money from my uncle back home in Nigeria to buy a business that didn’t work out, and when I wanted to leave Nigeria. My mother is terribly ill; the responsibility of her medicines and maintenance is on me. My sister....” He stopped, thinking he was saying too much to someone he’d just met.

“I know. Just calm down. There are always huge responsibilities on anyone who travels out of Africa, especially to Europe.”

Laja heaved and sat back, stretching out his legs.

“I’ve been in this country for over ten years. What you must know is what I tell people like you, who come here newly,’ Uncle Sam said and paused to take a sip of his drink. Laja leaned forward on the sofa, looking expectantly at his host.

“England is a good and a bad place, depending on how you use your head. Many young Africans come here with high hopes but end up worse than they came. When some earn little money, they do a currency conversion and smile to themselves, thinking that they have become wealthy. They overlook many things - the rent, bills, tax – and embark on a flamboyant lifestyle,” Uncle Sam chuckled and glanced at Laja who was nodding intermittently as he spoke. “They soon forget their original plans and allow their dreams to die. Gradually, they fall into a financial and emotional rut; the struggle to get out makes them sink deeper.”

“I know. A friend of mine who travelled to Spain told me of his sad experience and those of others.”

“Different people with different experiences but just be your unique self. You’ll hear a lot of stories, but I want you to be smart but modest. You’ll have to forget your education and who you were at home, they are irrelevant here.” Again, Uncle Sam paused to gaze at Laja. “I hope I’m not sounding boring or scary?”

“Not at all. It’s good to have someone like you to guide and tell me the truth. I appreciate it,” Laja said.

“Talking of appreciation, smiles and compliments are common here, but the truth is that however long you stay here, you’ll always be different. I always tell people to place themselves at level zero and see where they go from there. Don’t allow someone else to get the sadist satisfaction of putting you in your place. It is always more painful that way,” Uncle Sam said and stood up. “You seem tired. You may want to go upstairs to unpack and have a rest. We’ll talk more later.”

Laja knew he must have been dozing and felt terrible. He climbed the stairs to his new room, removed his jacket and slumped into the bed beside his smaller luggage.

The strangeness of the room made him sit up suddenly as he woke up. Then he remembered where he was and fell back into the bed, staring at the ceiling. After a period, voices from downstairs attracted him to the lounge. Uncle Sam was with two guys. “This is Laja, the new guy I told you about,” Uncle Sam said as he stepped into the lounge. Laja, meet Riba and Isaac, the other housemates.”

Riba was tall and lean, with an air of a studious student about him. Isaac was a bit chubby and darker than everyone else. They shook hands.

Riba smiled. “I learnt you are a Nigerian. How’s home?”

“Good. Nothing much has changed.”

“Hm! I wasn’t expecting much change in an endemic rot,” Riba said, shrugging.

“I hope you came with some warmer clothes than what you’re wearing,” the guy called Isaac said. “It’s a bit warm today but don’t be deceived by the British weather, it could change suddenly.”

“Who comes from Africa to England with winter clothes, Isaac?” Riba said.

“I know, I was only” Isaac started.

“It was getting warmer when I left Jo’burg and I was told that when it is warm there, it would be getting colder here, I” Laja said.

“So, you came from South Africa? How’s the place?”

“Not too bad. But people there say things are getting worse.”

“I heard it’s a great place to be and that you don’t need to come to Europe if you”

“If you have the permits to stay, and you got a decent job, if not, it’s difficult. You could be deported.”

“Really? With all the African Renaissance rhetoric?” Riba said, frowning.

“Really? To many of them, they are not in Africa. Africa is another place.”

Riba licked his lips. “Anyway, you are welcome,” he said. He later left, saying he was going to his room to have a short rest before leaving for night work. A moment later, Isaac too said he was working. He strapped a backpack on and left. Uncle Sam offered Laja macaroni and cheese. He ate, wondering what lay ahead. It

was the first time he'd seen people returning from one job to go back to another. Would he too have to work round the clock?

Two days later, Uncle Sam showed Laja a document which he said had arrived in the post from Chuks. It was a draft agreement he had to sign, stating he would pay £50 monthly from the following month, September, to Chima through Chuks for a loan of £4500 he'd collected. Laja read it twice – he could not believe it. He wanted to say he was not going to pay a penny of the inflated amount, but he would be confronting the wrong person. What if Uncle Sam was in the know?

“But I didn't ... I mean, it was £3500 we agreed on!”

Uncle Sam collected the paper from Laja's shaky hands and adjusted his glasses “Was that agreement made here or in South Africa?”

“With Chima, the guy in Jo'burg.”

“Well, the remaining must be for other expenses. D'you think meeting you at the airport and arranging to get you here was free? You Nigerians say: ‘No paddy for London,’ it's true my brother, there's no friendship without mutual benefits in the UK,” Uncle Sam said as he handed the document back to Laja.

Laja's folded the paper, went to his room, and sat on the bed. He'd known that it was going to be difficult paying back his debts, but he hadn't expected this. Trapped, he had succumbed to incurring more debts in Johannesburg, it was wicked for anyone to add more to it. How hard and how long did they think he could work to pay back the said ‘loan?’ Unless there was a way they could force him to pay them, his mother's care, paying his rent, and meeting other basic needs would be his priority when he started working. As he put the letter in his small bag, he

remembered Uncle Dele's loan and sighed. Life was going to be tougher than he'd thought.

Chapter 27

On Tuesday the following week, Uncle Sam took Laja to register for national insurance. On return, they went to the office of an employment agency, Fillers Recruitments. A lady who introduced herself as Stephanie gave Laja some forms to complete and made copies of his passport and other documents.

“Sam, please make sure he brings his NI immediately it arrives.”

“Trust me, he will, Steph,” Uncle Sam said as they stood up to leave.

“Hold on a minute. Would you like to start today?” the other lady in the office, who had been on the phone since their arrival, said. She stood up and walked to Laja.

“Sorry, I’m Jackie,” she said. “Something just came up, and we need people to go there immediately. Are you interested?” Laja looked towards Uncle Sam who seemed surprised too.

Uncle Sam shrugged. “He will do it. Or what d’you think?” he asked Laja who nodded and smiled.

“Where is the place, Jackie?” Uncle Sam asked.

“Premier Inn. I’ll take him there.”

“You are fortunate, man. Just do your best and follow directions back here when you finish,” Uncle Sam said, putting an asterisk on a map he’d made on a piece of paper. “From here,” he said, “it’s straight down the High Street and at the bottom you take the left turn. It is the third street after that.”

Jackie gave Laja a pair of work boots and gloves and drove him to the hotel where some furniture was to be offloaded from a truck into a building. Taking the furniture up some stairs was tricky and back-straining. Many times, his knuckles scraped painfully against the bannister and walls. He'd never done such a tedious job before and felt everyone else was being lazy as they repeatedly went to smoke or have a cup of tea. At one point, he needed to use the toilet but chose to hold it till the end of work. The agency must have a good report about him so that he would get more work.

Almost drained of all strength when they finished, he trudged, following directions to the office where he handed them the original copy of his timesheet. From there, he did not have any problem finding his way back home. He'd worked for three hours and earned £15.60.

“You look tired, man,” Riba said as he opened the door.

Laja smiled and shook his head.

“What have you been up to? I learnt you got a job. What was it?”

“It's not really ... it was a part-time a job ... we were offloading furniture upstairs at one hotel and”

“Wow! For how much per hour?”

Laja handed his timesheet to Riba. “I don't know, but we worked for about three hours.”

“What! 15.60 for a job that knocked you this hard?”

There was curiosity in Uncle Sam's eyes as he descended the stairs. “How did it go?”

“They paid him minimum wage for a heavy portering job,” Riba spoke before Laja could respond.

Uncle Sam collected the timesheet from Laja. “That must be the rate for the job, what’s the problem with it?” Uncle Sam said to Riba. “The agency wouldn’t pay him less because he’s new.”

“Ridiculous. That is slavery, Sam.”

“But you are not”

Riba walked away before Uncle Sam could complete his sentence. The older man’s vexed eyes followed him. Then, he turned to Laja. “Don’t mind him. You’ll need to open a bank account. They will pay this into my account which you filled on the forms. I will top it up for you to get a mobile phone. You need one.”

Chapter 28

Ben, the landlord's son, lived in the attic. He only came down to use the toilet, overfill the washing machine with his clothes, or to hastily throw a pack of food into the microwave.

Laja, who'd thought he was the only one at home, jumped the first time he saw him.

"I'm sorry if I scared you. I am Ben."

"It's okay. I'm Laja. Happy to meet you."

"Happy to meet you too. What are you studying?"

"Em, em ... I will be...."

"You are at uni, aren't you?"

"Yes, yes. Maths, Additional Maths and"

"Wow! Wow! Really? You must be good with numbers. I never liked Maths. Managed a 'C' at school before I stopped bothering my brain," Ben said as he covered a slice of bread with butter, another with a generous amount of raspberry jam, and put the two together. Laja noticed that Ben's name was written on the containers of the spreads.

Ben ate hungrily, humming, and opening the cupboards one after another, with his free hand. After finishing the sandwich, he made another. Laja wondered what he was looking for.

“See you later, Laj,” Ben said and disappeared through the kitchen door. His feet were heavy but quick on the stairs as he climbed up.

Four days later, Laja came downstairs to hear Ben and Riba arguing. He stood at the landing, listening.

“Read my thick lips, I don’t navigate inanities with nonentities,” Riba said.

“You are the nonentity. A hypocrite who comes here to work and improve his life yet hates Britain and its people. Why not go back home, man? Loads of jobs are waiting for you there.”

“I am too big to hate. And you don’t think the jobs are available here because people like you are too lazy to work?” Riba said, took a couple of steps toward the lounge and stopped. “Unlike you, I don’t do benefits, I break sweat for every penny I earn in this country.”

“You are ... you are talking shit, and you know it,” Ben said.

“Why is my educating you so painful, you have a problem with being enlightened by a black man?”

“Fuck you! That all you do, hide your stupidity under colour. Is it a mantle?” Ben said.

Laja was hesitant to say a word, not knowing what the argument was about.

“Hey guys, please”

Ben turned to him. “All I said was let the crap of the past go, focus on the benefits of the present, and he”

“Of course, to you it’s crap, but to millions of Africans who were uprooted from their homes, had their future stolen in the name of your evil slavery and colonization, it can’t be crap. Can it?”

“Stop your victim mentality and get a life, mate.”

“I’m not your mate. I am an original African”

“So what? Millions of better Africans everywhere....”

“I’m different. I don’t do what fools like you want. I don’t bootlick or kowtow to any skin colour.”

Ben sneered. “Welcome, black Jesus, saviour of the black race,” he said, moving away.

“Better than you, a white pig!”

Ben turned, his face was red, and walked towards Riba. Laja stepped between them.

“Guys, please.”

“Fuck you!” Ben said, raising his middle finger at Riba.

“Fuck you too, times the number of the letters in ‘fuck,’” Riba said as Ben ran upstairs.

Their argument did not make much sense to Laja, but he’d learned a new expression: “I don’t navigate inanities with nonentities.” He would leave out the ‘Read my thick lips’ part if he ever needed to use it.

Chapter 29

The advertised positions he chose seemed tailor-made for him in education and experience. Within a couple of weeks, he wrote over thirty job applications, which Uncle Sam posted for him. A few responses came quickly through the phone, asking for more information about his qualifications, and if he was qualified to work in the UK. Others painted a picture of the roles he would be playing, so convincingly that he was sure he would soon get employed into a lucrative position. The disappointing calls dropped immediately he responded that yes, he was Laja Balogun. The rash among them dropped almost immediately they heard him speak: “Sorry, must be a wrong number.”

Uncle Sam laughed when Laja mentioned his disappointment at not getting follow-up calls after about four weeks.

“I’m sorry, but you are not likely to get the types of jobs you were applying for.”

“But you”

“I know, I posted the letters as it was not easy to tell you that it would likely be a waste of time. We all went through similar experiences, thinking that we were even overqualified for the jobs we applied for, only to learn the hard”

“It’s called the migrant overenthusiasm syndrome,” Riba added. “There are jobs black people do here, which we get easily, Laja, not the type of white-collar jobs you’ve been applying for. Some things automatically disqualify you from such jobs....”

“Now I know why they....”

“Outside London, even those who are born here and have the right accent still find it difficult to get office jobs as long as they are black,” Uncle Sam said and chuckled. “But don’t worry, I’m sure the agency will get you a job soon.”

Laja was dozing while watching *Home And Away* in the lounge when the house phone rang. The ringing penetrated his ears and went deep into his head.

“Hiya, may I speak with Lajee, please?”

“Speaking,” Laja said, his heart racing.

“It’s Jackie from Fillers Recruitment. We’ve got all your checks and references back, positive.”

“Thank you,” Laja said.

“Are you happy now?” she said.

“Yes. Very happy.”

“There is an opening at the hospital. Their Housekeeping Department wants someone who would be there as a regular until they recruit and train their own staff. Is it something you want to consider?”

“Yes ...yes, please,” Laja said abruptly.

“Hokey Dokey. I suspect they might want to retain you as their staff, but that would be after you’ve worked for us for at least three months. Is that okay or d’you want to have a think about it and get back to me?”

Laja felt she knew he was desperate and would grab any opportunity but was teasing him. “It’s okay. I’ll like to ... if they want me,” he said.

“No worries. I’ll call them and let them know you’ll come in tomorrow morning. Ask for Shelley at the Housekeeping Department. She’s the manager. D’you want me to spell her name for you? It’s Shelley - Sierra, Harry, Echo, Lima, Lima, Echo, Yankee. Okay? She’ll be expecting you.”

He could not wait to tell Uncle Sam, who came back late afternoon.

“At long last. Congratulations. What a pleasant coincidence; that’s my department,” Uncle Sam said, as they shook hands.

“Congratulations, man,” Riba, who was watching TV and hadn’t appeared to hear them, also said. “But be careful. Cleaning after others is not the best job in the world. I know, someone must do it, but a cleaner in a hospital is not just cleaning dirt but also scratching at sicknesses and even death while cleaning human waste and bodily fluid like blood, phlegm, and mucus of sick people.”

“Have you got a better job for him then?” Uncle Sam said, his voice raised.

“Chill, man. I’m only telling him to be careful and protect himself. Don’t make it sound as if I’m condemning his job, Sam. You know I’ve seen it all,” Riba said, stretching out his hands and turning to face Laja. “I’ve cleaned enough shit to last me a lifetime in this country – watery ones, the diarrhoeic; the big, heavy unfloatable ones that block the closets; the tiny snaky ones; the bitty fluffy terrible stinkers that keep on bopping as you flushed – you name it, I’ve cleaned it.”

Uncle Sam burst into laughter. “You are disgusting,” he said.

“Truth is often disgusting but it is what it is, Sam,” Riba said. “All I’m saying is, be careful and have a plan. You don’t clean others’ shit without thinking of an end date.”

Laja smiled, for him, the type of job did not matter. He was desperate and ready to do any job.

Later in the evening, in his room, excited, yet apprehensive as he thought about what to wear. Choosing the right thing to wear was important so was determining the questions he could be asked. For a long time, he thought of appropriate responses he would give. Then he stood before the dressing table’s cracked mirror to practise how to wear a humble, gentlemanly demeanor that would impress an interviewer.

Uncle Sam knocked on his door at about 11.00 pm asking if he could come in.

“I’m off work tomorrow but I’ll be leaving for London early in the morning. I hope you know your way to the hospital”

“I’ll find my way. It’s on the main road, isn’t it?”

“Yes, just off the road leading to the university. And I think you won’t find the job too taxing. I’ve been working there for about five years now, and I am the best in the department. The manager, Shelley, likes my work. That’s why at times, I work two shifts during the day, and she still allows me to work night.” There was excitement in his voice. “And when it comes to deep cleaning, she doesn’t trust anyone else unless I’m off duty.”

“What’s ‘deep-cleaning?’”

Uncle Sam turned to face Laja. “You see, when there is a contagious disease on a ward, it will be evacuated, and our department will be called to do a deep cleaning. That is, every item and space on the ward must be carefully cleaned with a stronger disinfectant than we normally use. Do you understand?”

Laja nodded.

“Or when a patient dies. The curtains and beddings will be removed and replaced, and everything in the bed space, the bed, furniture, and floor, will be deep-cleaned.”

Laja’s eyebrows rose. “So, you see dead bodies?”

“Rarely. A couple of times. The porters would have removed them before the nurses call Housekeeping.”

“How ... how did that make you feel?”

Uncle Sam paused, then shrugged. “That we are all good when we are alive. When life is gone, what remains is a mess, a stench.”

“Very true. So, when it’s deep cleaning, you spend more time cleaning around the place where”

“That’s the difference. We use stronger cleaning stuff and do quality cleaning to ensure the safety of other patients and staff. And it must be done in fast because the wards are always short of bed spaces. I deep-clean a bed space within 35 to 40 minutes; better and faster than anyone else in the department.” There was an elation in his voice as he spoke. It made Laja imagine what he would meet in the morning and if he too would love the job.

He was the first to be up, dressed by 6.30 am and sat in the lounge watching the morning news. When Uncle Sam came down and saw him, he smiled. “The hospital is just about ten minutes’ walk from here, you’ll be too early if you leave before 8.00 am. And you don’t need that type of jacket and shoes for the job, man. They’ll give you some uniform. You’ll only need a cheap work jacket for warmth when outside.”

Laja thanked him and went upstairs. He was not going to change the jacket; it was formal wear for his first day at work. As soon as he heard Uncle Sam leave, he went back downstairs and sat, flicking to different TV channels. At 7.40 am, he left the house and arrived at the hospital reception just before 8.00am.

A receptionist gave him directions to Housekeeping. The office, in a rather dark corridor leading to the Chaplaincy, was different, like an afterthought addition to the hospital. Shelley welcomed him and reeled out the benefits of being in the department, repeating the availability of extra shifts if he wanted to work more than his contracted hours. On a board behind her desk was a photograph of Uncle Sam wearing a light blue top and smiling awkwardly. Written above the photograph was: *Cleaner of the Month*. His surname was misspelt: Frypong instead of Frimpong.

“That’s Sam. D’you know him?” Shelley asked.

“Yes. We stay in the same house,” Laja said, then regretted it a few seconds after. What if Uncle Sam did not want people to know that they were acquaintances?

“Fantastic. He’s one of our best here. A hardworking man,” Shelley said, her face brightening up as she shifted her seat back and tucked strands of hair behind her ears on both sides. “You know what? I think I’ll put both of you together on some shifts after the induction so that he mentors you. Is that okay?”

“No problem. It’s okay.”

“Besides cleaning, we are also responsible for the constant hydration of all patients. D’you know ... I mean, are you comfortable with making and serving drinks? Tea, coffee...?”

“Yes. Sure.”

“I don’t mean to be rude, but you should be able to make drinks for patients when you are on shift,” Shelley said, turning her neck to the right and raising her brows.

“I understand. I can make tea ... any drink.”

“Fantastic. Fantastic,” Shelley said, opened a drawer and brought out bundles of paper, took some out and pushed them towards Laja. “If you spend some time completing those, we can start you as soon as we get a couple of references from your.... Wait a minute, since you are from the agency, you won’t need those. We can start you off with induction and training as early as Monday. Is that okay?”

“It’s okay by me.”

“That’s okay with you then. Yeah?”

“Yes...”

“I’ll see you on Monday then,” Shelley said.

“Thank you,” Laja said, smiled and stood up. He sat down again and started completing the forms he’d been given as Shelley rummaged through her drawers.

“You know what? We can get you your uniform today,” Shelley said. She dialled a number, then put the phone down almost immediately and stood up. “You

can take those with you, complete and bring them with you on Monday. If you follow me now, we'll see what we can get you."

Laja put the forms in his bag and followed Shelley as she weaved in and out of corridors. "I don't know how they do it, but the uniforms are either too small or too big for everyone. I hope they'll find you some fitting ones."

The storekeeper, a wiry middle-aged man, gave Laja a brief look and threw two packets of uniforms marked National Health Service (NHS) in plastic bags on the table. He then scribbled and made asterisks on one of the forms which he asked Laja to sign.

"I'll see you on Monday," Shelley said, and left.

Chapter 30

After a week of induction and training and another of shadowing others, Laja started working on his own. On a late shift on Peterborough Ward one evening, he was startled to find a plump black man with dreadlocks sitting on a stool, a drink in hand, inside the kitchen. He was wearing Housekeeping uniform.

“I’m sorry. Didn’t know anyone was in here.”

The man smiled. “It’s okay. Just resting my feet after the tea round. Are you new here?”

“Relatively, just about six weeks.”

“I’ve been on leave. I’m Jermaine, happy to meet you.”

“I’m Laja. Happy to meet you too.”

“Lagher? Lagher from Africa?” Jermaine said, laughing loudly.

“It’s L-a-j-a. Where are you from?”

“What d’you think?”

“I don’t know”

“You probably think I’m from Africa. Yeah?”

“Of course, I know ... I mean you speak with British accent, but you must”

“Far from it, man. I’m not from Africa. I’m from the Caribbean, Jamaica.”

“Oh! Okay,” Laja said and smiled.

The liquids trolley was overflowing with half-eaten fruits, cakes and wraps among the glass cups, jugs, mugs, and side plates.

“I’ll do the kitchen, don’t worry. You can sit for some minutes, relax and make yourself a drink. Then, later you clean the toilets,” Jermaine said.

Laja who’d started scraping a cup of unfinished yoghurt into the bin, wondered why two staff were delegated to work on the same ward. “I’ll just do what I need to do and....”

“No. I do the kitchen. You do the toilets. I was already here ...,” Jermaine said. “Okay, don’t worry, I’ll do the toilets too,” he added, with a wave of hand.

Laja stood, looking at him, not knowing what to say.

Jermaine continued: “You know what? I work in this ward most of the time, and when people come in here, all they do is disorganise things. I arrange things properly, that’s why I insist on doing it myself, not that I’m foolish. Yeah?” He pushed a glass into Laja’s hand and pointed at a bottle of orange squash on the table. “Get yourself a drink, sit and relax. I’ll do everything.”

Laja poured some of the drink into a glass, added water and took a long sip.

“You put too little water. Add more water, man. It’s squash. Don’t you take this type of drink in Africa?”

Laja felt a pinch, but it took a while for him to take it in and consider how to respond. Maybe Jermaine didn’t mean it in a bad way, he’d sounded friendly. He’d often felt pained after reflecting on encounters where he’d not given quick and apt responses to comments he found disparaging and derogatory. “No, we don’t have this. We only eat oranges that don’t make people bloat up,” he said. He saw the

momentary change in Jermaine's demeanor and felt he'd made his point. He left the kitchen.

At the corridor linking Peterborough to Twyford Ward, he saw Uncle Sam hoovering and told him what had happened.

"I know the bastard. He's got about two people sacked here," Uncle Sam said.

"Really, but he"

"What he said sounds racist but I'm not sure if one can call it that since he's black too. Caribbean people don't like us. They said Africans sold their forefathers into slavery. But your response was harsh too. If he takes it up against you, he's going to have the upper hand. You must act before he does. If not, I can bet that by tomorrow afternoon you'll get queried."

After getting a sheet of paper from the Nurse Station on Twyford Ward, he wrote, as dictated by Uncle Sam, that Jermaine had made a derogatory comment about him. He slipped it under Shelley's door. He was off the next day but got a phone call from Shelley saying his complaint was being investigated. She asked if he would like an extra day off to get over the issue and feel better before returning to work. Laja declined, saying he would be fine.

Laja returned to work with an afternoon shift on McGill Acute Medicine Ward. He'd worked before in one of the bays where one William Broston always wanted long chats with everyone.

“I don’t have any children. What d’you really need them for?” he’d said to Laja on the first day he worked there. He’d smiled, not knowing what to say. The nurses often whispered that many of the elderly patients complained of recurring illnesses just because they were lonely and preferred to stay in hospital where they had people caring for them and who they could talk to.

As soon as he spotted him, Mr. Broston asked: “Where are you from?” Laja had heard the question many times and it often led to more questions. If he had to respond, he would end the day not completing his work. Without a word, he wheeled his cleaning bucket closer and pressed down the mop to drain it.

“Boy, what’s your name?”

“It’s Laja. I told you before, Bill,” he said and commenced the forward and backward movement of his mop, trying not to bend over as instructed at the Moving and Handling training. But how does anyone sweep and mop without bending over?

“Rhaja! From India? Uhm, I don’t think so. Where are you from?”

Before Laja could answer, Bill added, “I mean originally.”

Uncle Sam had told him that ‘originally’ was a common British preemptive appendage to the question of identity. It ensured that an answer of being British, or a European citizen wouldn’t be enough if the responder was of a different colour.

“Nigeria,” Laja said, pausing and raising his head to look at Bill.

“Where is that?”

“West Africa.”

“Ahh! Yes. I have been there. I was in Egypt and Morocco during the war. Nice places to be in those days before the natives destroyed everything.” Resisting

the urge to tell him that the countries he mentioned were not in West Africa. Laja quickened the pace of work. He could not ignore Bill if he asked more questions. There had been memos instructing staff that talking to patients was part of their job roles. It was therapeutic and aided healing. Any employee ignoring patients would face disciplinary action. If any patient would complain, it was likely to be Bill.

“What did you say your name was?”

“I’m Laja, Bill.”

“Ninja? That sounds like a cult or a cartoon character, isn’t? Where are you from?”

“I told you a moment ago, Bill, Nigeria. I’m from Nigeria.”

“Yes. You did,” Bill said, then pulled and stared at the lapel of the hospital gown he was putting on. “What d’you make? Bless me. I mean, what do you produce in Africa?”

“It depends on which country in Africa, Bill. In Nigeria, we are the fifth largest producer of crude oil in the world,” Laja said as he swirled a dry mop on the floor.

“You don’t produce things like cars, planes in Africa, do you?”

Laja stopped. “It’s a big place, Bill. I’m from one country out of over fifty. In my country, we don’t produce cars, but there are car assembly plants and”

Bill giggled. “Anyone can assemble; you only have to follow the manuals, isn’t it?” he said, turning to the man on the right side of his bed. The man stared into his newspaper, unperturbed.

“Why didn’t you go to school?” Bill continued.

Laja breathed in deep. He'd expected Bill would stop questioning him after he left his bed space. If he said he didn't go to school, Bill would likely ask where he learned to speak English.

"I did go to school, up to uni."

"You? Uni? What did you study?"

"Maths, Maths, Physics."

"What's that?"

"Mathematics, Additional Mathematics and Physics. Combined honours," Laja said, raising his voice. He wanted others around to hear him.

Bill turned his head both ways. "Doesn't make sense. If you've been to uni, why are you doing this type of job then?"

It was another question Laja had heard often.

"It's a job, and someone has to do it," he said as he placed the *Wet Floor* sign between the bed spaces he'd cleaned. As he stepped out of the bay, he heard a shout for help from the next bay, his next port of call. He left the cleaner's trolley close to the wall and went into the bay with a broom and yellow bag.

"Help please! Help!" The elderly man, his eyes sunken and wild; his hair dishevelled, was turning from side to side, tearing and pulling at everything he could reach. The opening of the oversized hospital gown he wore showed a gaunt frame beneath. He struggled against his bed's side rails, trying to push them down by pulling and hitting them with his fists. "Who's in charge of this place? Who's the zookeeper here? Heeelp! Where are these bastards? Hey, black boy, come and help me. Come here! Please!"

The man's breathing sounded laboured, and his voice soon became hoarse. Laja went to the door, expecting to see a nurse approaching. There was none. Housekeeping and other support staff had been warned always allow only medical staff attend to patients' needs according to their professional decisions. He went back into the bay.

The man had thrown his pillows and everything he could reach on the bedside table - water jug, cup, newspapers, toffees, and sundry items - on the floor. The wet floor, a slip risk, would raise more eyebrows than the man's unattended pleas. Laja got a mop to swab the water snaking away from the bed space. As he squeezed the mop, he heard a grunt and a forceful escape of air, then another grunt. The smell that followed was overpowering. Laja hurried to the corridor. A nurse approached, stopped a few metres from the bay, checked the papers in her hand and went back. Another came out, two bays away, stopped as if to listen, then walked briskly into the next bay. The agitated man brought out his hand from his pyjamas bottom and threw something in the air. Excreta flew everywhere. Again, and again, he scooped his waste, threw it around and smeared everything near him with it.

Soon, the floor around the man, including the broom and the mop Laja was using, were covered with excreta. One of the other men in the bay seemed too stunned to speak. The other, strangely, slept through it all. A couple of nurses arrived and stood at the door. The ward Sister entered the bay and first stood at a distance, watching.

"I asked for a commode. Didn't I? Didn't I? I want to go home. Now! Right now!" He shook as he spoke. A male nurse went in, walking stealthily, calling on the man to calm down. The elderly man seemed to listen to the nurse and stopped shouting.

Laja put on new gloves and apron, moved in, and started cleaning the floor.

“Did he ask for a commode and didn’t get one?” the ward Sister asked, looking around for a response. Her face and question jolted life back into her staff. A couple of them went in to support their male colleague. They pulled the curtains around the man’s bed space and started cleaning him up. Curled up, the man soon started snoring. The other patient, who’d seemed startled, asked the Sister why a psychiatric patient was kept in the same ward with him.

“He is not a psychiatric patient. Something must have triggered his action. He is only suffering from dementia praecox ... Whoops!” the Sister said, putting her left hand over her mouth, quickly walking away.

“Housekeeping! Can we have air freshener here please?” the male nurse said as he emerged from behind the curtains.

“We don’t carry them around, but I’ll go and see if I can find one,” Laja, who was sweating, responded. He moved to the wash-hand basin, removed his gloves and apron and put them in the yellow bag he had with him. After washing his hands, he went out of the bay. It was an opportunity to stretch and breathe some fresh air.

In the cupboard, he found a tin of *Kleen* air freshener and took it to the bay. The nurses had gone out. He lifted the tin, pressed the atomizer and let out couples of spurts.

Moments after, the ward Sister appeared, followed by the male nurse.

“What d’you think you are doing? What is this?” she asked, pointing at the tin in Laja’s hand.

“The nurse asked for air freshener and”

“Which nurse? Which nurse instructed you to spray aerosol into a bay where I have patients with multiple conditions?” Her face turned red as she turned from Laja to the male nurse who wrote animatedly in the patient’s folder.

“I’m sorry, I ...,” Laja started to say.

“Sorry is not good enough. If we all have reasons to say ‘sorry,’ the morgues would be overflowing by now. This is not a jungle clinic where anything goes. If you are not sure of anything, ask!” the Sister said and dashed out. The nurse crept out as Laja bent down to clean under a bed.

The ward Sister returned to observe the man and leafed through the notes in the file clipped to the man’s bed. She turned to face Laja. “You are a cleaner, keep to your job role and don’t attempt to kill my patients! Okay? And I’m taking this up with your manager.” As she walked to the door again, her shoes squeaked under her stamping.

Laja felt used, angry that the nurse who started it all did not utter a word in his defence. He felt blood rushing into his head and soon developed a headache. About five minutes after, the ward Sister matched in again and walked to the man’s bed. “Excuse me.”

Laja looked up.

“Could you come and clean this little stain up here,” the Sister said, pointing at the blood pressure monitor beside the bed.

“Sorry, we don’t ... I don’t clean equipment,” Laja said.

“Sorry?” the Sister said, her eyes turning beady and gleaming.

“I said I don’t do equipment. We are not allowed to,” Laja said firmly.

The ward Sister stood still. “Must you refer me to your job description because I asked you to clean this dot that requires no more than a wipe?”

“But you are the one who referred to my job role earlier, telling me to keep to my job role as a cleaner,” Laja said. “Why are you offended that I am telling you that I want to keep to the role?”

The Sister first fixed her gaze on Laja, then her face turned from her right to the left, her mouth opened. No one on the ward, not even the brashest among her nurses, had ever spoken to her in such a manner. They all feared her.

Laja picked up his mop, broom, and bucket, placed the caution sign where he’d just mopped and walked out. Though he’d felt he got his pound of flesh back, he felt sad. It was not about her. He went into the cleaners’ cupboard and locked it from behind. Tears rolled down his eyes.

He’d cried a few times since he joined the hospital. Not that he wanted to cry, but whenever he felt belittled, he would compare his past with the present and become saddened. Why would he, an employer of teachers and a cleaner, travel over 6,000 miles to become a cleaner? He saw a vast difference between his current manager and Helen, his centre manager at *The Consultancy*. It would be unfair to compare Orul, *The Consultancy*’s teacher of English Language, who had a Masters’ degree, to those who barked orders at him on the wards.

As he ruminated on such occasions, something would move from his chest to his throat, then to his nose, and come out of his eyes as tears. It often happened when he was alone. If he heard any movement, he’d quickly wipe his face dry. After some time, he started enjoying the feeling which the crying gave him. It made him feel light and gave him solace.

The following morning Shelley told him that she had relocated him to the Streets. Laja did not ask why. He knew why he'd been removed. The ward Sister had won.

“You didn't tell me you had an encounter with the ward Sister,” Uncle Sam said to Laja about a week later.

“It happened while you were away on leave. I didn't think it was worth talking about.”

“Shelley told me you were rude to the ward Sister, but I knew there would be more to the story. How is your new post?”

Laja shrugged. “It's okay. I haven't got a choice. Now, I must clean the general area and toilets as many times as they are used or look dirty to someone. Every time I mop the floors, someone appears, tiptoes or walks stealthily over the wet floor, as if doing me a favour. ‘I'm sorry to walk on your nice clean floor,’ they often say, leaving their shoe marks as evidence of their humility. I wish I could tell them it's not my floor; that they needn't apologise. I prefer those who walk straight past, unbothered, too worried, or too ill to notice me and the floor.”

Uncle Sam giggled. “Why not request to be on permanent nights? It quieter and you don't come in contact with many white people.”

“I have. Shelley said they are full for now,” Laja said.

Uncle Sam swallowed a piece of the kenke he was eating. “That would have helped. The more you cross the path of white people, the more trouble you'll have in a place

like that. The patients and their families are worse. They relish in teaching black people how to do things ‘properly.’”

“It’s frustrating but what can one do?”

“Hhm. Nothing. There is no place like home.”

Isaac, who had come in, was by the door, removing his shoes. “Which home are you talking about, Bros?”

“Home of course! However bad it is in Africa; graduates don’t clean floors and shit in public places. I mean after all the frustration, discrimination and home sickness one copes with, you still”

“Forget that, Bros. Home is where food is; where hope is,” Isaac said. On his face was a despondent look, as if he was confused or regretting what he’d just said. He removed his backpack and put it on the sofa near the door. “I think Africans should not be talking about homesickness and how home is the best place to be. With what’s happening across that continent, we should be talking about sickness-home, not homesickness.” Suspense and silence fell on the lounge. Isaac picked his bag and ambled upstairs to his room.

Chapter 31

Isaac did not work on Sunday mornings but went to church. On every invitation, Laja promised to go with him but failed until about nine months after his arrival when he was getting worried about the expiration of his study permit. Despite another job, filling shelves at Sainsbury's, he was always running out of money. No one seemed available and approachable for a frank talk. He wanted practical advice on how to be less apprehensive and strike a balance between his commitments in England and back home. So, one Sunday morning, he went to church with Isaac.

“For many of you it's work, work, work,” the preacher said, jerking his body as he repeated ‘work.’ The choir instrumentalists supporting him with a fitting beat. “How many of you have become millionaires through your work?” the preacher asked, looking round the church hall, walking from one end of the altar to the other, then quickened his step to the lectern at the middle. “If your work has not made you work-rich, isn't it time to seek to become God-rich? All you ask God is: ‘Give me shifts or I die.’ Isn't it time you divert your energy to God instead of work?”

Heavy drumbeats followed his question. Applause, shouts of ‘Yes!’ and gesticulations shook the building as the preacher jerked repeatedly again.

“Even the women among you go about with dirty hair, covered with some smelly wig, saying they are too busy working, too busy to find time to do their hair. Oooh! You are only dirty by nature, Sister. You go contrary to the instruction of God in 1 Corinthians 11:15, that you take care of your hair, your crown. Soon you will be too busy to clean up after using the toilet!”

Another roll of instruments followed as the congregation burst into unchurchly laughter and screaming of ‘preach it.’ The pastor wiped his face.

“The Bible says a woman's hair is her glory. So, don’t blame God for not answering your prayers. He distances himself from you because your head smells and your glory dims. If you can’t do it up, cut it off!”

Another roar of ovation and laughter followed.

After the service, Isaac introduced Laja to a guy who had just arrived from Nigeria to study.

“I hope you are not thinking of going back, sir. Don’t dream of it until you sort yourself out here and you’ve made some real money that you can invest,” the guy said when Laja asked about home. “You will be amazed that your friends and colleagues are doing better than you. It would be difficult to fit in, sir. Immediately you step out of the country, no one pities you. All they want is how to drain you.”

“It’s the same thing in Ghana,” Isaac said.

“Sincerely, anyone thinking of going back to that place must think very well, sir,” the guy continued. As he spoke, his glabellar lines moved like a wave, folding, and unfolding, as if highlighting the truth of his warning. Laja found it interesting that the guy was distancing himself from ‘that place.’ His repeatedly addressing him as ‘sir’ was also discomfoting.

On their way home, Isaac turned to Laja. “So, what d’you think about the service?”

“Good,” Laja said, “Very entertaining.”

“Yeah. The pastor is funny, maybe dramatic, but truthful,” Isaac added.

“Work, work, work,’ Laja said, shaking his body and laughing.

Isaac smiled. “You know why most black people are always working and why it’s good for us.”

“Of course, it’s the money”

“Not always true. Considering the exchange rate, everyone would say that but it’s more than that. People want to keep their minds and bodies busy. You see, being idle makes one think about the things that were, or are expected to be, but which are not. That leads to more worries and regrets which may lead to depression and high blood pressure. And since black people rarely go for health checks, sudden death may follow. You know what I mean?”

It was something Laja had not thought deeply about. “Yes. You are right,” he said.

Uncle Sam was busy in the kitchen when they got home. “You both went to church? That’s good. I hope you prayed for me too?”

“Bros, join us next time to go and pray for yourself. Everyone has too many problems to pray about than remember someone else,” Isaac said.

Uncle Sam grunted and resumed loading the washing machine. After a while, he straightened up and stared at Laja. “You are not looking as happy as I would expect of someone whose problems have been deposited at the church. Are you okay?”

Laja sighed. “I’m just troubled these days. Too many things to worry about, and my visa will soon expire.”

Uncle Sam placed his hand on Laja’s shoulder, led him to the lounge and sat beside him on the sofa. “D’you know what I always tell our people? The first thing

for an immigrant is to put their papers in order at all costs. The peace of mind after that would enable them do better things.”

“It seems the days are flying by. I’d thought by now I would have saved enough money to”

“You’ve worked for almost a year now... but it happens to everyone. Compared to the bills and other responsibilities, the wages are never enough. When is it running out?”

“In about three months. The problem is that since I didn’t have money to register at the uni, I can’t apply for a renewal.”

Uncle Sam pouted, then drew his lips back repeatedly while rubbing the stubble on his chin as Laja spoke. “One thing you can do is to get married as soon as possible,” he said.

“Marry? How will... how on earth will ...” Laja said, gazing at Uncle Sam.

“You have to. If you get married to a citizen, you can put in an application in another category before your current visa runs out. It is the best, if not the only option you have, a marriage of convenience.”

Laja had thought it was like a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it could get him settled status, but on the other, it could entangle him in a web of blackmail, extortion, and eventual deportation.

“What if the lady turns around to blackmail and...?”

“We won’t go near a black or Caribbean girl; those are the ones who extort. We’ll get an EU girl, Hungarian or Polish. They are not trouble. Once she gets her money, you get your papers, she goes her way.”

Laja rubbed his hand over his head, from front to back repeatedly. “How much are we talking about here?”

Uncle Sam shook his head from side to side. “Between one point five and two thousand.”

“Two thousand pounds?” Laja said, his voice rising.

“Yes. Registry, church, everything.”

“It’s a lot of money in addition to what I’m owing. If I have a little more than that I’d go back home instead.”

“That’s what you all say. You won’t go, trust me. It may sound a lot, but it is not.”

Laja put his right hand to his chin. He could suspend his payment to Uncle Dele, even to Chuks, and push himself hard with work to get the money in a couple of months, but his experience with Lati, Wale, and Chima, had entangled him in debt. He must be careful. “Umm, it’s tough, I’ll see what I can do,” he said.

“You don’t have to worry. You’ve got a job; if you are lucky and keep out of trouble, you will be fine. But I will advise that you make sure you block loopholes which could get you into trouble and make you end up being taken back home.”

Much as he wanted to think that Uncle Sam was invoking the fear factor, he knew also that he was stating a possible fact. “I’ll see what I can do and let you know as soon as possible,” he said and stood up.

Chapter 32

Gina, Uncle Sam's girlfriend, had crossed the channel from France and lived in an asylum seekers' residence in London.

"What was she doing in France?" Laja had asked when Uncle Sam mentioned her to him the first time.

"She and her family got a visitor's visa from Ghana to spend some time in Paris on holiday. As they waited at the airport for someone to pick them up, her husband said he was going to get some drinks but did not come back. After about an hour, Gina raised an alarm. She said she didn't know where to go, as her husband had left with all money and documents."

"Was it planned ...?"

"Of course, what do you think? Coincidentally, her son was screaming his head off; the immigration and social services officers at Charles de Gaulle concluded he must be starving," Uncle Sam said, smiling. "She said she too wept profusely. When they asked what she wanted to do, she told them she would prefer to stay back and apply for asylum because she had nowhere else to go. It was a taboo in her culture for a man to suddenly abandon his family and disappear, hence her husband's family would call for her head if she went back to Ghana without him."

"Primitive cultural practices; a sure asylum winner!" Laja said.

"Well, it worked for her. She told them that her husband has been behaving strangely and that she feared that a man who abandoned them might come back to

harm her and their son. She was given accommodation, registered for French lessons, and was receiving financial support.”

“So, what happened to the hus...?”

“He reappeared after some time. At first, he would come, spend some time with Gina and his son and leave. Later, he started spending nights with them and ...”

“But ... what ... I mean how was he able ...?”

“He did, somehow. When his visits became too frequent after about six months, especially after Gina gave birth to another boy....”

“Another baby in France?”

“Yes. She was pregnant when they arrived in France. When someone tipped her off that the French authorities were becoming suspicious, she did not wait to be questioned; she paid her way and crossed the Channel into England.”

“Leaving her husband in France?”

Uncle Sam nodded. “That was the beginning of the bigger problem between them. He thought she was too hasty and should not have left France because he had other plans for them.”

“And that was it?”

“Not immediately. He tried getting in here to join his family many times without success. He was later arrested and deported to Ghana. Without much money, he could not afford to come back to Europe. After making several appeals for money that his wife could not meet, their relationship became strained, and he decided to resettle down in Ghana. He got married to another woman.”

“Leaving Miss G. for you to take over!”

“No! She was involved with a British guy with whom she had a son, and they were separated before I met her.”

“So, you are the father of many sons.”

“Stop it! You know I’ve got my own wife and children. Gina and I only meet each other’s needs. You know? More of good company, friends than serious lovers. For an African man, British loneliness decimates you gradually if care is not taken.”

Laja knew it was true. His own loneliness had been profound, beyond the need for physical companionship. It was becoming estrangement; like being a summer plant uprooted and replanted into a different soil during winter. Despite the time he’d spent adjusting to new setups in South Africa and in England, coping with the changes had turned out to be more difficult than he’d thought. The weight of his needs – paying debts, meeting basic needs, and money to send home for the care of his mother – was becoming more substantial. But the deep loneliness within him outweighed all. He needed more than money.

What he did not understand was why Uncle Sam, with family in Ghana, and Gina in London, needed another girlfriend called Candy in Colchester. “I know. Loneliness and separation can push you to the brink of insanity,” he said, “especially when you miss family, friends, and lots of other things.”

He too didn’t know he could miss Lagos. The 5.00 am waking up after sweaty nights in his airtight room which vagrant mosquitoes still found space to enter. The shove and push to get on buses within maddening frenzies; the morbid fear of crossing the lagoon in a wooden canoe, and the harry and the hurry of shuttling between jobs. The late-night return home, tired and drained; the strained

pissing of orange-urine aimed at an angle of the blackening toilet bowl. Then, the troubled sleep, dragging on to burst into another dawn when he still needed more rest but had to get up. He'd thought that Lagos was not worth missing. But now he found himself missing home; missing the madness, the disorderliness, and unpredictability that was Lagos. And he missed his type of music – Afrobeats, with heavy, throbbing drums. England was quiet, too slow, too monotonous for him.

He thought Uncle Sam spoke, but he didn't hear him. "Now, those Miss G. children, what ...who do they identify as? Ghanaians, French, English?" he asked.

Uncle Sam shrugged. "It's scary. They are not the only ones. We have a whole generation of African children who are in limbo all around the world because of migration." He hissed and shook his head.

Uncle Sam was leaving for London late afternoon on a weekend in 2008 after working a long day shift on Twyford Ward. "Let's go and have some fun in London instead of staying in here like a featherless, motherless bird," he said to Laja.

"I'm not working. I'll be okay here, thank you."

"Sure?"

"Yeah. Say hello to your Miss G.," Laja said, grinning.

Uncle Sam gave him an intense look, "You!" he said, shaking his finger at him.

"The furthest I can go with you is Colchester train station, just to look around, not to your girlfriend's."

"That's still okay, and stop rubbing it in. You think I don't miss my family?"

“Do you?”

“Of course, I really miss them, especially my kids at a time like this. Though I’ve sent them money and gifts, it not the same. It’s a season for families to be together. But what can I do? I can’t be in two places at the same time.”

“You are right,” Laja said.

“I can’t continue to be lonely. It’s killing me.”

Laja pre-empted Uncle Sam’s gaze and quickly nodded as if in empathy, though he did not think it was wise for him to be in the company of someone else’s children while his own children remained fatherless back home.

“That’s the reason why you should bring them here as soon as possible,” he said.

“I’m making efforts, I really am. It’s only that the process is very convoluted and expensive.”

“If Miss G. can do it, I believe you can too,” Laja said as they boarded a Bus 65 to the train station.

He walked back to the Bus Stop after Uncle Sam crossed the turnstiles to take a train to London Liverpool Street. The bus and streets were full of people in a celebratory mood. The house was tranquil. Isaac had left for London and Riba for Chelmsford, where his work agency had gotten him a good-paying job as a live-in carer. Ben was away too.

Back at home, he went through the TV channels to find anything interesting. If he went upstairs to his room, he might fall asleep. And if he did, even for a couple of hours, finding sleep at night would be almost impossible. His mind would jump

from one issue to another until early morning when he would start feeling sleepy.
But by then he would need to get up and start getting ready for his morning shift.

Chapter 33

Whenever Sharon, Riba's girlfriend, visited him, they would chat, argue, and moan loudly through the night. Yet, Sharon appeared worried and uncomfortable every time Laja saw her. She would quicken her steps after saying a curt 'hi.' On her last visit, Laja overheard Uncle Sam telling Riba that he must add five pounds to his weekly rent if Sharon was going to stay longer. Riba had argued that it was the first time she stayed more than a couple of days and that she'd be leaving the next day. He insisted that he couldn't afford more than the weekly fifteen pounds he paid. Laja was shocked to realise that he'd been paying five pounds more than everyone else, despite having the smallest room. He'd felt exploited but decided not to confront Uncle Sam.

Riba and Sharon had their longest argument the night before she finally left.

"You can't continue sleeping with me if you can't fulfil your promise. I have others who can help me; you're not the only one with a British passport," Sharon had said, standing outside Riba's door.

"Then go and ask the other suckers to help you. You aren't doing me favours. You sleep with me too; we sleep with one another," Riba said in raised voice.

"I don't blame you, it's my situation that has left me with no choice than to lose my dignity in search of papers. Back home, I worked in a bank and was chauffeur-driven," Sharon said.

“You have choices. It’s either you go look for someone else to sponge off or go back to your bank job in Zimbabwe. I believe your car is still waiting,” Riba said and chortled.

After Sharon left, Laja had noticed that Riba’s seemed relieved. He brought home another girl, a crudely beautiful girl who seemed startled to see Laja and Uncle Sam in the lounge as she entered. She smiled and waved her small hand weakly at them after introducing herself as ‘Sam.’

“Sam?” Uncle Sam said, looking from the girl to Riba and back. “That’s my name. I thought”

“It’s short for Samantha,” the girl added quickly.

“I see. You are welcome, Sam,” Uncle Sam said, winking at Laja. They both watched as she and Riba went upstairs.

A couple of days after, Riba came back from night work and stormed out of his room after a few minutes. He met Laja who was just leaving the toilet at the corridor.

“Hey man, did you knock on my door last night?”

“No. Why?” Laja asked

“I mean ... Sam,” Riba said, pointing towards his door. “She said someone knocked on the door on two occasions in the night and that when she asked who it was, there was no response.”

“Well, it wasn’t me. Is she sure about this?”

“Well, she was sure and afraid enough that she wouldn’t come out but urinated inside the flower vase inside the room.”

“But I was the only one here last night and did not go near your door. Maybe you should ask Ben...but I don’t think he would”

“That hermit won’t come a mile near my door,” Riba said, looking pensive. “But could she be lying?”

A few minutes after, Laja heard him arguing with the girl.

Toke called later that day, asking him to call back immediately. Her calls had become more frequent now that he’d got a mobile phone. Still, she always complained that she paid a lot of money for receiving his calls at the local Nigerian Telecommunications Limited centre but that it was better than having to go wait at Alhaji’s house to receive calls.

“Mama’s health is getting worse. The hospitals here don’t seem to be of much help anymore,” she said, then paused. “We need more money to take her to a hospital in Ibadan or Lagos.”

“Did the current hospital refer her to any hospital in Lagos or ...?” Laja asked.

“Of course not, they are happy to be collecting money and using her for trial and error tests. I don’t think they have what it takes to care for cancer,” Toke said.

“Which hospital do you know that can take care of her? Has she agreed to go?” As Laja spoke, the line hummed, and Toke’s voice became unclear. Laja hung up and called back. Toke picked at the first ring.

“Most people suggest we take her to the Lagos University Teaching Hospital because they don’t do mastectomy in Ibadan anymore.”

Laja could hear his own hard breathing down the phone line. “Mastectomy? Has Mother agreed to it?”

“She’s still insisting that she wants to go to heaven with her complete body, but I learnt that she wouldn’t have a choice if they decide to do it at the hospital,” Toke said.

“But they can’t. She has to give her consent, in addition to that of another close family member, probably you.”

“I thought so too, but ... I think she will agree to anything now. The pain is just too much; the problem is money.”

“Do you have an idea of how much it will cost?”

“It’s a lot of money but nothing is too much to save her life. Besides the surgery, we’ll have to pay for medicines, food, accommodation”

“I know. It’s helpful to have an idea of how much it’s”

“Okay. I will find out and let you know.”

He was about to say goodbye when Toke spoke again. “One of the people Mother owes money came to embarrass us. Mother could not say a word. The woman shouted and threatened to drag her into the street and beat her.”

Laja remained silent. What Toke was narrating should not be happening. He felt he’d failed in every way. That night he was awake for a long time contemplating whether his coming to England was worth it in any way besides creating a physical distance between him and the problems he would have faced back home.

The following morning, a Sunday, Laja went into the kitchen with his load of washing and met Riba cooking.

“I thought you’d gone to church with Isaac again. Tired already?”

“Yes and no. I can never be tired of God, but I’m tired of the people at the church and their behaviour,” Laja said.

“How ...what d’you mean?”

“I don’t want to be part of any war, directly or indirectly.”

Riba stopped stirring what he was cooking to stare at Laja. “War? Which war?”

“A class war between those with papers and those who do not have.”

“You are relatively new in the place. How d’you ...”

“Anyone can see it. The nurses, doctors, and a few others in that class behave settled after service. They sip tea, chat, and exchange banter with one another. The others, who have no papers, are always in a hurry. They slip through the doors with the end of Grace, grinning at best, to escape meeting the others”

Riba burst into laughter.

“This is a serious matter, Riba,” Laja said.

“You are right. But what is wrong with black people? How come we have a certain pattern of bad behaviour everywhere we find ourselves?” Riba said and switched off the cooker. “It was same at the church I attended in Chelmsford before I called it quits with African churches.”

“You did attend...?”

“Yes. For a long time after I came newly to England until I smelled hypocrisy everywhere, I heard gossips. I saw arrogance struggling with inferiority complex among people who were supposed to be brothers and sisters. I asked myself questions I couldn’t find answers to, then I quit.”

“It’s a shame,” Laja said.

Riba shook his head. “A big one. All black people, whatever their status, are migrants across generations. So, why should anyone look down on others because they got papers or British passports.”

“They see it as a something which others can’t achieve.”

“But this is not Africa. The Home Office will never complain of lack of resident permits or of passports. It’s a matter of time before everyone who qualifies gets theirs,” Riba said as he dished his food into two plates.

Laja put his washing into a basket and was heading for the garden to spread them but stopped at the door as Riba spoke.

“D’you know that the Ghanaian man who has enslaved Isaac is an elder in a church?” Riba said.

Laja grimaced. He wanted to tell Riba that he knew the story and that Isaac had gone to London that day to confront the man whose identity documents he used at work. The man had stopped transferring money into Isaac’s account. He’d asked him many times to no avail until the man stopped picking his calls. Isaac was afraid, but since his wages from the mortician could not pay all his bills, he’d decided to go to London and confront the man.

“Black people! We are our own enemies,” Laja said and exited the kitchen into the garden.

Ben was stooping before the washing machine when Laja re-entered.

“Hi, Ben,” he greeted.

“Hey!” Ben said and continued loading his clothes.

Riba walked in, an empty plate in his hand.

“Ben, were you the one knocking on my door at night two days ago?”

Ben stood up, frowning. “What?”

“Don’t play dumb with me, man. Have you been knocking on my door at night?”

“And why would I knock on your fucking door?”

“You tell me.”

“Well, I don’t do guys, and if I did, I wouldn’t come a pole near you.”

“I know you won’t dare come near me, but the girl up there is white, like you.”

Ben stretched out his hands. “Who the fuck cares? Is this really about some ghost knocking on your door or about you trying to brag about screwing a white girl?”

“Fool. All I’m saying is that we got tenancy rules. No one should go about disturbing others” Riba said.

Ben was glowering. “Why should you tell me that? And talking about rules, I’m not the one driving around in an unregistered car!”

“What?”

“You heard me, fool.”

Riba stood for a while gaping at Ben. Then, he opened the fridge. “Unlike you, a jobless man, I’ve just come back from work and need my sleep.” He took a box of apple juice and walked calmly out of the kitchen.

“And don’t play that shit with me next time, man,” Ben said, taking a few steps after Riba as he climbed the stairs.

He seemed to have found a way of taming Riba. Though he only drove the said car occasionally at night, a word to the police would get him in big trouble.

In his room, Laja replaced the SIM card in his phone with the one he used for international calls and called Gani whom he’d not spoken with for a long time. He hadn’t called him throughout his stay in Johannesburg because he didn’t want to be invited over to Pretoria where Gani lived. He hadn’t thought he would stay that long and didn’t want to be a burden to anyone. He would be his own man. Maybe it was also the way he felt when people mentioned the house Gani built for his mother. They’d only started chatting after he’d got a job and asked Toke to help get him Gani’s number from his mother.

“Hey! What’s up? Long time,” Gani said.

“Na me call you di last time nau. You no dey return people calls.”

“I’m sorry, man. Na work o. Most times I come back very late and tired, only to get ready for anoda work.”

“Dat one no be better excuse. Na 24-hour world we dey nau. You fit call any time. Na every day you de work? How you de sha?”

“I dey like dende o. And you?”

“So, so. We de manage for England,” Laja said.

“Wetin be manage for Queen country? Na we wey dey inside Africa for de talk of manage.”

“Na dat be di difference. You dey home for Africa. Me, I be stranger for here inside white man country.”

“Which home? E dey worse for here. Na trouble tragedy. You dey home but you no dey home where fellow black people de tell you say make to go back to your country.”

“Really? For South Africa?” Laja said, feigning ignorance.

“Yes o. Dem they call us *querequere*, say we de talk like bird, and make we commot for dem country.”

“Ha! Discrimination dey everywhere sha. For here, I don learn sey: ‘the line is bad, I can’t hear you properly,’ mean say your accent na rubbish. Wen dem say: ‘Sorry, I’m deaf, could you speak louder and slowly,’ na polite British way to say, ‘speak English like an Englishman, if you must speak it.’”

“Na wa o. No place like home sha.”

“E dey hard to merge two places wey de different. The boredom we I dey feel na out of dis world and”

“Na true! Sometimes e be like sey me alone dey inside desert inside di two-bedroom house wey I de stay. I de consider moving to a smaller place now.”

“Your own better. If you see one small space inside something like *mai guard* gatehouse where I de pay £20 every week, you go tire.” The building wey dem de divide into four, call each one house no reach half of one small house for Nigeria.”

Gani’s laughter sounded guttural. “Dat na British style nau.”

“Di tin wey de pain me pass be sey I no de even rest inside the room self. Most times, na work, work, work to pay bills. Dis arrogant British landlords for go Nigeria go see wetin we de call house,” Laja said.

“Sometimes I ask myself wetin I find come Pretoria if no be longthroat.”

“No. Beside money, travel na big education sha.”

“You are right sha,” Gani said.

They chatted until a long pause travelled the line between them as they held their breaths, seeming to have exhausted words they wanted to say, each waiting for the other to speak.

“Okay o. I go come England come greet you wen I dey annual leave.”

“Any time. I dey for you,” Laja said, knowing that even if Gani wanted to come to England, he would discourage him. He wouldn’t welcome a friend whom he was better than academically at school but who had become richer than him. He wouldn’t want someone who’d built his mother a big house in Nigeria and who lived in a two-room house to come and see him in a cleaner’s uniform and living in a tiny shoebox room.

Uncle Sam came back from London in the evening. Laja stole a glance and laughed.

“Is that all your London barber could get you?”

Uncle Sam chuckled. “What’s wrong with this cut?” he said, turning his head from side to side.

“Nothing. Only that the guy on Queen Street would have given you a better cut at a cheaper cost,” Laja said.

Uncle Sam grunted. “It’s not just about the haircut, my brother; you don’t allow just anybody to touch your head. I’m okay with the Ghanaian barber I’ve known for a long time. I trust him.”

Laja started at Uncle Sam’s head for a while. “Well, it’s not that the cut is too bad.”

“Thank you,” Uncle Sam said.

A few minutes after, Isaac came in, looking dejected. He dropped his bag on the sofa and unbuttoned his jacket.

“How did it go,” Uncle Sam asked him.

“I’ve got nothing, only promises which I fear he won’t fulfil. First, he said the man here had not paid him fully for my work. When I showed him copies of the bank transfers the man gave me, he then said there must have been some mistake, that he would pay me. I know he won’t. He’s a mean man.”

“Don’t worry; it’s a matter of time. But it’s painful to be powerless. How far with your American visa?”

“That? It seems my sister doesn’t understand. She said America doesn’t allow dual citizenship; I said *hakuna matata*, no problem. What’s the value of a Ghanaian citizenship anyway? I would gladly throw my passport into the Thames to take to Ghana Immigration for me.”

Uncle Sam laughed. “The Thames does not go to Ghana. And stop saying that about your root, young man, you need it to make you stand.’

“Which rotten root is that?” Isaac said and hissed. “Spare me that, Bros. As I am now, I don’t care about any root.”

Riba, who was standing against the wall, a cheeky smile on his face said: “If you don’t respect your root, then you will soon die off, wasted, man.”

Isaac turned. his jaw clenched. “I won’t be wasted in Jesus’ name. You ... you talk of Africa all the time as if it is heaven”

“Calm down, guy. All I’m saying is, shed your slave mentality and”

“Rubbish! If you love Africa ... your Nigeria so much, why did you come here to ...to clean shit.”

“Listen to me. I am Riba. Unlike you, I don’t flush my self-esteem down the toilets that I clean or rub my identity into the floors that I mop. Yeah? Get that into your head.”

“Get out of here! Which identity is an oddjobber like you talking about?”

Riba smiled. “Let me educate you here. Even if the Queen wears a mini skirt, it does not diminish her status or make her the equal of anyone’s grandmother. I know who I am.”

Uncle Sam, who had started ironing his clothes on the stained ironing board

at the landing tittered. “The Queen in a mini skirt? That would be the day!” he said, laughing. “But, guys, you are saying the same thing. It’s all a matter of individual perceptions,” Uncle Sam said, nodding. “You are both on point.”

“But I don’t like hypocrisy; I say it as it is,” Isaac said, spreading out his hands, “Ghana is fucked; African is a mess! Take it or leave it.”

“That’s for you. Me, I am African, and I can’t come here and lose the sense of who I am.” Riba said.”

“Bros, we are not saying the same thing. Unlike him, I carry the hopes of generations on my shoulders, and I must not fail,” Riba said.

Isaac shook his head and burst into laughter.

“What? Carrier of the world’s problems, what if your head bends and your shoulder bones shatter?” Isaac said, laughing.

“True, I can’t be the potter of the world’s problems, but at least I can start with my family; ensure that none of them ever comes to Europe to slave again. I want to be the interlude, after me, the end,” Riba said. “And if in doing that my bones break, surgeons will fix them.” Like an actor reading from a script, he turned from Laja to Uncle Sam and back to Isaac and pointed his forefinger at him. “Never disparage your root, you may need it someday, black man.”

“Then, let’s wait for the day,” Isaac said.

When he came down about an hour after, Uncle Sam was in the kitchen wrapping sandwiches in foil paper.

“Are you working again tonight?” Laja asked.

“Yes. They called me because someone phoned in sick,” Uncle Sam said, walking toward the lounge.

“Ha! Come and see o,” Uncle Sam said from the lounge.

On television, a group of men were protesting, shouting into the press cameras.

“It’s the nationalist England for the English people. They don’t want the settling of Sudanese asylum seekers in Colchester. They said they are Moslem terrorists,” Riba, who was in the lounge, said.

“Migrants are migraine, send them home! Migrants are migraine, send them home,” the men on television chanted.

As the story ended, Uncle Sam got up and slowly walked out of the door.

Chapter 34

Laja and Uncle Sam were working on Bernard Ward when the emergency buzzer went off just before noon. The clinical staff rushed to Bed 13. He had perceived the smell of death, which he seemed to have known so distinctly, around the lady when he was cleaning her bed space earlier that morning. The doctor on ward round came and confirmed his suspicion. The nurses pulled the curtains around the bed. She'd be removed within the hour if the porters came in good time. But it was not always so.

It was a season of what the clinical staff called over-bedding and understaffing. Female and male patients were sharing wards, and many side units meant for one had two patients in them. Some wards had patients on the corridors or observation tables, waiting for someone to be discharged or certified dead. On some days, dead bodies stayed long on the wards, to the frustration of the ward sisters who complained that they feared a spread of communicable diseases. The nurses showed little emotion and appeared more interested in the beds than the dead.

Laja, billed to work at Sainsbury's later in the night, was eager to go on his arranged extra break. But Uncle Sam was taking too long. Even if he came back, he would be busy deep-cleaning, and he, Laja, would have to be present for other Housekeeping duties on the ward. He went looking for him, knowing he would be in the cubicle at the end of the male staff toilet, where they took turns to take short naps. Seeing no one else in the other cubicles, Laja called out. "Uncle Sam, the patient in Bed 13, is dead. The porters have been called."

There was no response. "Uncle Sam, are you there?" Laja said, knocking on the door of the last cubicle. He rapped on the door again, then knocked louder. When

there was no answer still, he went on his knees and peeped under the door. He saw the edges of the pair of Housekeeping trousers folded over black shoes. Getting up, he anxiously banged on the door.

“Uncle Sam, I’m not joking. They need you in the ward now. I must go back before they start looking for both of us.

He walked toward the door, then stopped. A man in porters’ uniform brushed past him, then turned to look at Laja suspiciously. Laja went back and banged on the cubicle again. Something must be wrong!

Putting his hands over top of the cubicle, he heaved himself up. He saw Uncle Sam. He was on the toilet bowl, his neck slopping awkwardly to the left. His light green shirt hanging loosely. With all his weight resting on the shaky cubicle, Laja struggled to unlatch the door with his right hand. He jumped down and pushed the door open. Uncle Sam’s left eye was shut, the right, slightly open. Whitish foamy substance had gathered at the left edge of his mouth.

“Uncle Sam!” Laja called, shaking the older man on the right shoulder. Uncle Sam’s limp body almost fell off the toilet bowl. Laja took a quick step back and screamed. A hot rush swept through his body. For a moment he stood frozen, gaping at the body.

He ran out and dashed toward the ward. The ward Sister frowned, shook her head, and shrugged her shoulders as he spoke. She pushed aside a heap of papers, stood up and called another nurse to come with her. They hurried after Laja. In the toilet, the nurses pulled out gloves from the cleaners’ dispenser cabinet and put them on. Together, they dragged Uncle Sam’s flaccid body out of the cubicle to the floor. The ward Sister went on her knees, put her right ear to Uncle Sam’ chest. Then she

checked his wrist for pulse. She got up, looked at the body all over, and beeped for a doctor.

After a few minutes, she asked the other nurse to go and call any doctor she could find. A black male doctor came, glanced at the body, then bent over to search for a pulse with his long, dry gloveless fingers. He touched Uncle Sam's chest with his stethoscope and shook his head. "He's dead. He died not quite long ago."

Laja screamed. A cold feverish feeling welled up somewhere in his spine and travelled all over his body. The doctor washed his hands and pulled a long roll of paper to wipe them. The weight of what was happening felt too fluid to hold together, yet too heavy for Laja to bear. A man he was speaking to just over an hour ago couldn't be dead! It was impossible. He stared at the doctor, wishing he could say what he would do to save Uncle Sam's life.

"I'll certify him dead. Send me the paperwork when you finish," the doctor said to the ward Sister. Open-mouthed, Laja's eyes followed the doctor as he walked away slowly, unbothered.

"Call the porters," the ward Sister said to the other nurse who made for the door immediately.

The ward Sister removed her gloves and started washing her hands. Tears fell rapidly from Laja's eyes. Hands folded across his chest, he bit deep into his lips.

"Are you okay?" the ward Sister, who leaned against the wall, staring into nothingness for some time, asked Laja.

He nodded.

“Tragic! He was here less than an hour ago, now gone,” the Sister said, snapping her fingers. “You’ll need to write a statement since you found him,” she added and walked away.

Laja nodded, too shocked to think or move.

When the ward Sister came back and covered the body with a sheet, it dawned on Laja that he would never see Uncle Sam again. After about thirty harrowing minutes, the porters arrived. They lifted the body and dropped it into a hollowed trolley, like a big bag of potatoes. They pulled a white sheet over him and wheeled him away. The ward Sister washed her hands again.

In the cleaners’ cupboard Laja picked his stuff, not sure if he should remove Uncle Sam’s as well. He would do it another day. At Housekeeping office, Shelley had compassionate leave forms on her table for him to complete.

“I’m so sorry, Laja. These things happen, don’t they?” she said, standing up to hug him. He felt uncomfortable as their bodies touched.

“You need some time off. You may take the forms with you. Complete and bring them later. I’ll put it in that you started your leave today.”

He had not expected any leave but took the form and thanked her.

“What are you going to do?” Shelley asked, pushing the forms closer to his side of the table.

He didn’t know what to say.

“I know. I know,” Shelley said, looking pitifully into his eyes, “no one plans for tragedy. When it comes, it wipes off everything on the board.”

Laja nodded, tucking his lips into his mouth.

The news of Uncle Sam's death had spread far before Laja got out of the hospital premises. There were eight missed calls and numerous messages when he switched on his phone. Two more calls came in as he walked home; he ignored them. His chest and head felt heavy, and he wanted to scream and release the pain on his chest and the perplexity of his thinking. One moment it felt as if there was no death, that it was his imagination running wild; then the truth would burst in wildly, with deep sadness. He could not escape from the reality.

The house was eerily quiet when Laja entered. He turned his face away from Uncle Sam's picture hanging on the lounge wall, went into his room, and sat dejectedly on the bed. More calls came in. He confirmed their fears: Uncle Sam was dead, he discovered his body himself, he told them. Nature, with the fact that he'd not slept after a night shift, weakened him. He dozed as he called Sainsbury's to cancel another night shift booked for that night.

It was 6. 22 pm when he woke up to voices downstairs. Riba and Isaac were, with Nana, a mutual friend, and another man, with very dark complexion and reddish eyes. They all turned to him as he entered. He narrated what had happened. As he spoke, Isaac and the other man hissed, whimpered and sighed. Nana, who had not spoken to Uncle Sam for months after accusing him of snatching his girlfriend, Candy, whom Uncle Sam claimed he'd known from back home in Ghana, appeared genuinely sorrowful.

“Did he collect his Esusu money?” Isaac asked after a long silence, looking toward Laja. Why should the monthly contributions involving five of them be Isaac's priority at such a moment? As coordinator, the other three contributors at

work had transferred their payment into Laja's account. He was supposed to add his own £500 before paying the £2000 into Uncle Sam's account that afternoon. He'd told him the night before that he would be sending the money to his family in Ghana as part of the plan to bring them over before the end of the year.

"I transferred it into his account last night," Laja said.

"Shame. No one can withdraw that now. All gone, sweat and blood money gone freely to the bank," Nana said. "All the hard work and sleepless nights and days..."

A searing feeling of guilt tore through Laja. But it was too late; he couldn't change what he'd said.

"God is unfair," the dark man said, looking from one face to another as if provoking them to an argument.

Isaac turned to him, disgust on his face. "What has God got to do with this?"

"A lot! It's not a man like Sam who should die now. He worked very hard to get a better life for himself and his family," the man said.

"So, it is God that's to be blamed for his coffee-sleepless nights and days?" Riba said.

"Many people work more than him and are still alive," the man replied.

"Of course, but for a man of his age with underlying health conditions, who worked always, and smoked, what were you expecting God to do? Turn his body into steel?"

"We can't reach any conclusions until the post-mortem result comes out. Can we?" the man responded.

“We bloody well can. We black people work too hard and don’t take good care of ourselves,” Riba said and stood up.

“That’s true ... but people work that hard because of necessity and the need for survival. No one wants to die from overworking,” Isaac said.

Silence fell on the lounge; Laja left for his room.

Candy came late afternoon the following day. Laja pointed her to the sofa and continued his chat with a representative of the Ghana Union UK. She spoke as soon as he ended the call.

“I was at work throughout yesterday. Someone sent me a text message asking me to confirm if it was true. That was when I learnt. I am shocked. What happened?”

Laja told her everything.

“Unbelievable. He was a strong man. I’d never heard him complain about his health.”

“Me neither.”

Tears started falling down her face; she wiped them with her palm. Laja wanted to touch and say consoling words to her but desisted.

“Is that it? He’s gone forever?” she said.

Laja nodded repeatedly, at a loss.

He stood in the doorway and watched her go. He’d been attracted to her the first time Uncle Sam introduced her as a friend. Her look and demeanour had

reminded him of his sister, Toke. Every time she'd visited, she cooked Uncle Sam a meal and tidied up his room. When he overheard her moaning in Uncle Sam's bedroom one afternoon, Laja knew they were more than ordinary friends. Yet, his liking for her had grown.

Three days later, she called, asking if he was at home. About an hour later, his phone rang. She was at the door and had been knocking. He welcomed and offered her a canned drink. She kept stealing looks at Uncle Sam's picture on the wall, as if she didn't want the picture to see her.

"I still can't believe he's gone and will never be seen again. We spoke on Monday ... just Monday, and now he's gone forever?"

"Hard to believe but it's true," Laja said.

Her eyes roved around the room, resting one item after another for moments before finally resting on Uncle Sam's picture again. "He told me on Monday night that he was expecting some money from you. D'you still have it?"

"What money?" Laja asked, turning to gaze at her.

She stared back into his eyes. "Something about monthly contributions you guys were making."

"That? Yes. I still have the five hundred pounds," he said, carefully observing her reaction. Now he knew why she had come back so soon.

"I've been thinking of how the money will not go to the wrong hands, but since I know you were close to him, I'll give it to you. And please keep it between us," Laja said.

She pouted and nodded. Soon after, she stood up to go.

Laja opened the door for her: “I will do a transfer into your account. Or would you prefer a cheque?”

“No, please. Transfer will be better. Thank you.” She smiled at him and left.

Laja went to the Moneygram office on Colchester Head Street and sent a thousand pounds to Nigeria for his mother. He called Alhaji Sule’s home and begged that someone should inform Toke that he would call within the next hour. Later that day, when he spoke with her and gave her the receiver’s control number, he instructed that the money be used for Mother’s hospital bills and medication only.

“So, what did you think the money you sent before was spent on? On my cosmetics? I don’t need your money. Chike ... my new boyfriend, is ready to rent an apartment for me, but I don’t want to leave Mother by herself. If you don’t want me to handle money on your mother’s behalf, then please look for someone you can employ to take care of her!”

“I didn’t mean it that way. I meant that other things are less important now and that”

“I told you before. You must come home and see your mother. Seeing you might make her feel better. Other people abroad come home, some at least twice a year, during Easter and Christmas. You never come but love giving orders from there!”

Laja was quiet as she raged. He’d told her that he was sure he would make good money if he left Nigeria. He couldn’t tell her about his predicament since he’d left Nigeria. Or how he would love to see Mother but couldn’t travel out of the UK.

“Hello! Hello! Can you hear me? Laja!”

“I am still here,” he said calmly.

“Why are you silent? I’m I now a radio set which does not deserve a response?”

“I’m sorry. I was just reflecting on how I miss you all.”

“I will ensure you can speak with Mother time. But if you miss us, then come home! Your younger brother who left not too long ago has already told me when he will be coming home.”

“Who? What did you say ...?”

“Ola! Did he not call you?”

“No! Is he...”

“Yes. He is somewhere close to you there, I believe. Andlit or something like that, in Belgium.”

“Belgium? Ola is in Belgium.”

“Yes. The Andlit people invited him to see how well he plays, then they employed him. He’s there playing for them,” Toke said.”

A sharp pain tore through Laja’s chest. He should be happy for his brother, but he felt nothing but regret. He had the opportunity to contribute to Ola’s success but could not. Now, as a footballer, with more money, he was pushing him aside as the main person taking care of Mother. That was obvious from Toke’s tone. It was unfair. Had he not been taking care of Mother long before Ola earned a penny of his own?

“Laja, if you have a biro with you, I can give you his number, so that you call him since he hasn’t called you. You two must be in contact. Can you hear me?”

“Yes. Call out the number. I will call him,” Laja said, knowing that he would not call unless Ola called first. He would not know what to say to him.

Mother’s first statement when they spoke was if he’d seen Ola. She sounded disappointed when he said they haven’t met.

“You mean you live in the same place with your little brother and didn’t make any effort to go see him?”

“We are not in the same place Mother. We live in different countries,” he said.

“So, you can’t go to check on him, know how he is doing?”

Laja knew it was useless explaining further to her, she would not make herself understand any contrary view than that of his sons meeting, checking on each other’s welfare, whatever it takes.

“He is fine. I see him on television every week playing for his club,” Laja lied. It was the only thing that would make Mother rest. She didn’t need anxieties over her children with what she was going through.

“Do you? Thank you. You must also find time to go and see him physically. That’s what brothers do. And please thank him for taking good care of me. Okay?” Mother said. “When are coming home?”

“I ...I will let you know, Mother.”

After their conversation, Laja pulled out his bag and brought out a small bundle of papers. There were ten Western Union and eight Moneygram money transfer documents. He went through them one after the other, punching the amount on each of them into a calculator. The total was over £8,000. He rearranged the papers according to dates, added the recent one, and put them back into the bag.

It was not right calculating how much he'd spent on Mother after being raised to believe that one should never keep a record of money spent on loved ones. But he felt the need to convince himself that he'd been doing his best for Mother. Whatever the amount Ola had spent, he was no match. He, Laja had spent more, being there always, from the beginning in many ways.

On a sunny day, a month after, he saw a strange number and quickly picked up, thinking it was from one of the places he'd applied for a job. It was Ola. Laja wanted to shout for joy on hearing his voice after so long, and congratulate him heartily, but he could not. Rather, his spirit was dampened.

“Toke gave me your number, but I have been very busy that I could not call. How are you?”

“Oh! I'm fine. It's been a long time. Congratulations on your ... your...club....”

“RSC Anderlecht. I have a three year contract with them,” Ola said. “How is Belgium to your place?”

“Mmm. I am not sure. I don't know.”

“How is work. Toke said she sensed things were a bit tough for you. Are you okay now?”

Laja was caught off guard. It was true that things were not as he'd thought they would be, but he'd not told Toke about what he was going through and not once did he say he could not send money for Mother's upkeep. How then did Toke reach her conclusion? He did not know how to respond to Ola.

“Hello! Are you there? I'm sorry if you did not like the way ... how I put it, but all I'm saying is that if things are not working as planned, why not go back home? Your mates are doing well, some married, with good jobs and businesses. Some have become government officials holding good posts,” Ola continued. “They come here, London, Rome, Paris, and other places with their friends and families on shopping holidays,” he said, then paused as if he wanted his words to sink in before adding: “I'm not planning to stay long here in Belgium. I hate the cold. If I'm lucky and don't suffer a major injury, in five years I'll be back in Nigeria, running my own business.”

It felt odd that Ola, his little brother, advising him, and speaking with such certainty about his future.

Candy came a week after her second visit. Riba opened the door and joked that she looked different. She giggled. “Thanks. It must be my hair. I restyled it.”

Riba mumbled, called Laja, and left for his room.

“You didn't call,” Candy said immediately she saw him.

“I'm sorry. I've been busy”

“Okay, but”

Laja got up. "I'm sorry, let me check what I'm cooking."

"What is it?"

"Jollof rice?"

"You? Can you cook jollof rice? Even Nigerian women don't know how to cook jollof rice properly."

Laja laughed. "You can't be serious. Everyone knows that Nigerians cook the best jollof rice in Africa," Laja said.

"But it's not your dish"

"Well, neither is it yours. It is a Sierra Leonean dish, but since we prepare it better than them, we have made it one of our national dishes."

"Who agreed to that with you? You can't beat Ghana Jollof. Never!"

"D'you want some then? A taste will convince you."

Riba approached from the stairs. "I'm off to work, man. See you tomorrow," he said and left. As soon as the door closed after him, Candy stood up and walked into the kitchen, standing behind Laja. "Come on then, let's see what you are cooking," she said. Laja opened the pot on the cooker. Hot steam burned his hand; he dropped the cover. As Candy moved closer to peer into the pot, her breasts brushed against his back. As he moved further left, picking a spoon and stirring the rice, Candy moved too, like a child shielding behind her mother.

"It looks good, but I bet it doesn't taste good," Candy said and dipped a spoon which she picked from the table into the pot. "Hmn. Tastes nice, a little salty though. Salt is not good for a man, you know?"

“Why?” he asked.

“You mean you don’t know?” she said, pausing to swallow another spoonful of rice.

“No, I don’t. How?”

“It affects their manhood and could lead to dysfunction issues,” Candy blurted.

“I’ve heard too much sugar does that, not salt. Where did you learn that from?”

Candy put her spoon down. “I am a nurse. I know these things, it’s only that I can’t practise in the UK yet.”

Laja dished some food and went to sit at the table in the lounge, asking Candy to take to her fill. She took more than he’d expected, topping it up with two chicken drumsticks. As they ate, only the sound of metal on china penetrated the wall of silence between them.

“You didn’t do the transfer.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t, for a reason.”

“Why?” Candy, said leaning forward, surprise on her face.

“I wanted to see you again,” Laja said smiling. “You look so much like my sister.”

“Really? But what has that to do with ...?”

“Well ... I’ll do the transfer before you leave.”

Candy, who had stopped eating, smiled.

“How old is your sister?”

“She’ll be 28 on second of April,” Laja said, scraping the rest of the food on his plate.

Candy eyes brightened up. “What a coincidence, I am an April baby too, but I won’t tell you my age.”

It didn’t matter to Laja. It was evident that she was older than Toke. He stood up and went into the kitchen. She came in as he was putting his plate and cutlery away. There was no crumb of food left on her plate; the chicken bones were stripped clean.

“You must be full of irresistible Nigerian Jollof.”

Candy laughed and hit him on the back with her fist, saying she only ate because she was famished. As he tidied up in the kitchen, she went back to the lounge and soon started talking to someone on her phone in a Ghanaian language, interspersing it with English words. Immediately Laja entered the lounge, she smiled, thanked him, and said she had to leave.

Laja sat beside her. “I thought you would stay longer, but it’s fine if you must go and see your boyfriend.”

Candy frowned, glanced at him, then smiled. “Where did you get the idea that I ... Oh! You were eavesdropping and thought my call was to a boyfriend?”

“Where would I not get the idea that a beautiful woman like you would have someone she loves,” he responded.

“You must be a jealous man,” she said and stood up.

Laja pulled her. She fell on his lap. There was exasperation in her eyes as she tried to get up and he held her down. Her struggle to free herself and the softness of her body against his, heightened his excitement. He made to kiss her, but she pushed his head away. When he eased his grip, she moved from his lap to the sofa, breathing heavily. On her face was a look of shock mixed with disgust as she ran a hand through her ruffled hair. He saw wild passion and desire and reached for her again.

“Stop! Stop this nonsense,” she said as they struggled more. She hit him on the neck with her palm and moved further away. He grabbed her and another scuffle commenced.

Soon, the power of her resistance started to wane as he continually squeezed her breasts and touched her all over. She grew weaker. It seemed involuntary at first, then it felt like a yielding, then a submission. He took the chance, turned her to face him, and explored her body more, heightening her fast breathing and moaning. Her hands touched his back as if inadvertently, rested there, then started crawling all over it. When he kissed her neck, her acrylic lengthened nails dug into his back. Their mutual exploration took them to the floor.

He was determined that she must feel the pain and pleasure of his strength. The sensuousness of her moaning encouraged him, until he could no longer hold himself. Orgasming, he collapsed on her. She pushed him away, got up, and used her underwear to clean between her legs. With the pants tucked into her bag, she started putting on her clothes. As she made for the door, he picked up his jeans and produced a bundle of notes. She collected it without a word, took the few footsteps to the door, and shut it loudly. He lay back on the floor.

From his supine position, his eyes went to Uncle Sam's smiling picture hanging on the wall. Candy must have seen it when they were having sex. Getting up, he tried to avoid looking at the wall but could not avoid a glimpse. He must break the fear. Walking to the picture, he stared into the dead man's eyes for seconds, then looked away.

Clothes in hand, he climbed the stairs. He heard a sound, remembered that Ben was in the house, and imagined what would have happened if he'd walked in on them. Inside the toilet and reflected on what he'd just done, a strange feeling ran through him. It wasn't of shame, or regret, or of being appalled. It was not even about lack of respect, or the fear of the dead. It was about himself. There seemed to be a weird part of him that he hadn't known existed until recently. He became fearful of what next it could make him do.

Uncle Sam was buried at St. John's Cemetery after a short graveside ceremony. Candy came to the funeral reception with Nana. Laja returned her impassive nod towards him and shook hands with Nana. Why could she not look him in the eyes? And why had she chosen to come with Nana, the man with whom she shared the late Uncle Sam?

The Ghana Union representative arrived, dressed in multicoloured Kente top. He did not seem to mind that he was over an hour late and did not apologise. In his speech, he kept repeating the necessity of not abandoning one's root for that of others who treated outsiders like slaves. With Ben, Shelley, and a couple of other white guests from the hospital present, Laja felt embarrassed and could read discomfort on the faces of a couple of others. The man was undeterred: "Sam

honoured his roots and was a loyal member of the union, he paid his levies regularly.” To reward his commitment, the association were willing to fly his body home to Ghana before they realised that his wish was to be buried wherever he died. To Laja’s dismay, the man went on to enumerate how the union had been assisting its members.

For a long time after everyone had left, he sat recalling moments he had with Uncle Sam and ruminating about the worth of life. At the cemetery, he’d thought of the powerlessness, lonesomeness and dread of being left alone inside a hole after Uncle Sam’s body was lowered and everyone started leaving. What if the dead man stirred? What if dead people had feelings? The oddity was only second to that of the moment when he discovered Uncle Sam’s body on the toilet seat.

Chapter 35

Only the cold breeze was a reminder that December was a winter month when New Year's Eve of 2009 dawned with a blue sky. It warmed up around noon and fireworks started going off in places. Laja worked a long-day shift alone on Boudica Ward because the other staff had called in sick and a replacement could not be found. The wards teemed with visitors bearing gifts of lowers, cakes, chocolates, cakes, among others for their family members and the staff. "Come on, it's New Year's Eve!" awaited anyone who refused an offer of sweets or chocolates.

Laja feared the mess of 'accidents' and the overwhelmed toilets that would need constant cleaning for many days after. It was foolish to say everyone all patients had the right to drink, smoke and eat whatever they wanted, knowing that they could get sicker and stay longer in hospital. But he was just a cleaner; without a mess, there wouldn't be need for a cleaner.

By afternoon, he was called to work in two bays. In one, a man had vomited all over his bed and the floor. In the other, the patient had an 'accident' for which he repeatedly apologised. Laja waited impatiently as two face-masked nurses cleaned the man up.

"It must be the chocolates. I think I had too many," the man said.

"It's not your fault, darling. You've got to have some enjoyment in life, don't you? And it's New Year Eve after all," one the nurses said.

"Yes, darling. We can't stop you having some fun," another nurse added.

Their words peeved Laja as he cleaned the floor later. He wondered it if would hurt or be unprofessional for the nurses to knit some firm, truthful health advice into their chats with the patients.

After leaving work at 7 pm, Laja walked down Hospital Road into High Street. Many shops had closed, but pubs and clubs were overflowing with revellers. He made to withdraw some money at the ATM on Priory Street. As he stretched his hand to collect the money, he felt a knock on his head. Thinking that he was being mugged, he turned swiftly.

“Black ass!” a boy in checked shirts and black jeans, shouted at him. His friends, another boy, and a girl in black T-shirt and black jeans, with a sweater tied around her waist, hurried away. Another girl, with blackened brows and piercings stared at him from the other side of the road, laughing. Laja put the money in his back pocket and moved away. The guys stepped from the road to the walkway and disappeared inside the McDonalds on the street.

Before reaching the intersection with Head Street, the two boys came from behind and overtook him, making loud noises. On the opposite walkway, their partner, the girl, strolled along, biting into something wrapped in paper. The boys started jumping and chattering like monkeys. The eyes of curious passers-by rested on Laja. Some laughed.

Uncle Sam’s had advised him against giving attention and seriousness to lots of things. “If you don’t want to be too miserable, you must accept that we are black people in a white world. Some things will happen to make you feel different and worthless. At times, silence and being unreactive when people expect you to, shifts

the pressure and fear back to them. You hurt the hurter.” Laja had smiled after the advice.

“I was to become the head of Housekeeping but they brought Shelley, who never had any cleaning experience to be the head. You think that was palatable? But for how long would I keep making myself miserable? Difference is what migrants must swallow if they don’t want to become mentally ill,” Uncle Sam had added.

Count Your Blessings, name them one by one... was wafting from somebody’s stereo not too far away when he woke up on the sofa. It was almost 11 pm.

Moments later, he stepped out of the house and walked into High Street, watching elated merrymakers, some staggy-drunk. Twinkling Christmas decorations still hung over the street. The town’s council had been forced to take them down a few days before Christmas after complaints from a secular pressure group. Now, after a court case, they were up again, but too late for Christmas.

At Castle Park, the presence of a crowd of young people discouraged him from staying. They could be unpredictable. He walked back up the High Street. Outside *The Opium* night club, he saw a couple of black people. On reaching the end of Head Street, he turned and walked back. He walked to the entrance of the club. Besides the bouncer who stole a look, no one else seemed to care about who he was or take a special interest in him. Inside, throbbing music rode on the restlessness of the multi-colour lights which filled the hall in ripples, zigzags, whirls, and lightning strikes. Their relentlessness flowed through the veins of the chatting, drinking, and dancing clubbers. He made for the far end of the hall, then ordered a shandy. The atmosphere of anonymity made him feel welcomed as he slowly sipped his drink.

At a minute to midnight, a siren went off. Laja jumped up. He was relieved to see that others didn't panic but started counting in the New Year in a mix of elation and drunken uproar. Indiscriminate handshakes, hugging and back-slapping, followed. A lady approached. She grabbed and hugged Laja, almost pushing him off his feet. Dumbfounded, he watched as she went to other people, doing the same. His glass empty, he stood up to go get another drink, a beer. The lady emerged from the crowd again and hugged him. The suddenness of her action splashed some drink over Laja's trousers. He stretched out his left hand, looking at his trousers then at the lady. She grinned and muttered words that were swallowed by the booming music. He did not want to create a scene, but went to sit down, determined to be on the lookout to avoid being her victim again.

He was engrossed in the atmosphere and was shaking his head to the music when the lady came back.

"Can I sit here," she said into his ear. Her body smell was strong enough to contend with the smell of alcohol in her breath. Laja patted the seat and smiled. She sat for seconds before getting up to go to the bar. Drink in hand, she came back, dancing awkwardly. After putting her drink on the table, she sat, giggling, and leaning against Laja. Confused, he stared at the lady, who said a few words he didn't comprehend. On two occasions he went to the bar and got more drinks.

"What's your name?" the lady asked, leaning against him.

"Laja"

"Lajan? I won't forget that! I'm Tessy. My friends call me Terrible Tessy," she said and belched.

Their attempt at dancing was a disaster. A few times, he had to prop her up from falling over. At about 1.30 am Laja said: "I have to leave now."

Tessy did not seem to hear him. He stood up, shaky on his feet at first. She lifted her hand to question if he was leaving. He nodded. She got up and put her right hand under his armpit as they both walked out of the club. The clattering of her heels on concrete of the sidewalk stopped when they left the High Street, and she removed her shoes to walk barefooted. Contrary to Laja's expectation, she did not bid him goodnight and walk away. She must live close to his place, he thought. But when they reached Meadow Hill and she still followed, he knew she wanted to go home with him.

Upstairs in his room, her bag landed on the bed, followed by the lacy cardigan she was wearing. She kicked twice; her shoes went flying to different parts of the room. Her feet, in tights, seemed too small for her size.

"Got a beer?" she asked, looking around the room.

"Just a minute," Laja, who was too excited to think, said, and went downstairs to the kitchen, knowing that besides food, juice, and fizzy drinks, the housemates rarely put any alcohol in the fridge.

"Sorry, no beer in the fridge," he said on getting back to the room.

"You can't be serious! Nothing to drink?"

"I don't usually ... I don't drink"

"What the fuck were you doing at the club then, observing women's asses? We have to go back and get some drinks," Tessy said, looking around for her shoes.

“Go back for drinks at this time of the morning? But you’ve ... I thought you’ve had enough to drink ...”

“No, I haven’t. I know when I’ve had enough. Thank you.” She started putting the shoes on. “How d’you get a good fuck without being fucking high?” Astounded, yet elated, Laja picked up his jacket. “I’ll go and get some drinks.”

“That’s fantastic! Run along black boy and come back to something juicy,” Tessy said, shaking her chest at him and winking.

The five-minute walk to the nearest open shop took Laja about four. He bought a pack of the cheapest six-pack beer available and headed back. At the corner linking Helen Street to Meadow Hill, he passed a couple merged in intimate cuddle in front of Youth Centre. It added to his excitement and increased his strides. On getting home, he hurried upstairs. Smoke clouded his room. For a moment, he stood rooted, afraid. Tessy was smoking marijuana.

“That was fast, my boy,” she said, then grabbed the plastic bag from Laja, pulled out a can of beer, and took a loud gulp. She sat up against the wall, her feet tucked under her, humming intermittently as she drank. Laja sat at the edge of the bed, opened a can, and sipped slowly, watching her.

After draining the content of his can, Laja went for a shower. He contemplated on why Tessy had followed him home. It was a question he should have asked at the door if he wasn’t sure. What other reason could there be if not that she wanted to spend the night, the early New Year morning, with him? He went downstairs and found a pack of energy drinks in the fridge and removed a can from it. It must be Ben’s. He would replace what he took before he comes back. In two long gulps, he emptied the content and threw the can into the recycling box.

Upstairs, before reaching his room, he heard a sound. He stopped. Impossible! Tessy could not be asleep and snoring already! He stepped inside the room to see Tessy sprawled on the bed. The beer can lay on its side, its content had poured on the bed. He removed the can and dabbed the wet spot on the bed with tissue.

For about five minutes, he sat looking at her, pondering on action to take. Slowly, he leaned over and kissed her on the cheek, then on her lips lightly, then he pushed his tongue into her open mouth. A rush of the sensual soon overpowered his sense for fearful restraint; he started removing her clothes. His fingers moved all over her body, ending between her legs. She only twitched once. He removed the towel around his waist and lay over her naked warm body. He kissed, pulled, and sucked her breasts, one after another. Spurred on by her rising nipples, he parted her legs and lifted them to his shoulders. He went in and out of the wetness between her legs until he could no longer hold himself and collapsed on her.

He woke up to a light headache and a pair of wild eyes boring into his. He strained his aching brows. Tessy was fully dressed in her rumpled clothes.

“Hi! Happy New Year!” he greeted. “You slept off still drinking your beer last night.”

“Who are you? Where is this place?” she said.

Laja sat up. “I’m Laja. We met at *The Opium* last night. Can’t you remember?”

“I asked, where is this place?”

“It’s Meadow Hill, we”

“Number?”

“96.”

She dialled a taxi and gave the address.

“How did I get here?” she said, looking around the room with dismay and repugnance.

“You followed ... we came here together from *The Opium*, last night ...this morning.”

She shook her head. As she tried to exit the room her left foot caught the carpet’s edge She staggered and her bag fell, spilling its content on the floor.

Laja got up. “Are you okay?”

“Oh, shut up!”

He picked up some of her things and handed them to her. As he touched her hand, she recoiled.

“Don’t touch me!”

He knew then he was in trouble.

Tessy threw her things into her bag and walked down the stairs. Laja hurried after her. He’d presumed she came home with him because she wanted to have fun, and she’d asked him how they could have good sex without getting drunk. Why did she lead him on if...?

“I’m sorry, please can we talk this over,” he said.

She did not respond but looked curiously around the lounge as she walked to one of the windows. After a few minutes in which Laja kept begging her, her phone

rang, she glanced at it and walked towards the exit. He followed her but stopped at the door. Besides being in his boxers, he didn't want anyone else to hear them. Standing by the window, he watched her enter a *Panther* taxi, taking his peace with her.

He sat on the sofa trying to clear his mind of the raging duel between what could be and what could not, in the aftermath of what had happened. He felt foolish. Drunkenness and Tessy following him home willingly were no excuses if she accused him of rape. He was going the way of his father, whom he believed threw the peace in his life and family away because of a strange woman. Now, his own fate was in the hands of another woman; he could only dream and hope for a miracle.

When he got up, his eyes went to the picture of the smiling Uncle Sam on the wall. It was as if he was repeating his popular aphorism: 'never forget who you are,' to him. He looked away and walked to the stairs. It'd been some weeks since his death and high time the picture was removed, he thought.

Upstairs, behind his room door, he saw a red lipstick, picked it up and threw it under the bed. He opened a can of beer and took a sip. It tasted horrible, but he needed it. Leaning against pillows and staring into the ceiling, he remembered Riba saying on one occasion that: 'Life is a sexually transmitted disease; if you can't stand its pains, don't do the sexing.'

Later that afternoon, as he opened the door to see two police officers, Laja's heart dropped. Their coming was like a surprising, non-expectation of the expected. He prayed that Tessy would not take any action, but at the same time, he knew that it was wishful thinking. As much as he'd tried, he could

not wish away the consequence of his action with inaction on Tessy's part.

Now, it was time to confront his fears.

"Sorry to bother you on New Year Day, sir. I am PC McEwan, and my colleague is PC Morgan, from Essex Police. We are here to see one Mr, Lagher," the leading police officer said. "Do you have anyone with that name living at this address?"

"Yes ... I'm... I am the one," Laja said and held the door open for the officers to enter. His heartbeat went faster as they sat down and continued to look around the lounge like property inspectors.

"May I take your surname, please," PC Morgan asked, after sitting down and opening his little notebook. "Balogun. Laja Balogun. L-A-J-A."

"Could you spell the surname too."

"B-A-L- O-G-U-N."

"Thank you. We are investigating an incident that happened here last night. Do you mind having a chat with us...?"

"No ... I mean no problem," Laja said.

"Who else lives on this property?"

"We are five...four. We used to be five, but we lost one of us ... last year," Laja said, pointing to the picture on the wall.

"Sorry for your loss," both PC Morgan and PC McEwan said., almost at the same time.

“Thank you,” Laja responded, wondering what next the men would ask. He prayed they would not ask for any identification. If they did, he would ... he would say he gave his passport to Uncle Sam for a lawyer to process his permit extension, and that after his death, he’d been trying to locate the lawyer but had not succeeded yet. He knew it was a ridiculous claim, but he would have to say something.

PC McEwan stopped writing.

“Do you know one Miss Theresa Richardson by any means?”

Laja frowned and stared agape at the policeman. “No.”

“Maybe you know her as Tessy?”

“Tessy? Yes, yes. I know one Tessy.”

“And how d’you know her?”

Laja narrated the story of how they met at the club and they both came to the house.

“Did anything happen between you in the night?”

Laja hesitated. Unaware of what Tessy had told them or if she’d had a medical check, a lie that he did not have sex with her might weigh heavily against him. “We ... she had a drink, smoked some strange stuff and ...later slept off.”

“Did you have sex?”

“Yes. We”

“You had sex with her while she was asleep, without her consent?”

“No! She....”

“But you said she slept after having a drink”

“And smoking ...,” PC Morgan added.

“No. She was awake when ... She woke up later in the night and...”

“Did you ask her if she wanted to ...” PC Morgan asked.

“No, but ... she wanted it. She asked me how we could have sex without getting drunk.”

“Besides the way you read what she said, did she tell you she wanted sex at any stage?”

A sound escaped from Laja’s throat. “No ... but ...”

PC Morgan peered into his eyes. “When she was leaving this morning, would you describe her countenance as that of someone who was happy with you?”

“I She didn’t... I don’t know,” Laja said.

He was relieved when the police officers got up to leave, saying they would get back to him if there was a need for further questioning. As he shut the door behind them, Laja turned to see the unavoidable picture on the wall again. That’s the man who would have come out with useful suggestions, he thought. Maybe there wouldn’t have been a reason to seek such a solution. Back in his room, he could not stop worrying about what would come next. It wasn’t how he wanted to start a New Year.

When Tessy left, he was left with uncertainty about what she would do; the police officers’ coming ended that. Now another one, more complex, had replaced the first one. He summed up courage, called Isaac and told him what had happened.

“As a black person, that’s not a wise thing to do. I have heard people, even whites, going to prison after taking drunk and willing girls home,” Isaac said.

“I don’t know what happened to me ... just couldn’t....”

“Did you sleep with her?”

Laja said “No” before he could think.

“Then there won’t be any evidence and you have no reason to be afraid. Let’s see what happens next. I’ve heard of a good solicitor who often got black guys out of this type of trouble. And he doesn’t charge much. Just relax. We’ll talk more when I get back,” Isaac said.

Chapter 36

A craving for chevon in melon soup made Laja go to the African food shop run by a Nigerian woman. Uncle Sam had called her shop an African solidarity shop because her things were more expensive than at other places where Africa food were sold. It was difficult also to find free parking close to her shop. All the other Afro-Caribbean shops in Colchester were run by Asians. Africans who ventured into businesses often closed their shops within months.

“It’s an inbred insecurity thing. Africans prefer the assumed security of working for others to thinking creatively and investing in businesses,” Riba had said. “I’ve stopped buying African food, I can’t be doing odd jobs under white people and then giving the money to Asians who sell black people’s food. It is double tragedy. I won’t do it.”

Though Laja had thought his decision was extreme, he was always cautious of arguing with Riba. Right or wrong, he had a way of making others sound foolish. After the death of Uncle Sam, communal shopping had ceased.

The sight and smell of the shop, its compactness, the overloaded bent shelves, and the disorganised arrangement of stuff reminded Laja of the open markets of Lagos. While he contemplated buying dry or fresh ugwu at the vegetable section, a plump man with a basketful of frozen offal packs squeezed past him. At the till area, he overheard the shop owner telling a customer that she offered Pound-Naira exchange rates better than Moneygram and Western Union. He would ask her what the rates were and buy international call cards when he was done shopping. Toke and Uncle Dele would be expecting his call that weekend.

He picked a pack of six cans of malt drink and a six-pack of beer. Since the Tessy affair, about two months earlier, drinking beer late helped him to sleep well. He stopped when he heard a female voice.

“Can we see some identification, sir?”

Peeping through the space between two shelves, he saw the man with the basket of offal standing before a lady in uniform. On her back was printed: IEU. Laja became panicky, knowing that they stood for Immigration Enforcement Unit. He’d heard that they were operating in Colchester, and it was in the news after they raided a Chinese shop and removed five men and a woman who did not have documents to remain in the UK. He’d spoken with a solicitor whom Isaac introduced to him when he became troubled about the Tessy issue, and he’d assured him he could help.

“Don’t worry. If you can survive the lady’s accusation, you have a chance with an immigration case,” he’d said. “If they’ve not charged you till now, it must be either the lady dropped the case, or.... Fingers crossed. Come to London to see me with all your documents as soon as possible.”

But Isaac, who knew the solicitor’s office and his way around London, was busy at work. They’d agreed to go at the end of the month. He wished they’d done so before now.

He moved further down the store but could still hear the conversation between the man and the lady.

“Not even a driver’s licence, sir?”

“What’s this about?” the man said, his voice a mix of sudden confidence and anger.

“Just doing our job, sir. You are just one of the many we have questioned today,” a male voice added.

“Your name, please?” the lady asked again. Silence. “I’m not going to ask you again after this. Have you got a form of identification on you, sir?”

Laja heard the man, his voice rising, say he was a European citizen and would not mind if the officers went home with him to see his residence permit. There was a cackling of radio. The lady spoke, giving the location of the shop. Laja looked around. Could the big shelf really cover him from being seen if the officers came looking? His eyes scanned the shelves around him. His ears strained; his heart beating fast, he felt faint as sweat ran down his neck. About three minutes after, he heard approaching footsteps and felt someone was close behind him. He turned.

“Are you okay there, sir? My name is Lionel, and I’m from the Immigration Enforcement Unit,” the man said, pushing what seemed a blank card into Laja’s face. “Have you got any ID on you, please?”

Several thoughts raced through Laja’s mind. Should he tell him the story that his passport was with an immigration lawyer? Or that he was a student with a visa extension application at the Home Office? Those wouldn’t fly. A quick check would burst his lies within minutes. Even if he told them he had IDs at home, they would follow him home. “I am a student at the Uni,” he said.

“Great. May I see your Uni ID, please.”

“I don’t have any form of ID with me here.”

“You don’t live anywhere near here. Do you?”

“Yes. Not really, I only came to”

“I know,” the officer said and pulled out the phone in his chest pocket. “Your student number, sir?”

Laja stared blankly at him. Words failed him. Instead, what galloped through his mind was a collage of his UK experience, from arrival till that moment, in flitting seconds.

“Your name or student number, sir? If you can’t give me the information I need, you will have to come with us for further questioning. Do you understand?”

But Laja was too shaken, too broken to understand anything. Nothing made sense anymore. He felt clammy, his shirt soaked with sweat.

“Do you have a phone on you?”

Laja nodded and bit hard into the inside of his lower lip to stem the rushing flow of emotion.

“Would you like to call anyone, sir?” the officer asked.

It was pointless calling anyone who would not be able to help him. He wished he’d visited the lawyer beforehand; he would have been the right person to call. But the implication of asking if he wanted to call anyone was that he might not be going back home soon, if at all. It was important to make the housemates aware of his whereabouts.

“Is there anyone you would like to call before you hand in your phone, sir?” the officer repeated.

Laja scrolled to Isaac’s number. “I’ll call a friend.” But what if they traced the call and arrested Isaac too? He paused and stared at the number, memorising it. “No need. My friend will be in class at this time, he won’t pick up any call.”

“May I have the phone then, please?” the officer said. Another man joined them and produced dangling handcuffs. He stretched his right hand towards Laja.

“There is no need for that, I’ll go with you,” Laja said.

“It is a mandatory precautionary measure for the safety of everyone, sir,” the man said as he pulled Laja’s hands together and clicked the cuffs around his wrists. The second male officer patted the other man they’d detained all over, removing the contents of his pockets. He put them inside a transparent plastic bag and sealed it. Then he came to Laja and did same.

“Besides things like pens, they can keep their personal stuff on them for now,” the female officer said to her colleague who opened the bag and returned Laja’s money and bank card into his trousers’ side pocket.

“D’you mind stepping out of the store with me please,” the officer who questioned Laja, said, pointing towards the exit.

Outside, a black car braked hard, its tyres brushing against the kerb. A woman jumped down and started waving a passport at the officers, shouting that the officers were racist and had no right to arrest her husband, who was a European citizen. The female officer tried to calm her down and leafed through the passport the woman brought. After making a call, she apologised and asked her men to release the man. Traffic had built up behind the woman’s car and her shouting had attracted passers-by who watched as she drove off angrily with her husband.

The walk to the black minibus with tinted glass parked on the adjacent street was the most difficult he’d ever made. He almost fell as he climbed onto the bus. An armed officer sitting near the door pointed him to the middle seats where a man sat

who looked East Asian. There were two young black men sitting together at the back, looking forlorn.

“Does anyone want anything before we leave?” the bus driver asked. There was no response. Laja wondered if the man near him spoke any English. What he saw was deep pain, etched into the furrows on his frowny forehead.

They stopped at the Central Police Station at about 7.30pm. A few minutes after, a man and a woman were led to join them. They sat in the row behind Laja. The wait continued till about 9.00 pm when they disembarked and were led to a prison transport vehicle with seats arranged back-to-back in four rows. They sat facing each other. Laja felt the breath of the man sitting across him on his face.

Their handcuffs were removed by a new set of armed guards, two of whom sat behind the wire mesh partition at the front of the vehicle. They left Colchester and joined the A12 at about 10 pm.

The duo who joined the bus at the police station started chatting in Yoruba. Laja did not want them to know he was Yoruba and understood what they were saying. He had his own worries. Of the other thousands of illegal immigrants in the United Kingdom, why should he be among the ones to be arrested?

He had not believed Mother when she said Fali was diabolically attacking her with cancer. Now, he was sure what his predicament was not ordinary. There must be unseen hands in what he was experiencing. Fali might be behind his predicament, remotely attacking him so that he would be unable to take care of Mother. Or besides Fali, who else had any reason to want to destroy him?

It couldn't be Bola, but could it be her mother, Mrs Junaid? She'd threatened him at the wedding. Maybe it was a curse from the vice-principal back at Newland.

She never liked him. Ah! Now, he was sure. It was karma; Uncle Sam's spirit was fighting back. It was wrong to steal his money and sleep with his girlfriend just after his death. He sighed. But what made him do it? It was a force he could not control. It was *Asise*, an irresistible power that made its victim misbehave, leading them to self-destroy. If not, why did he have to walk into the trap at the food shop? Why did he not get there after the IEU officers must have left? He glanced at the man beside him. Afraid, he didn't want to think that his sojourn in England was about to end.

The friends behind him continued chatting loudly. The woman narrated how a friend of hers had tried to avoid deportation by feigning severe depression. "They admitted her into hospital and pumped her with so much antidepressants that my vibrant friend became so weak and confused that she could barely say hello to me when I went to see her."

"Ha!" the man said. "That's wicked of them."

"This was a happy-go lady who attended parties in London every weekend. They destroyed her. In the end, they put her on a plane to Nigeria."

"So, despite all her suffering"

"Well, she wanted to stay and thought she could outsmart a people who are smartly wicked."

"What I don't understand is what they gain from seeing others suffer?"

"It is natural to them. What would you say about children, I mean teenagers, infants and babies detained in horrible conditions with their parents?"

"I've heard many stories, but I never believed they were real ...until, until I became a victim," the man said, his voice breaking.

“Don’t worry. God will sort us out,” the woman said, smiling. “If you, a man, starts to cry, what d’you expect from me, a woman?”

The man shook his head. “It’s just too much for me to bottle in,” the man said. “That story made me remember what someone told me about a friend of his who was arrested and lied that he was gay, saying if he was deported to Uganda, his country, where homosexuality was a crime, he’d be killed. At the detention centre, they put him in a room with two known gay men. They harassed and abused him for months despite his complaints and pleading. Every time he asked to be moved, the officers laughed, asking him if he was no longer gay. They left him there until they found him covered with blood one day in a suicide attempt.”

The woman exhaled loudly. “They put people in prison before determining their cases yet call themselves a country of fairness and justice.”

“It’s sheer wickedness.”

“No. It’s passion, sadistic passion. A zeal for their job when it comes to proving to people like us that they own this country.”

“How I wish African countries could have selfless leaders with their heads properly screwed on,” the man said. “What would I be doing here if Nigeria could give me a good life?” he added.

“Well, for me, I’m not done yet,” the woman said. “I’ll be back if they deport me.”

“But you don’t ... you don’t know what might happen yet.”

“I’m talking of the worst-case scenario. If they take me home, I’ll be back. We all own this country.”

“You sound so sure of”

“Yes. Who invited or gave them a visa when they came to steal from Africa? I’ll be back. What is important is money. I’ve got some good money saved up back home. I’ll pay my way back here within months and show them that they are not as smart as they think they are.”

The man’s confidence seemed to have been boosted when he spoke again. “I’m not going anywhere. I’ve got Human Rights lawyers fighting my case. I have a child who was born here. They can’t separate us.”

“They would do anything. Just pray for divine intervention,” the woman said.

Laja wondered if they would still say all they were saying if they knew he or any of the people in the vehicle understood Yoruba. What would the officers do? Probably nothing. Intention was not a crime.

“Where d’you think they are taking us?” the man asked.

“I think Tinsley House in Gatwick.”

“The one close to the airport? I learned it’s a terrible place ... that people died there”

“It’s not a common thing. It is the waiting and uncertainty that waste people away for days, weeks, months, and years in some cases,” the woman said.

“That is terrible.”

“Of course. These people love terrible things. Did you think it was because they ran out of time that they kept us till late? If they are not shady and terrible, why are they transporting us at this time, in the night?”

After about an hour, the vehicle stopped at a service station where it was fuelled. The officers came with packs of *McDonald's*, telling everyone what they had available and asking them to choose what they would like to have. The woman collected two boxes, for herself and the man, despite him saying he didn't want anything to eat.

“Does anyone want to use the conveniences before we move?” one the guards asked.

Laja wanted to ask to use the toilet, but the thought of being accompanied there by armed men discouraged him. Two men who later said they would like to ease themselves were told they had to wait until they arrived at a police station nearby. Laja felt happy that he had not asked. After about half an hour, and another 15 minutes at the police station, they left and joined the M25. The darkness inside the vehicle, the whizz of the vehicle as it penetrated the dark motorway, and the sorrowful uncertainty, combined to cast a surrealness on their journey.

They arrived at Brook House Immigration Removal Centre after midnight. The woman, who had been dozing, was told get off as she was to be taken to another place. She took her time, talking to her male friend, saying all would be fine and that they could be released soon. “If we don't meet here, we'll meet again someday back home. Take care of yourself,” she said.

The men filed into a large screening hall where there were many other people, waiting for processing. A man who smelled of garlic did a rub down on Laja and removed the money and bank card in his pocket, putting them inside a labelled bag containing his phone and pen. Then, he removed the SIM card from the phone,

saying camera phones were not allowed and that Laja would be issued with another phone. “Any drugs or weapon on you?” the man asked.

Laja felt like laughing. He said “No.” The man continued, slowly processing him even after others got allocated rooms. It was past 2.00 am when he was led to ‘B’ wing and shown his room, Room 25. Surprised that they would be three in the room, Laja mumbled a greeting; one of his roommates muttered in response, the other seemed asleep. The room stank. He could not sleep for a long period. A small, barricaded window high up at one end of the wall explained why the room was stuffy. The wash-hand basin was dirty, and the floor was wet. He wondered if and for how long anyone watched the small TV set in the room. There was no need opening the wardrobe, he had nothing to put in it until the morning when he would change into the tracksuit he’d been issued.

It was like being in a trance, expecting reality to dawn as he and others continued with induction the following afternoon. They completed forms about rules and regulations and the facilities and opportunities available were repeatedly emphasised. Representatives of a charity called Bail for Immigration Detainees (BID) also addressed them, explaining the processes of accessing their support. Laja did not think he could qualify for bail and lost interest. He called Isaac during breaks, but the calls went into the voicemail. Isaac picked at the third ring in the evening, asking where was. He shouted when Laja told him.

“I’ve heard of that place. I know a couple of guys who went there and were later released. Don’t worry, I’ll get information and see what can be done,” Isaac said.

“But how? I don’t think I qualify for ... I just can’t think straight. I wish I know what is going to happen.”

“To be frank with you, I don’t know, but I know there is always a way. Let me talk to some people and see what can be done. Okay?”

It did not matter that they were not very close, or that Isaac was probably trying to make him believe he was willing to help - it was enough for Laja that there were listening ears he could share his predicament with. Moreover, though Isaac too wasn’t sure of what could happen, the confidence in his voice took away some of the heaviness on Laja’s chest.

One of his room-mates, Mustaph, about thirty-five from Afghanistan, was heavily built and bearded. He occupied the upper bunk of the double bed. He’d crossed into Dover from Calais on a boat and filed for asylum. After staying in a hostel for months waiting for the outcome of his application, he’d had an argument with another asylum seeker over the use of the cooker in the common kitchen. The other man claimed that Mustaph threatened him with a kitchen knife and that he’d heard him mentioning bombs, ‘kaffir’ and ‘jihad.’ The police arrested and labelled him a terrorist suspect before bringing him to the Centre. He always wore a skull cap, long robes and prayed many times a day.

Kara, the other roommate was Ugandan, in his mid-twenties, with a strange accent. Sometimes he smoked in the room despite the ‘No Smoking’ notices all over the building. He’d grown up, schooled, and was working in London before he was arrested for having sex with a minor. He was awaiting a decision on his application against deportation to Uganda where he’d not been since leaving as a child and had no known relatives there.

The roommates didn't seem to mind seeing Laja, but he was not sure they were happy that he'd become the third person in a room meant for two. Could they be envious that he occupied a new single bed, while they shared bunks? The thought of it seemed petty, but it was difficult to know what could make anyone jealous or angry in such a gloomy environment.

When he called Isaac nine times without a response two days after their conversation, the hopelessness and forlornness of Brook House started seeping deeper into Laja. As he lay in bed that evening, his entire life passed before him like a badly made movie. When the locks clicked during lock-ins at 9. pm, his tear ducts opened to pour out some of his grief. The Centre was another world, one of shadows and darkness, and he was trapped within it.

Six days later, he tried again, his heart pumping hard. Isaac picked up after the third ring.

"I didn't want to waste your credit by picking your call when there was nothing concrete to tell you," he said and paused, as if deliberately heightening Laja's longing to hear what he had to say. "I've spoken with many people and there is a chance. The problem is money. If we can get some money, you will be released on bail, then you'll sort things out gradually. Your prayer should be that they don't link that rape accusation with your case."

"I hope not," Laja said and sighed. "What ... how much do you think ...?"

"Depends. You need someone who is a citizen swearing on oath that you are in a relationship with themthat's where most of the money will go."

"A lady ...?"

“Of course! Have you become gay in there?” Isaac said, laughing. “Seriously, I think ... if we can raise about two thousand pounds, there is a good chance. The solicitor will file what is called Article 8 application for you, and work with the lady to provide evidence that the tribunal needs to get you bailed and we take it from there.”

His use of ‘we’ made Laja happy. It was good to think to that he had someone was on his side, doing something about his case. “Where are we going to get...find a good lady? Uncle Sam said”

“That’s where the money comes in. With the money, we’ll hopefully get a trustworthy one,” Isaac said.

The suggestion seemed the only avenue of hope. Laja regretted not exploring it when Uncle Sam had mentioned it. “It is worth exploring. I’ll think about it and call you tomorrow. Thanks you so much,” Laja said. But there was nothing to think about. He’d only pushed the deed to another day because he wanted to be responsible for his own affairs and decisions.

That night, more planes flew over the Centre than usual. Not only did their noises deprive many of sleep, their passing, as usual, left implicit messages of deportation in the minds of inmates. The further the planes went, with their noise becoming a hum, the further hope disappeared for some. And because detainees heard of people being taken on the ten-minute drive from the Centre to the airport from time to time, there was the persisting uncanny curiosity about who was on the planes and where they were headed.

Laja spent most of the night preparing for the call to Isaac. His salary for the previous month would have been paid, and that should have taken his savings

account balance to over £2000. He'd thought that keeping the money would give him some leverage if he was eventually taken back home, but he would prefer staying back, at least for some time. True, he hadn't found anyone whose lifestyle he envied since he arrived England. The wheel of work and bills which never stopped turning, made people work round the clock. Doctors and nurses, the better off among migrants, worked Saturday nights and came to church on Sunday morning red-eyed and yawning. Some would leave immediately after service, saying they were off to work again.

He'd heard of sick people crawling to work because they had to, and he'd seen Uncle Sam die at work. In the time he'd spent in Colchester, he'd rarely heard of black people going out for leisure, relaxation or visiting friends and family. This wasn't the life he wanted. Back home, many lived a harsh economic life, still they lived freely, and had fun. Some were even very rich, living comfortably amidst the running poverty. Yet, he was afraid of home. He'd come too far, sacrificed everything to be in England. He would do everything possible to stay.

He didn't have any hope in the immigration charities. The number of people they attended to made them look overburdened and their presence was like a sheer waste of time. "Free things are fearful things," he'd often heard Mother said when he were growing up. "It is a dangerous situation to be where no one can be held responsible if things go contrary to the way it was intended." He could now see her reasons; he wished to see her.

The following afternoon, he called Isaac and told him where to find his HSBC Bank savings card and gave him his PIN.

“There should be about £800 in there. If we start with that, then, when they pay me, we’ll have more.”

“Don’t worry, it will go a long way,” Isaac assured him.

“I pray I will not be taken home before ...”

“No! Stop thinking negative. Did you have your passport on you when you were arrested?”

“No.”

“You told them where you are from?”

“No. Yes... I think I did when they questioned me here.”

“You shouldn’t have told them. They can’t take you anywhere if they don’t know where you are from. But I understand. No one thinks properly under that type of pressure,” Isaac said.

“How soon d’you think ...?”

“We can’t afford to waste time. I’ll go to London tomorrow to talk to the solicitor. Don’t worry.”

Laja thanked him and hung up. No calls came in the days that followed. Calls and messages to Isaac’s phone were not returned. Then, the message on the phone became: *‘The number you have called does not exist.’*

Chapter 37

The Centre's Library was always busy with inmates reading, writing letters, and using the limited internet facility to search for people and organisations that could help their cases. After about a month, Laja stopped looking for help after completing and sending three request forms without a response. They must have seen the futility in his quest for asylum. Nigeria was not at war, nor did he come into England as a victim of social, cultural, or political oppression or threat. He'd abused the system by coming in on a study visa and failing to register as a student with an education provider. Then, he'd overstayed his visa. Any application on his behalf would not succeed since he had no reasonable claim to stay in the UK. Besides a relationship application, an application on compassionate grounds also had a good chance of success, but he'd had no record of a serious medical condition since he arrived the UK.

Despite the hours the inmates spent chatting, having heated arguments, playing games, and airing outside, the frustrations and pains of uncertainty filled many with boredom and lonesomeness. The routine of their day-to-day living made the days boring and very long. Their nights were filled with nightmares and sleeplessness. In the gloom, there were, sometimes, cheery news of inmates set free, or changes in immigration laws which many thought might favour them. For Laja, it was better to steel himself and not nurse false hopes. He'd seen dejected men crying like babies and heard those who begged and howled like the demon-possessed going through exorcism as they were taken into isolation rooms. At church meetings in the multifaith hall, he'd watched inmates supplicating, then shouting at God, for urgent

help. Even self-professed atheists attended, believing that their salvation from deportation could only come through some higher invisible powers.

There was victims' solidarity. The strong among them raised hope and encouraged the weak. A few older inmates preached togetherness, advising and encouraging the new and younger ones. They told life stories of fate lifting the faithful from the abyss of hopelessness, but some still kept to the easiest path to find succour - their faith, race, status, and in the strength of their personal experiences. Laja equated most friendships among inmates to the food they were served – abundant but tasteless. Were the cooks, mostly inmates too, instructed not to salt or spice the food? Or was it their own contribution to the creation of a hostile environment for inmates?

He worked, cleaning rooms, and earning a miserly two pounds per hour, money with which he bought a few things from the Centre's shop. And he could learn a new language, or a trade – barbing, masonry, tailoring, carpentry – but while the work engaged him physically, his mind was not calm or settled enough to learn anything new. What was the use if he would be deported at the end? He was not going to be a tradesman back home in Nigeria.

There was freedom of movement but the 9.00 pm to 6.00 am lock-in; the midday and 5.00 pm checks during which they must be in their rooms; the batch-opening of the doors to control crowding the dining room at supper, the count and recount in and out of the rooms like chicken, was inhuman. This was no life to live.

The toilet in the room didn't flush, so, they used a big empty powdered milk tin to get water from the wash hand basin to the closet to send its contents down. So, the

floor was always wet, made worse by Mustaph's ablution water. He washed parts of his body before each prayer, inside the room. When Laja summed up courage and told him that it would be better to use the multifaith hall for his prayers one afternoon, Mustaph did not respond until he'd completed his prayer.

"You hate me, you hate Islam and Moslems? Yes?"

Laja was stunned.

"No. I didn't mean it that way"

"How you mean it? Me ever tell you stop reading bible?" Mustaph asked as he carefully folding his prayer mat.

"But my reading the Bible is different from what you do," Laja said. "I don't take up space or splash water on the floor in this airless room."

"Me say nothing, no problem, no trouble, no accuse you when you read Bible. Yes?"

"I didn't intend to This is not an accusation. It's about living a healthy life," Laja said, looking towards Kara, who had also complained about the wet floor, to say something. Kara neither uttered a word nor seemed to hear what they were saying.

"Okay. Okay. This no hotel. We all go one day, yes? You rich and clean, why come here? You get hotel if you go out here. Okay? Here, everybody is same ...eh...equal. You don't put your problem on me," Mustaph said and walked out of the room.

Should he have kept quiet and allowed Mustaph to continue as he wished? Or was he just venting his own frustration? Of course, being locked up for over eleven

hours a day would affect anyone's sanity. For the second time in his life, Laja was not sure of his own sanity. Nor was he sure of that of others.

On occasions, inmates exchanged insults, and exchanged fisticuffs; they shouted invectives and curses at the guards and escorts. Splashing the walls with oil and dirt was common, so was writing lewd comments on them. Many times, he felt like hitting his head against the wall to clear it. He couldn't. Others would think he was mad.

Late on a Friday evening after lock-in, two G4S staff came to remove Mustaph.

"Alhamdulillah!" he said, looking stoic and relieved. Quietly, he packed his things. Laja was sad that they had not made up after their argument and wanted to wish him well, but he could not think of what to say. Their paths might never cross again but it was better to be quiet than make Mustaph misconstrue his last words to him. Life was war; it was cruel. It brings people together then painfully tears them apart.

Kara too did not say a word to Mustaph; he kept mumbling incoherently to himself and continued days after. Laja became worried after a few days. "You've been very quiet. Are you okay?" he said to him one evening.

"Yeah," Kara answered, smiling. "It's my psychiatrist. He's missed two appointments. A nice guy, he gave evidence in support of my bail application at the tribunal, twice," Kara said, raising two fingers. "The bastard Home Office solicitor argued against bail. He said I was a risk to the public, and they could not guarantee that I won't harm a member of the public."

"Did he know better that your psychia ... your doctor?"

Kara wrung his hands and smiled. “Ugh! They don’t know me,” he said and turned to Laja. “Do you think I could harm anyone?”

“I don’t think so,” Laja said quickly.

If Kara had been refused bail because of fear about his mental health, why had they kept him with other detainees? His incessant smiles and bursts of laughter had increased, making Laja wary of being alone with him. Now that Musa was gone, he wondered what would happen next. There have been stories of attempted murder at the Centre. One inmate had tried to strangle another with a metal cable; another, on being denied bail, slashed a guard’s face with a razor. The rooms were often searched, but like the hard drugs flying around the Centre, no one knew where the cable or the razor came from. Laja often pondered if the emergency alarm button on the wall worked.

Chapter 38

It was three months later when Isaac called with a strange number.

“Hi, Laja. How are you?”

“Isaac?”

“Yes. I’m so sorry but”

“My God!”

“I’m sorry. I lost my phone,” Isaac said.

For a moment, surprise and relief created more confusion in Laja. So, it wasn’t karma! Isaac had not scammed him.

“How are you?” Isaac asked.

“I’m fine and not fine. I can’t be in prison and say I’m fine. Wow! I thought you had defrauded me ... that all hope was gone.”

“No. I wouldn’t. It would be wicked of me to do that to you, knowing what we all go through in this country,” Isaac said, his tone becoming less enthusiastic.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to”

“It’s okay, I understand. Now, I’ve been able to get someone trustworthy who will do what you need. We’ve had a discussion with the solicitor, and she’s willing to come and see you so that you talk and get familiarised. The solicitor has collected an initial payment of £500. He wants you to book an appointment for next Saturday so that the lady can come and see you.”

Laja cleared his throat. “I ... I think what they do here is that the visitor calls them and books the appointment with the office and”

“No problem, I will find their number and book a visit,” Isaac said.

“I think it’s better if the lady books it, saying she is coming to visit her fiancée.”

“That’s a good idea. Ask them what she would need to do and let me know.”

“I’ll find out and send you a text message on this number tomorrow,” Laja said.

“We’ll see you on Saturday then.”

Laja smiled and was about to hang up.

“Hello. Hello.”

“Yeah, Isaac?”

“Do you know someone called Tukii?”

“Tukii?”

“Yes. A lady who kept calling from Nigeria. She said she wanted to speak to you...”

“Toke! That must be Toke, my sister. How did ... what did she...?”

“She called the house phone and left many messages until I picked up one day and she said she’s been trying to get hold of you and”

“I hope you didn’t tell her what happened. I don’t want my mother to know.”

“No. I didn’t.”

“So, what ... what did she say?”

Isaac was quiet for about half a minute. “I think ... if she’s your sister, I’m sorry it’s bad news.”

Laja’s heart sank. He knew what it could be. It was the news he’d always prayed against. “Is my Mum dead?” Laja asked, standing up from the bed.

The line froze again in the seconds that he waited for an answer. It was an obvious response that he would have preferred not to hear but which he must hear.

“I’m sorry, I think that’s what she said. I just have to tell you, Laja. I’m sorry.”

The phone stuck to his ears. He felt angry with himself; he’d failed her. Then he became angry at her. Did she not realise that he was making efforts to make things better? Why die on him? But it wasn’t her fault. It was the illness; it was cancer. The breasts! In their being eaten by cancer, they’d questioned his sonship and manhood, challenging him to save them and his mother. He could not. And because of his inability to do anything, they’d died and took Mother with them. If only they’d been cut off in good time.

“Are you okay, mate?” Kara said.

Laja nodded. After a couple of minutes in which he did not know how to respond to Isaac, who was offering sympathy and advising him to take it easy, he cut the call and sat on his bed. “My mother’s dead.” Saying the words made the reality hit harder. He burst out crying.

“I’m sorry. Life’s mean,” Kara said.

Isaac called back. "I'm so sorry. This should not be happening to you at this time.

Do you want me to cancel the appointment with the lady until ...?"

"I don't know. But ... No. Go ahead."

"Are you sure?" Isaac asked.

"Yeah. I just have to do it."

"I'm sorry. Call to let me know if you can't... if you don't want us to come,"

Isaac said and ended the call.

Laja felt empty and confused.

"Let them know in the office. You need to inform them. When did this happen?" Kara said.

Laja shrugged. He'd not asked. He picked the phone and called Isaac. He did not know either. Toke had not mentioned it and he didn't ask. Laja sat, contemplating what to do next. He stood up and went to the office.

"How can we help you, mate," the man at the desk asked.

"I just heard the news that I lost my mother."

"Oh. I'm sorry, love," a lady at another table behind the main desk said in calm soothing voice. The man looked at Laja for some time, then turned in his swivel chair to face the lady.

"That's why I don't support these people having phones on them," the man said in low tone but loud enough for Laja to hear. The lady did not look up from her computer screen or responded to her colleague.

He turned to Laja. “Sad news. I’m sorry, there is no way we can help you, mate. You don’t want to walk to her funeral in your country and come back, do you? Where are you from?”

Laja stormed out of the office, tears dropping from his eyes.

That night, the sound of a plane flying over the Centre heightened his imagination and sorrow. First, it was as if they were taking Mother away. He would never see her again. Then he imagined her lying on a cold tray in the morgue, sandwiched between strangers. There have been stories of corpses which stayed in the freezers for so long that they lost shape and identification; there were road accidents victims whose relatives were unaware they’d died and declared them missing. Those whose relatives could not afford mortuary fees, were also abandoned in hospital mortuaries across Nigeria. The bodies all had to wait. His mother probably somewhere too, waiting.

There was no consolation other than the one he got from Isaac, Kara, and the lady at the office. Everything went on as usual, nothing was affected; no one cared. He remembered Riba saying that burying the dead was actually not to honour them but to spare the living the stench that came with their decomposition. The thought of Mother somewhere, alone, and decomposing, brought tears to his eyes. He turned to face the wall. Had Eyitemi heard of her death? His coming back into her life, and the hurtful feeling of guilt she’d felt, probably accelerated the malignancy of her cancer. The possibility that she might have died with deep, doubly incurable pains, saddened Laja more.

He wished he knew the things that she had wanted to say but could not in her last moments. Did she change her mind about his travelling abroad? Was she proud

of his effort to make her life more comfortable with the money he sent home? Painfully, cancer had won and took her voice away forever. Again, he turned to the wall and wept.

A day before Isaac and the lady were to visit, a light knock on the door, followed by a turning key in the door, woke Laja. It was past midnight. He sat up as two guards entered and switched on the light.

“Hello mate,” the guard with a metal chain holding many keys around his waist, said. “You are moving. Pack your things quickly.”

Laja rubbed his eyes and turned from the speaker to look at Kara, who was sleeping.

“It’s you mate,” the second guard with tattooed biceps that were almost tearing through his white shirt arms, said.

Laja stood up, then sat down. He felt dizzy. It didn’t seem real. This couldn’t be happening.

“C’mon mate. We haven’t got all night,” the muscular guard said.

“Why? Where ... where am I going?” Laja asked.

The keys man opened his mouth, but his partner beat him to it.

“Maybe to a better place, mate. You never know,” he said with a smile and nod.

Laja stood up. The suddenness of the situation was overwhelming. Was this planned because of the visitors he would be having later that day? Now he was sure that the

Centre had been eavesdropping on their phone conversations and reading their letters.

“Get to work, mate, time is running out,” the keys man said. His colleague unzipped a checked bag they had brought with them and gave it to Laja.

There was not much to pack. He struggled to suppress the feeling that he knew where they were taking him. “I don’t know what to take since I’m not sure of where ...,” he said.

“Everything. Take everything you have, mate,” the keys man said.

He’d thought Isaac would bring him some stuff in the morning. From the wardrobe, he removed everything and crammed them into the bag. If he was being taken to the airport, he would not go back home with cheap prison stuff that he’d bought at the Centre from proceeds of his work, cleaning inmates’ rooms for peanuts. He rummaged through the bag and removed immigration papers he’d photocopied at the library, a pair of flipflops, and the track suit he was issued on arrival and put them on the floor. Then he thought they would be good mementoes of his failed England venture and started putting them back into the bag. After removing his nightwear, he put on a sweatshirt and the pair of jeans he wore when he was arrested.

“Ready to roll?” the keys man said.

Laja brought out his phone and started searching for Isaac’s number. The other guard shook his head and stretched out his hand to collect the phone.

“I need to make a call, please.”

“I’m sorry, you can’t at this time,” the man said loud enough to wake anyone sleeping, but Kara did not shake. The guard opened the phone and gave the SIM card to Laja. They stepped out, with the beefy guard staying by Laja’s side. The keys man locked the door, then walked behind Laja, his keys jangling with every step he took. Down the corridor to the stairs, they heard noises of chats, radios, and television sets from the rooms. But it was the sound of jangling keys and the heavy footsteps of the guards which dominated the night.

Somewhere in ‘C’ wing ahead of them, there was shouting and struggling. It seemed he was not the only one being taken to the airport that night. Near the gate, a bus with tinted glass was parked, its engine running. At the reception, Laja’s exit papers were quickly completed, and he was handed over to two escorts. They told him he had to be handcuffed. He put his wrists together behind him. The cuffs clicked into place. It was 01.50 on the office wall clock. He heard someone behind him say: “Another one bites the dust,” as he led towards the bus.

Chapter 39

There were no other passengers in the Waiting Room into which the escorts led them after removing the handcuffs. Another set of guards took over from the escorts. The layers of uniform and protective jackets made their chests jut out as they moved around.

At the far end, tiny insects flew around a fluorescent light over a TV set sitting on a metal stand. It was tuned to a BBC News station. Laja remembered paying his contribution to the house TV licence just a week before his arrest. If he could get a refund of the taxes, National Insurance, and pension contributions he'd paid in England, it would be a substantial amount to restart his life when he got back home.

They were about ten men and five ladies. One of the ladies went to the toilet twice in half an hour, escorted by one of two female guards. On her third request, another lady, who'd said she needed the restroom too, argued with a female security guard. "I need to go now. Why are you allowing others and stopping me?"

"I'm sorry you have to wait, there are only two of us, and I can only take one at a time," the guard said. "She can't leave that lady for a sec," she added, indicating the other female guard who stayed glued to a fair-complexioned lady with dark patches around her neck area. The lady kept grumbling as the guard walked away behind the other woman.

"I need to go to the toilet now," the fair lady shouted and sprang to her feet. Her guard quickly moved back, with her arms raised defensively. One of the male guards moved toward the scene. But the lady smiled and sat back slowly into the

aluminium bench. It squeaked. Laja thought she looked familiar; then he remembered her. It was the loquacious lady who'd been in the van with him and others from Colchester on the day of his arrest. Was she pretending to be mentally ill?

The sound of metal on marble cut into Laja's ears. He turned. Some male guards were moving empty seats further back. Another group of people marched in, all in handcuffs. One of them stood out. He was big and tall. Laja looked again. Three years were not long enough to mess up his memory, but it was difficult to believe. Someone who had boasted of getting many people settled in the UK couldn't be among those to be deported for lack of papers. Laja took a furtive look. He was right. It's Chuks! As he raised his head, Laja quickly turned away. He felt guilty immediately.

Though he'd been trapped into paying him and his friend, Chima, they'd given him hope and purpose when he was down. Chima was his saviour in South Africa; Chuks arranged for him to be picked up from Heathrow and hosted him. The little things - the movie they went to see, the *suya* he bought, his friendliness - were evidence that he was a good man. He didn't need to do those. But what could he have done to be among the handcuffed? Only aggressive and foreign criminals were handcuffed during their deportation. Laja struggled with the urge to go and say hello. But what would Chuks' reaction be? Would he still be angry that he'd stopped the monthly payment after Uncle Sam died?

With the fear that the guards might stop him, Laja got up and took quick long strides towards where Chuks sat. No one stopped him, only the guard at the back door gazed at him.

“O’l boy! Na you be this?” Chuks said with a spark in his eyes.

Laja smiled.

“You just cut us off and we no see your brake light again. No be so dem de do am o.”

“How you dey?” Laja said, involuntarily raising his arm to give him a handshake. Chuks smiled; Laja retracted his arm, feeling stupid.

“I dey o my brother. Long time,” Chuks said and yawned. “Na so woman finish me o.”

“Woman? How... which woman?”

“Amara. You know am nau. Amara wan use me get paper, go report me for abuse because we get small quarrel,” Chuks said, shaking his head.

“But how could she be”

“Oho! Na so everybody dey ask o. Di woman wey I wan marry, bring come UK, do everything for am, she call police make dem arrest me. I spend like six months for jail, my brother,” Chuks said, yawning. “The injection we dem give me just de make dey weak,” Chuks said, yawning again.

“Injection?”

“Na so o. When I refused to pack my things follow dem, na im di bastards give dem papa injection o,” Chuks added. Laja stood for a while, not knowing what to say. If his own case with Tessy had gone to court, he would have gone to jail too. But why would Amara want Chuks deported? Did she truly want to use the opportunity to get herself papers that she would eventually get when married to Chuks? He wasn’t telling the whole story; he must have beaten her.

“Ah ha! I hear say dis guy, ehm...Sam don die,” Chuks said, looking pensive towards Laja.

Laja nodded.

“Na wa o. Na so person de die?”

It was not the right place to narrate how he'd found Uncle Sam dead in the toilet. He stood silently for some awkward moments until he felt a pinch in his bladder.

“I'll see you later,” he said and walked back to his seat, then told the nearest guard that he needed to use the toilet.

The man smiled, raised his left arm to show the way, and followed Laja. There was a cleaner's trolley sitting at a corner in the corridor. It was similar to the one he used at Colchester Hospital. A black guy with gloves appeared from inside one of the cubicles and nodded towards Laja who smiled back. With the guard watching as he stood before the urinal, the shy bladder syndrome kicked in. It took a while imagining that others were queueing up, waiting for him to finish, before he was able to calm himself and let go. When it came, the urine was in small spurts, as if something was blocking its way. Laja did not feel all of it had come out when he stopped. He was embarrassed that it was taking too long.

After about two and a half hours of waiting, the guards asked Laja's group to stand up and form a single file. Again, he suddenly felt pressed but saying he needed the toilet at that time would be interpreted as fear. They marched for a few feet before being ordered to stop. The other group were led to meet up with them. Chuks walked up to Laja's side as they were led through a door. “O'l' boy, I'd rather die here than go back o. I will make them kill me here before the plane moves, I tell

you.” In his eyes was the strong will of a distressed but determined man. There were ragged circles of sweat under his arms and around the neck of the blue T-shirt under his jacket. Laja could smell him.

They boarded from the tail end. The paying passengers were in the front part of the commercial plane. Before Laja could reach for the nearest window seat, someone else took it. But from his aisle seat, he could still see outside. Surprisingly, an urgency to leave took over him. He was far into the plane’s nosy take-off into the skies and the rituals of air travel; the hours of seated boredom, dozing, and waking up to gape at the on-board entertainment. His imagination took him further to the plane’s landing kiss on the runway, and the jolt of the heave-filled stop on arrival. Then, the numerous, antsy mufti and badge-wearing officials in uniforms, up till Immigration. Laja feared what they could say or do, having heard of how they questioned returnees, demanded huge bribes, and threatening them with detention for going abroad to disgrace their fatherland.

If Mother hadn’t died, he wouldn’t have wanted anyone to know he’d been deported. If she hadn’t been buried yet, he wanted to go and see her body. And Toke - he wanted to see her too. Isaac would help send the remaining amount in his HSBC account into his Nigerian bank account. His Barclays account would become dormant, with his money in it gone. He would ask Giripi for Jude’s contact, and call Gani for help in finding his feet in resettling in Nigeria.

The silent wait in the plane was broken by a scuffle.

“I won’t allow you to chain me to a seat. I won’t take a monkey ride chained to this cheap *Moolue*. Never!” Chuks was head-to-head with one of the guards.

Another one, a senior by his rank, walked down the ‘B’ aisle towards Chuks.

“We won’t take your insults anymore, mate. We are doing our job here. Just shut up and sit down, or we’ll be forced to restrain you further!”

“Restrain who? You want to inject me again. You people want to paralyse me? You’ll first kill me before you inject me with anything!” Chuks shouted and lunged head-first at the guard holding on to his cuffs. The man’s face took the full force of Chuks’ head-butt. He fell over a seat. His colleague hit Chuks with the side of his fist. Two more guards rushed down the aisle and they pinned Chuks to the aisle floor. He screamed and struggled but they kept him down, threatening to make his situation worse if he didn’t calm down. After minutes of struggling, Chuks voice became almost inaudible.

“Leave him alone. You’ll kill him!” someone shouted. A female flight attendant rushed in, saw the head-butted guard with blood trickling down his nose and ran back, her left hand over her mouth.

“Allow them. Let them kill and eat him,” another guy shouted. Others joined in, shouting, calling the guards cruel and hurling insults at them. A couple of the guys got up and tried to reach the spot where Chuks was, but the guards prevented them. Outnumbered, they rushed from seat to seat to stop the most determined of the guys from approaching. The plane’s engine started running. From time to time its wheezing engines jerked the fuselage. The head of the guards came in and spoke to his men. They lifted Chuks from the floor, forced him into a seat to which they attached the handcuffs while Chuks kept struggling.

Some of the flight crew and more security men came to see what was happening. The discomfiture spread to the commercial passengers where some could be heard raising their voices, asking questions.

“Come and see what is happening here o!” A guy sitting by a window on the left side of the plane called out.

“It’s the Immigrants’ Rights people. They are blocking the runway. No wonder we’re not moving,” another guy, his face pressing hard against the window, said. Some guys stood and crossed the two middle aisles to the other side and leaned over to get a view of what was happening on the tarmac.

Laja stood up, crossed the middle isles, and joined a window with two people. On the ground, police officers and airport security men scuffled with about ten young people. From their positions, Laja could only see parts of the face-off on the ground as the people appeared and disappeared under the belly of the plane.

A burst of laughter rang out. Everyone turned to see the fair woman, who had remained quiet all along, gazing into the in-flight entertainment screen before her. Laja peered into the screen closest to him. The incident on the tarmac was on the screen. He rushed back to his seat. The activists were shoving banners which read: *Stop Migrant Deportation Flights; No One is Illegal; We Are All Migrants; Fuck the Homeless Home Office*, into the faces of police officers trying to stop them. As the officers grabbed one, the others swooped on them to set their colleagues free. One removed an officer’s cap and tossed it to another, who quickly threw it to another of his mates, laughing. A couple of ladies, naked from waist up, sat on blankets and sleeping bags unfazed, chatting, and laughing. The officers, all male, were hesitant to touch them.

“They can’t take us, at least not today, I’m sure,” an elderly man, who had been sitting calmly, reading a Bible all the while, said, his eyes quickly returning to his reading. Moments after, the commercial passengers behind the curtain were led out.

About 4.30 am, a group of policemen led by a sergeant entered the cabin.

“Gentlemen, I’m sorry you have to disembark from this aircraft. I will appreciate your cooperation and orderly conduct as the officers lead you out. Thank you,” the sergeant said.

For a while, no one moved, the guys looked from one to another, as if asking the meaning of what they’d just heard. The elderly man turned to catch a few eyes. “Did I not say so?”

Laja stood up. “We are not going anywhere. If you can’t take us home, leave us here,” he heard himself say. Before he could finish, a babel of voices joined in support. “Yes. Take us home! Take us home! Or leave us here.”

“Gentlemen...” the sergeant started.

“You can’t be taking us up and down like toys,” Chuks, who’d been quiet for a long while, said.

“Gentlemen ... gentlemen, we don’t want to make this difficult, do we?” the sergeant said.

Laja continued. “Make it what you will! You detained us for months in detention centres. You brought us here and raised our hopes that we were going home. You kept us hidden away on a passenger plane for hours, only to come now

and tell us, without any apology, that we can't go to our own countries? You want to take us back to your detention places. We say, No! We won't take it!" As he spoke, his voice and body shook. Something strange had come over him. After about thirty minutes, the police officers left, quietly.

The on-board entertainment screens went off, but the guys at the window told everyone when the Immigrants Right's people were leaving. A man, dapper in navy jacket and red tie, appeared with a lady in tight-fitting skirt suit, accompanied by some police officers.

"Gentlemen ... and ladies, I am Steve, the Operations Manager of this airline. I have come to plead with you to please calm down. I do understand what you have been through"

"Get out!" Chuks shouted.

The man stopped for a while, then bent to listen to the lady who whispered into his left ear. "Who is your leader so that we speak to him, please."

"No! No divide and rule here! Say whatever you want to say before all of us," someone shouted from the 'C' isle.

"Well, thank you," Steve continued. "I do understand your situation, but as you know, we are not the Home Office or the government and cannot help you. We are a commercial airline, and as it is, we have lost a lot of money, and we are losing more every minute you stay on this plane. Please understand our situation. You are all civil people and should maintain civility by ensuring a peaceful resolution to this. If the police say you should get off the plane, please comply. We don't"

"We are not going anywhere!" the Bible-reading man shouted.

Shouts of ‘Take us home! Take us home!’ took over the cabin. Steve and the lady exchanged looks. The police officers appeared disinterested but stern in their demeanour. Steve raised his hand, but his voice was drowned by booing and shouts of “Take us home! Take us home!” He turned and walked away.

The mist which had cast a shroud over the tarmac started melting at about 6.00 am. Most of the guys were asleep in uncomfortable positions. Chuks was snoring loudly. Those still awake, yawned repeatedly. One of the ladies was humming a hymn: *Lead us, heavenly Father, lead us* Laja wanted to see which of them it was but was too tired to bother. His body yearned for a bed, where he could stretch out. And he was hungry too. It was time to admit defeat. There was no need to stay longer on the plane and keep resisting the police officers who would have their way at the end. The little pride they had left would turn into shame, and probably with injuries if they had to be forcefully evacuated. But Laja could not tell them; he was too tired to open his mouth, too fearful of how the others might react.

When a squad of police officers came into the cabin at about 7.15am, it only took the elderly man standing up, clutching his Bible between his armpit, for others to follow suit. One after the other, each one stood up without a word. A bus was waiting on the tarmac to take them on the seven minutes ride to Tinsley House Immigration Detention Centre.

Chapter 40

After two weeks at Tinsley House, Laja was called to the office.

“We have been feeding you all this while, but now you have to start making your own food and taking care of yourself,” one of the officers said to him, twitching his bushy moustache. He handed Laja a letter and told him to sign on a record book. Laja anxiously opened the letter. Disbelief stared at him in the heading – ***Successful Bail Application***. His eyes scanned the body of the letter to be sure the content matched the heading. *The Secretary of State has granted your bail application and has instructed that you be released from detention pending the outcome of your Leave to Remain application....*

“Thank you, Lord!” he shouted and shot his hand through the space in the glass panel to shake the officer.

His legs could not stay still as he glanced through the letter repeatedly, moving here and there in the office, a big smile on his face. It was his name on the letter, dated about a month earlier. But he could not remember the details of the application referred to and wondered why he hadn't got the letter while at Brook House. What if he'd been deported?

He thanked the officer and left the office. It was unbelievable. The confirmation came two days after when he completed some discharge papers, was given a letter to a probation officer, and a one-way train ticket to Colchester.

Part 3

Chapter 41

The house looked and smelled different. Uncle Sam's picture was gone from the wall. Upstairs, he pushed the door of his room open. Two people were on the bed in a cuddle, asleep. Quietly, he shut the door and stood back. He didn't think the housemates would leave the room at an extra cost to them, but Isaac should have told him when he knew he would be coming back.

Back downstairs, he sat on the sofa, feeling like an outcast. There was nowhere else to go. He could not change the address into which he'd been released on probation. Yet, not having a place of his own, and becoming a burden to anyone scared him, especially since he would not be able to work.

"Again, I'm sorry about your mother," Isaac said as he came through the door.

"Thanks," Laja said.

"Have you been upstairs?"

"Yes."

"I'm sorry, I didn't tell you. We needed to cover the rent, and when some girls were desperate for a room, we decided to let it out and" Isaac said.

"Girls?"

"Yes. From the uni."

Laja shrugged. "You were not expecting me back anyway. It's a miracle I'm back here."

“I know. You’ve been very fortunate. Have you had anything to eat?” Isaac asked as he walked to the kitchen.

“No. I’m okay for now.”

Isaac came back with two cans of Coke and gave Laja before switching on the television.

“I’ve contacted the lady again after you told me of your release. She will come to discuss with you before you go to the lawyer. You’ve got a window of opportunity; we’ve got to move fast.

Laja moved to the edge of his seat. “When is she coming?”

“She’s willing to come as soon as possible. I’ll be working tomorrow and Friday, so I arranged for Monday afternoon. Is that okay?” Isaac said as he took the last gulp of his drink and squeezed the can into a rough hourglass shape which he placed it on a side table.

“That fine. I haven’t got anywhere else to go, have I?”

Isaac chuckled. “You’ll soon have lots of places to go. After meeting the lady, you’ll need to go and meet the lawyer. A quick application to the Home Office will save”

“But the letter they gave me said they are considering a Leave to Remain application which I”

“Did you make an application?”

“I can’t remember a specific one. It’s probably the immigration charities....”

“Don’t be deceived into falling into their trap. You need to get an Article 8 application in there as soon as possible.”

Laja nodded.

Isaac stood up. “I got your stuff in my room. You can bunk with me until you settle down and get a place of your own. Ah! Don’t forget the appointment with Pamela,” he said as walked away.

“Thank you.” Laja said. Getting a place of his own meant starting all over again, probably among new housemates or neighbours. He didn’t want to think about it yet.

The woman smelled of tobacco as she entered and looked around. Isaac introduced them.

“Hi,” she said, smiling and offering a hand of very long nails. Laja shook her hand uncomfortably. He didn’t like make-up or ladies who wore jeans with heels and this one was almost as old as Mother but for her made up face, floral blouse with top buttons undone, and the pair of body-hugging black jeans. Isaac asked if she would love to have a drink.

“No. Unless you’ve got some nice wine, but it’s too early for me to start. It’s going to be a weekend of booze and fun from tonight when I get back to London,” Pamela said.

Isaac again narrated how they’d travelled to Gatwick to see Laja but were disappointed when told he’d been deported. Pamela nodded and shook her head to shake a lock of wig-hair off her face from time to time.

“As I told you, I gave Pamela £250 before we came to Gatwick. When you go to the solicitor, you will give her another £250, then?”

“When are we meeting at the ... the lawyer?” Pamela said to Laja.

“Isaac suggested Monday,” Laja said.

“Okay. Anytime. All you need is give me enough time to get ready.” She turned to Isaac. “Have you told him about the rent ... if ... when he moves in. You know what I mean?”

“Thanks for reminding me,” Isaac said. “Laja, you’ll be paying her some money for rent and your upkeep when the application is filed. The Home Office will need evidence that you truly have a relationship going, by living together. She will put your name on some of the bills. They might come to check at any time. So, you’ll need to move in with her, I mean on and off ... and”

“I thought... How am I ...” Laja started, not sure of how to say that he’d thought everything had been included in the cost.

“Yeah?” Pamela said. “It’s just for fucking formality, for them to meet you at my address or see some of your things and ... You know?”

“Pictures together, ask you some questions, and stuff like that,” Isaac added.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t know we’ll have to stay together. I can’t work now... and don’t have any source of income.”

Pamela crossed and uncrossed her legs and shuffled in her seat. “We can stop all this if you are not okay with it,” she said, looking from Laja to Isaac and back to Laja. “I don’t usually deal with Nigerians, but your friend told me that you are a good guy, that’s why I’m doing this to help you. Yeah?”

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean it the way you are taking it. I was only wondering how”

“Don’t worry, Laj. Things will work out. Let’s just get it started,” Isaac said.

“Are you sure?” Pamela said, lifting her eyebrows at Isaac.

“Sure, sure,” Isaac said, smiling.

Laja stole looks at Pamela. Mother would move in her grave if she knew what he was trying to do. But he had to. It was another sacrifice, and if successful, a compensation for the pains of his wasted years.

Chapter 42

There was a cackle, then a voice. “The next train on Platform 2 is the 07:15 train to Liverpool Street, stopping at Kelvedon, Marks Tey, Witham, Chelmsford, Shenfield, Stratford...” The perfunctory voice drew passengers closer to the platform edge as the Great Eastern train snaked in and hissed to a stop. It was almost full. Laja held on to the middle pole. After many passengers left the train at Chelmsford, he got a seat before boarding passengers rushed in. Opposite him, with a table separating them was a couple with a girl of about four. “Hi mate,” the man said unexpectedly. Laja responded with a “hello.” The train moved and soon gathered speed.

A middle-aged black lady was closest to his seat, her right hand moved between holding the roof pole and pressing her phone. Stretch marks and a tattoo of an unidentified image showed on her midriff every time she raised her hand. She peeked at the empty seat and at Laja many times, then returned to her phone. Why did she not want to sit near him? Laja lifted his bag from his lap and placed it on the seat. The man opposite looked from the lady to Laja and winked. His partner nudged him; he gently elbowed her in return and smiled.

“Dad? The bush is running past us,” the little girl said.

“No, darling. We are running past the bush.”

“But we are not moving. Look!” the little girl said, stretching out her hands.

“We are not the ones moving, darling. We are inside a moving train.”

“But you said we are running past the bush just now!” the girl said, turning to her mother.

“When you are inside an object which is moving, you are moving too but not with your physical body,” the mother said.

“Like in the plane ... when ... we went to Spain,” the girl said, smiling broadly.

“Yes, like being on the plane. People don’t fly, do we?”

The girl shook her head. “Only birds fly.”

“Yes. We got there flying on a plane. Didn’t we?”

The girl nodded.

“Tickets please,” a man, his belly pushing against his shirt, demanded. He punched a hole into Laja’s ticket and returned it. As he put the card into his breast pocket, his hand touched the piece of paper on which Isaac had scribbled the direction to the solicitor’s office after he said he’d been refused an off day at work. *From Liverpool Station, take a Circle Line train to Aldgate. Get out of the station and find Juris House on Aldgate High Street,* it read.

“The guy is an immigration expert, he’s good. Just explain everything, and show him everything you have, he has a way around a lot of immigration problems,” Isaac had said.

At Liverpool Street Station, Laja was directed to the platform to get on the Circle Line underground. He jumped into a crowded coach, held tightly to a hanging strap, and glanced at the underground itinerary map. It was the right train. What if Pamela did not show up or said she was no longer interested? It would confirm his fears that she was not a responsible lady. But with what Isaac said about the lawyer, Laja believed he would make other arrangements for him. The problem would be

money. He needed a lot of money to process the papers and to survive. It was going to be difficult without a job. He might be forced to use his fake British passport to get a job, any job.

Suddenly, there was a loud bang, then darkness.

Chapter 43

In his position, on his back, Laja saw the sky through parted lemon-green curtains. His eyes trailed a framed picture of a cautiously smiling Queen Elizabeth, looking into the room and at him. Where was he? Thinking was painful and the lower part of his body was like a log of wood forcefully attached to the upper part. Beepings, busy footsteps, and the smell he'd known so well, convinced him he was in a hospital. But where and for what? He tried to move, but his effort shot searing pain through his neck, down the chest and into his head. It made his eyes blurry. The incapacitating feeling was so overwhelming that he couldn't hear his own voice as he shouted for help.

When he woke up again with a blistering headache, his gaze returned to the portrait on the wall. The repetitive sound of equipment near him continued. In his ears, they were singing:

Queen, Queen, quinine

Queen, Queen, King

After Queen a King?

Queen, Queen, quinine

Interspersing the sound was a lighter choric one.

Do re mi. Do re mi. Do re mi.

Ko le ku. Ko le ku. Ko le ku. (He won't die. He cannot die. He won't die).

The familiar sounds grew louder. He could see clearer, and voices became distinct. Slowly, he tried to push back against the bed to prop himself against the pillows. It was impossible, the weight of his lower body was immovable. Then he saw it.

His legs were heavily bandaged. The left appeared smaller than the right. Shocked, he scrambled up. Some of the network of cables and tubes disconnected as he heaved and turned, desperate to see other parts of his body. The monitors went off. He saw someone in lemon green top and trousers rush towards his bed and pull the curtains before everything disappeared into a haze.

When he came around, he did not open his eyes. His ears picked every movement and voice and tried to make sense out of them. What had happened to him? When he opened his eyes, a nurse was scribbling into his file. It took a while before she noticed his eyes were opened.

“You are back. How are you feeling, Mr...?” the nurse asked, unclipped the file she’d returned and opened it. “I’m sorry, I wasn’t sure which is your first name and Anyway, my name is Ciara, specialist ICU nurse and I am taking care of you today.” Her smile stretched further to the edges of her lips as she spoke.

“Do you know where you are?” she said, moving to the head of the bed and fiddling with the machines. “Do you know where you are?” she repeated.

Determined he must say something to encourage the nurse and help his healing, he made an effort. “Ho...spi...tal,” he said, struggling for breath.

“Good. This is the intensive care unit of the Royal London Hospital,” she said. “It’s Sunday today. You were brought here after an incident on the train three days ago. Do you remember anything?”

Laja was confounded. With what he'd seen of his legs, it was certain he must have been in an accident, but he didn't know how or when it happened.

“There was a terror attack on London transport system a couple of days ago. Many people died. You were on a train and among the lucky survivors. You suffered injuries to your legs, especially the left. You are lucky to still have them, but the surgeons had to remove part of your left foot due to serious tarsals and tendon damage, to save the whole leg,” Ciara said.

Laja looked at the lower part of his body again and shut his eyes. He'd been through a rough patch laced with misfortunes. What would happen next? When Ciara came the following afternoon, he gathered his strength and asked: “Will, will I be able to, to walk ...?”

“Of course, you'll be able to use your legs again. They'll likely fit you a prosthetic on the left foot and you'll walk almost perfectly. Good healing and physiotherapy might make it even quicker than imagined,” Ciara said.

“Thank you,” Laja said and shut his eyes again.

In the couple of weeks that followed, he tried to exercise and regained some strength. He'd never had to depend on others for basic needs and wanted to do as much as he could by himself.

“They found two international passports inside your bag. Were you travelling with anyone else?” Ciara asked one afternoon as he dozed.

He could recollect there were three passports! Besides his Nigerian passport on which his expired study permit was stamped, he also had the British passport Lati sold to him, and Uncle Sam's British passport which he'd kept inside a big book he'd brought from South Africa. He'd taken all of them with him based on Isaac's

advice that the solicitor might find any document he had useful. Which one was missing? He kept quiet. After about five minutes, he felt Ciara leaning over to fiddle with the buttons on the machines at the head of his bed. She smelled so terrific that he wished he could hold her and cry on her shoulders. Moments later, he felt a pinch on his right arm; his head felt light again, then a weakness numbed his whole body.

It was almost midday when he woke up the following day feeling gloomy and having nagging pains all over his body. The fact he would never be able to walk normally again was sinking in. Prosthetics could only be as good as the best rubber technology; they were not human body parts with natural functions. How would he cope working anywhere, resting on one foot? He was now limited in the things he could do, the places he could go. He told Ciara about the pains later that day.

“I’ll ask the doctors if they could increase the dosage of your analgesics,” she said. After taking notes from the monitors, she scribbled more into his file and left.

He prayed to see Ciara every day and they started having longer conversations.

“How far is your country from Kenya?” she asked one evening, sitting close to him on a chair after pulling the curtains.

“Not sure,” Laja said.

“I’m relocating to Kenya at the end of the year.”

Laja frowned. “What? You got a better job offer there?”

“Job? No. I’m going to live there with my boyfriend.”

He felt a sudden drop of zest. “Really? What does he do? I mean, what is he doing there?”

“He’s Kenyan. A white Kenyan and a farmer. He relocated there a few years ago and is now a citizen, settled and doing very well. Only waiting for me,” Ciara said with a smile.

“You are leaving the UK to settle in Kenya?”

“Of course. It’s a beautiful quiet place,” Ciara said. She gazed at the monitors and made some notes. “I’m happy you are improving. I’ll see you next week.”

He never saw Ciara again and was moved from the ICU to a general ward two days after. He wished he had the opportunity to speak with and spoke and find out more from her. All his life he’d always heard of people leaving Africa to settle in Europe, not the other way round. It was either Ciara was going into some irresistible wealth or she was crazy.

After three days in the ward, a black male nurse approached his bed and asked if he was well enough to receive visitors.

“Sorry?”

“Some persons are here to see you.”

Laja was surprised. “Who are they?”

The man laughed, stretching out his hands. “How d’you expect me to know? They must be people you know,” the nurse said.

Laja wondered why it had taken so long for Isaac to come looking for him. Was the plan with Pamela still on? All that was no longer important now. But who had Isaac come along with?

“It helps the healing processes to have people you know around you, you know?”

Laja nodded. “Okay. I’ll see them. Thank you.”

“No worries. I’ll show them in,” the nurse said and walked towards the nurse station.

Laja sat up, rubbed his face, and brushed back his hair with his palm. He ran his hand down the hospital gown he was wearing and looked around his bed space. Minutes later, three people approached. As they moved closer, he did not see Isaac. He looked beyond the people towards the entrance, hoping to see him come in.

“How are you, Laja?”

He turned to see the woman who spoke. Her beaded, braided hair was packed into a fountain-like mass at the centre of her head. Big silver earrings dangled from her ears, and her lips were covered in silver lipstick. Laja sat up further and ran his palm over his face.

“Vic? Unbelievable!”

“Yes!”

“Unbelievable.”

“I know,” Vic said, gesturing with a hand to indicate her body. “I have been pumped up.”

“No! You are the last person in the world I was expecting to see.”

“I know. It’s been almost seven, eight years now? Isn’t it? How are you?”

“I’m fine, much better now. It’s been a long time,” Laja said.

Bola had not changed much – a little weight, perhaps, and her eyes looked older, expectedly, but she was still as beautiful as he'd ever known her to be. "Bola, how are you?" he said.

She swallowed before she responded. "Hi Laja. I'm fine. How are you?"

"I'm in pains but grateful to be alive. Thanks."

"I saw...we saw your name in a newspaper as one of the victims, and I was not sure it was you since we didn't know you were in England. We contacted the police, and they gave us information on how to find you. We came last week but were not allowed to see you," Vic said.

"Really? It must be because I was in intensive care. Thanks for coming back."

"Thanks gracious you're fine. Many people died. Those people are just heartless cowards," Vic said.

"Yes. Religion has nothing to do with killing and maiming. I lost a foot," Laja said.

Both Vic and Bola looked alarmed. "Really? I am so sorry," Vic said, a look of horror on her face. "That's why I don't go to church. I can't stand being made to say or do the things I don't want to do by anyone."

Bola stared at his bandaged feet for long.

Laja's looked around to see if he could borrow a chair from other patients. Each bed only had one. If he asked Vic to take it, since she was older, that would mean asking Bola to sit on the bed. He didn't want that. And where would the boy sit?

“I’m so sorry, Laja. I never knew Eyitemi was your brother. You don’t have the same surname, and you never mentioned that ... that you” Bola said, sniffing. Vic quickly pulled the curtain around them. The boy, whose gaze had been skittering from Laja to the array of hospital equipment, was enthralled as his eyes followed the curtain rail round.

“That okay. It’s all in the past now. I never knew I had a brother when we were in a relationship. It’s ... it’s all fine.”

Again, Bola swallowed hard many times, then looked straight into Laja’s eyes. “D’you remember the pregnancy?” she said, a little glint brightening up her face. “I kept it and had him when I came to London. This is Dayo, Ifedayo, our son,” she said, patting the little boy on his head. “He’d been with Vic all the while. I couldn’t tell you because my dad ... dad didn’t want me to, and ... and we lost contact. I’m sorry.”

Laja stared at Bola, open-mouthed. Then his eyes moved and rested on the boy, who quickly turned his face away, trying to hide behind his mother.

“Are you okay?” Vic asked.

Laja nodded many times.

“She wanted to tell you but didn’t know where to find you. She tried to contact your mother and sister but was told they’d left for another house,” Vic said, looking at Bola as if seeking her approval to continue.

“When your brother found out about Dayo, it led to his separation from Bola,” Vic added, then smiled at the boy. “DY, say hello to Daddy.”

“Daddy? He’s not my daddy!” the boy said, pushing out his lips with confusion on his face. He turned to see Bola’s tears were dropping rapidly. She nodded towards him. “He is your real dad, your only dad.”

The puzzled look expanded all over the boy’s face. He turned to Vic, a plea on his face.

Vic nodded repeatedly, smiling. “He’s your dad, Dayo. Remember I told you I have a surprise for you when we left home?”

“Yes, McDonald’s!”

“No DY. This is the big surprise. We might go to McDonald’s later if you are good and say hello daddy.”

“Hello, daddy!” the boy shouted.

Laja said hello and held out his left hand. The boy moved closer, looking intently, cautiously into Laja’s eyes. Laja pulled him closer, looked into his eyes, then leaned to make their heads touch. It wasn’t a dream. The boy’s eyes were his eyes: dark beady eyes. “How are you, Dayo, my boy?”

“Fine!” the boy responded. His loud, clear voice coursed through Laja and gave him immense joy and inexplicable strength. He wanted to tell everyone around the story. Thoughts of how he could make things better, start life anew, rushed through his head. He could not concretise them; they were fluid and came with strains of pain.

His separation from Bola had cut short his first experience of what he knew as love. But she’d come back at the lowest moment of his life, with the fruit of that union; the only one he would not be separated from forever. His hopes had

dissipated, his mother died, and he'd lost a foot, but he now had the one to live for,
his son, his blood.

Critical Commentary

Introduction

Heimlich thus becomes increasingly ambivalent until it finally merges with its antonym *unheimlich*. The uncanny (*das Unheimliche*, 'the unhomely') is in some way a species of the familiar (*das Heimliche*, 'the homely').

(Sigmund Freud, 1919 {2003}, p. 134).

The statement above sums up the ambiguity in the concept of the uncanny, which I have chosen to theorise and contextualise the themes of home, leaving home, and identity in my novel, *Pounds of Flesh*. The novel follows the main protagonist, Laja, who, at 10, moves out of the place he knows as home due to his parents' separation. As he grows older, Laja discovers more about the pains of dislocation, displacement, and discontinuities. The 'familiar' or 'home' in this thesis is not just physical places and people, but also the invisible conditions, emotional and psychological feelings of people. In this thesis, home serves as a metonymy for the place, people, or situation, which an individual, the migrant in this commentary, finds welcoming, pleasant, conducive, and well-known. It is where they want to be. When change, gradual or sudden, makes this home become 'strange' or unfamiliar, the individual often leaves, voluntarily or forcefully, to seek the familiarity and certainty in a new home.

The concept of the uncanny by Sigmund Freud in the essay, *Das Unheimliche* (The Uncanny), written in 1919, is apt to theorise and contextualise *Pounds of Flesh* and its themes. This is because I believe that the uncanny, which is about the change that occurs when the familiar becomes unfamiliar, vice versa, appropriately captures my characters' experiences as they search for 'home'. In his essay, Freud says, 'the uncanny is that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar' (Freud, 1919, p. 124). By this, Freud refers to sudden disruption to the known or a distraction to 'well known'

conditions, people and places. This separation or severance from loved and cherished people and places is often estranging and brings about uncertainty.

Similarly, in *Pounds of Flesh*, the migrant often needs to move from the original or familiar home to seek a new one comes about when their original and familiar home becomes strange or unfamiliar due to natural, economic, socio-political, or other forms of disruptions. However, this search for new homes often bears uncanny experiences both on leaving, on the journey, and at their destination, if they 'arrive.' Freud's claim that the uncanny 'belongs to the realm of the frightening, of what evokes fear and dread' (p.123), can be compared to the risks, fear, and uncertainties that migrants face, especially in *Pounds of Flesh*.

For example, after leaving his lucrative job in Nigeria and getting stuck in South Africa, Romanus expresses his fear and frustration.

My brother, I don't know. I'm afraid and confused about what next, but I have come too far to go back. I can't go back home the way I am," Romanus said.

Laja nodded. Romanus had been the friendliest to him. He was full of ideas, encouragement, and fruitful advice but uncertain about what to do about his own life. Laja would miss him. He himself did not know what lay in wait, yet he had to move on with his fate (*PoF*, p. 177).

Freud (1919 {2003}) goes further to explain the terms, unhomely or unfamiliar as:

Heimlich thus becomes increasingly ambivalent, until it finally merges with its antonym *unheimlich*. The uncanny (*das Unheimliche*, 'the unhomely') is in some way a species of the familiar (*das Heimliche*, 'the homely') p. 134.

I equate Freud's discovery of the blurring between the *Heimlich* (homely) and the *Unheimliche* (unhomely) to the development in my novel where the home, which is generally conceptualised as a place of peace, rest, safety, and security, can become

the opposite. Based on the narrative in *Pounds of Flesh*, I argue that because the familiar often harbours the unfamiliar, vice versa, home is ambiguous and the search for it, a continuum. This ambiguity of home itself is abstruse, depending on who is interpreting home. Is it a prisoner? An exile? Someone in a broken relationship? A country at war? Perception also depends on perspective and experience as it is preposterous, for example, to claim that every migrant never finds home.

These complexities around home and identity in *Pounds of Flesh* are seen in characters who leave their original homes but do not find the quested familiarity and home in places where they had thought they would find it. For example, Riba's views often antagonise Ben because, unlike Riba, Ben is white, and has moderate views on slavery and colonialism, which Riba believes are at the root of Africans' migration to Europe.

Of course, to you, it's crap, but to millions of Africans who were uprooted from their homes and had their future stolen in the name of your evil slavery and colonisation, it can't be crap. Can it?

Stop your victim mentality and the harvesting of historical cobwebs, man. Get a life, mate! Ben said (*PoF*, p. 198).

On the other hand, Isaac, who is African, wants to separate himself from his root and past, contrary to Riba's viewpoint.

Listen to me. I am Riba. Unlike you, I don't flush my self-esteem down the toilets that I clean or rub my identity into the floors that I mop. Yeah? Get that into your head.

Get out of here! Which identity is an odd-jobber like you talking about?" Isaac said and hissed loud (*PoF*, p. 241).

Riba's nationalist beliefs contradict those of Isaac, who believes that the end must always justify the means.

These contrasting experiences and viewpoints further the unending ripple in the search for home. Laja is disappointed as all he earns is not enough to cover his bills and debts after his desperate move from Nigeria through South Africa to England. Jude, his friend, deported from Spain, does not find fulfilment back at home and left again because he could not fit in. He tells Laja:

If you commot Nigeria and you come back, you no go fit into the setting here again, I tell you. Difficult to explain, but it's the truth, you won't just fit in," Jude said (*PoF*, p. 120).

Uncle Sam wants to take good care of his family in Ghana and would love to bring them to England but finds temporary solace, or home, in other women like Gina in London and Candy in Colchester. Isaac is desperate to leave for the United States of America because he is not settled in England after arriving from Ghana. Riba wants to be the last in his family to come and 'slave' in England. An uncanny circle emerges and widens as the migrant characters do not find the homeliness they crave. Some become nostalgic about the old homes, which they now reconceptualise as homely because of the unfamiliar situations and challenges that confront them in their new homes.

However, while relating the uncanny to creative writing and literature, Freud says that 'many things that would be uncanny if they occurred in real life are not uncanny in literature, and that in literature there are many opportunities to achieve uncanny effects that are absent in real life' (Freud, 156). He thus establishes the duality in the creative writer, first as a familiar, ordinary person, then as a creator of an unfamiliar fictitious world and experiences. Bennett and Royle (2014, p. 35-36) take this further to claim that 'Literature is uncanny' as it is 'the discourse of the

uncanny' and deals with experiences, thoughts and feelings which have to do with 'defamiliarisation' through making the familiar 'strange.' This process, they say, produces 'alienation effects' and make things 'uncertain.'

Pounds of Flesh also contains elements that the critics, Bennett and Royle, mention as tropes of the uncanny – uncertainty, repetition, and death (ibid. pp. 36-40), among others, which I contextualise under the subtitle, *Haunting*.

We have haunting and repetitive experiences in the novel where Laja, his mother and siblings sink into homelessness and uncertainty after leaving their family home. They move from place to place because of financial difficulties and uncertainty. Laja is repetitively attracted to women who look like his mother and sister. The pastor at Isaac's church mocks women who appear as the doppelganger of themselves - their natural look and with their wigs on. There are the shocking deaths of Laja's mother and his benefactor, Uncle Sam.

Structure of commentary

In the first chapter of this commentary, I place the novel in context, explaining the historical, socio-cultural, political, and environmental factors that make up its settings, plot, and themes. I give information about my socio-cultural background, influences, and motivation for my writing. These make the reader an informed participant and shed light on my characters' orientation, beliefs, experiences, reasons for their actions, and what shapes their points of view.

In Chapter Two, I deconstruct the concept of home into its various manifestations - physical Home, emotional Home, economic Home, and psychological Home. By doing this, I stress the ambiguity of home and what it might entail for different peoples. First is the migrant whose expectations may conflict with

the reality of their new home's experience; second is the people they left behind in their original homes; and thirdly, those in their host communities whose homes now welcome unfamiliar people. These conflicting and ambiguous expectations and experiences are characteristic of the uncertainty which pervades *Pounds of Flesh*.

Chapter Three is on the themes of leaving home. I use the migrant characters' experiences to draw on the impact of separation from home - loss, exploitation, otherness, the struggle to re-find home and the impact of leaving familiar people, relationships, and spaces for unfamiliar ones can dovetail into estrangement and other uncanny experiences. While not portraying the desire for home as a futile venture, I assert that the human search for the home of their expectations is insatiate.

In Chapter Four, I focus on the theme of identity as it relates to the uncanny through the exploration of aspects of identity – naming, body, and voice – to contextualise migrant identities in *Pounds of Flesh* and highlight the repercussions of not being at 'home.' I use colour as synecdoche for racial difference with the discordance of not being at home in one's natural body and skin colour. I analyse the concepts of name and naming; the migrant need to change names sometimes; the pains of name-shaming and name-switching, stereotyping, and the loss of name. Furthermore, I elucidate on voice through its familiar and unfamiliar nature, citing the socio-cultural practices like status and sexuality, which often dictate having or not having a voice (silencing) in the novel. I also reflect on my use of different voices and my limitations as a second language user of the English language.

Chapter One

Writing *Pounds of Flesh*

Among the many liberties that the creative writer can allow himself is that of choosing whether to present a world that conforms with the reader's familiar reality or one that, in some way, deviates from it.

(Sigmund Freud, 1919 {2003}, p. 156).

The writing of *Pounds of Flesh* came out of the desire to tell a story linked to my personal experiences and observations. The novel was not intended to be autobiographical, but I discovered that my personal experiences, desires, and interactions with others in Nigeria and England kept interjecting, and at times imposing themselves on the narrative as I wrote.

As a child, Yoruba language quest and adventure novels, especially those by D.O. Fagunwa, assuaged my imaginative thirst for the unusual. These texts include *Igbo Olodumare* (1949); *Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmole* (1938); *Irinkerindo Ninu Igbo Elegbeje* (1954); *Ireke Onibudo* (1949). My curiosity and interest in the uncanny must have developed from these early readings, which transported me into what Gabriel Ajadi calls Fagunwa's 'world of spirits, gnomes, trolls, fairies, ghosts, ghommids and kobolds' (Ejikeonye, 1995, p. 8). Also, I had desired a big family house where I would live with my parents and siblings forever, without anyone leaving. Simultaneously, the stories of creativity and development I read and heard about in Western countries made me yearn to travel abroad for further studies when I grew older.

Fagunwa's narratives, mostly about people, especially hunters, leaving home on a quest and encountering extraordinary challenges and obstacles on their way into dreaded forests on or their return home, are allegories aimed at reflecting moral

transformation. These confrontational territorial challenges are like the characters who leave their homes to settle in other places encounter in *Pounds of Flesh*. The richness in the language of Fagunwa's narration also makes the novels highly entertaining. Ulli Beier's comment on this vibrancy of language is that Fagunwa:

impresses the reader with his knowledge of classical Yoruba, and he is as knowledgeable in proverbial expressions as an old-oracle priest... He uses the language creatively and inventively, constantly adding to the traditional stock of imagery and enriching the language (1967, p. 189).

Fagunwa's ability to creatively and compellingly use language attracted me to his works. I also read Amos Tutuola's phantasmagoric fables like *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952) and *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (1954). The latter, a novel, which also has the characteristics of Yoruba folkloric and morality tales, was written in broken English, a means of communication for the less literate and second language users of Nigeria's English language. Geoffrey Parrinder, in his foreword to *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, describes the story as one which:

deals not with "Deads," but with the spirits of the wild. These abnormal beings remind one of the creations of Bunyan and Dante. The story is a coherent whole and the closing sentence, "This is what hatred did", links up with the opening chapter wherein are revealed the jealousies of a polygamous household which leave a small boy, who does not know what is "good" or "bad", to face by himself the terrors of the Bush of Ghosts (*My Life.*, 1954, p. 14).

The novel uses the fantastic to convey the uncanny encounters and experiences of two boys of seven and 11, forced to leave home when their mother goes away because of their father's other wives' hatred. While trying to escape the impending war, they become separated. The younger boy, who narrates the story from his 'unknown years' (p. 17), the age of innocence, runs into the dreaded Bush of Ghosts

for safety. Later, as he searches unsuccessfully for the path to return home, he goes deeper into the bush where he spends 24 years.

Though written in 1954, Tutuola spotlights the ideas of tolerance, equality, and diversity using his itinerant lead in his characters as he crosses 20 ghost towns. He does this by contrasting 'good' and 'bad' in humanity, nature, and the otherworld. For example, in the chapter *Where Woman Marries Women* (p. 123), Tutuola transmits the idea of feminism and lesbianism in the story of a town filled with women whose marriages have failed, staying together, and getting married to one another. The narrator-hero is rejected almost everywhere he goes due to his flaws, his difference in nature from the ghosts and their strange demands, thus his unfamiliar bush experiences become relevant and futuristic through the juxtaposition of natural inclinations, ideas, beliefs, and universal worldviews.

Accessing these Nigerian writers' novels at an early age not only entertained me and widened my imagination and curiosity, but they also expanded my socio-cultural experiences. They heightened my interest in the textual representation of estrangement, melancholy, nostalgia, and the dangers which accompany leaving familiar places for the unfamiliar. The texts' narratives served as an imaginative world, places to escape from the reality of my world. More than others, the Yoruba novels I read, and their use of haunting experiences. I believe, have influenced my writing.

Besides the Yoruba novels, my encounters with James Hadley Chase's thrilling works, Frederic van Rensselaer Dey's Nick Carter series, and the Mills and Boon series introduced and transported me to other distant worlds and experiences in action drama and romance. Encountering William Shakespeare's plays as school texts further bolstered my interest in the literary arts. His court plays echoed the

familiar happenings in the local chiefs' compounds, and at the king's palace. Quoting Shakespeare accurately was fashionable and required excellence in English literature while I was in secondary school. The Heinemann African Writers series, and later the MacMillan Pacesetter series of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, portrayed and promoted African fiction and its authors. I read many of the works hungrily. My interest and exploration of the plays of the 1986 Nobel Laureate, Wole Soyinka, further engrained my interest in African writing, especially drama. I did my Masters' degree on obscurantism in Wole Soyinka's works and completed my MPhil degree on his theatre's relation to ritual and social renewal at the University of Essex in 2011.

When another student asked me why I wanted to study African literature in England during the postgraduate welcoming event at the University of Essex in 2007, my response was that I wanted to learn from the best sources available, as some of the best universities, most credible publications and experts on African literature were in the United Kingdom. He argued that despite that, it did not make sense for an African to leave his home continent to study its literature among other people with a different worldview.

On reflecting on the encounter, I thought that although he was right on the one hand, on the other, he was echoing the popular anti-immigration stance of that time. I considered our discussion to be one between the ideas of home and identity. Subsequently, I felt the urge to tell a story around the issues. However, *Pounds of Flesh's* initial setting was not in the West but Nigeria, dyed in Western heritage features that haunt every citizen of colonised countries, either at home or in the diaspora, in different ways.

Haunting

Parham Marisa (2009:1) says that 'haunting denotes an evocation or experience of memory that is uncomfortable or unhappy, something that will not go away,' and that 'haunting serves primarily as a means of accessing lost and repressed knowledge among subjugated peoples, whose history and culture have been undervalued and under-recorded in mainstream Western cultures.' The notions of 'repression' and 'subjugation' not only relate to residues of slavery and colonisation for the African migrant but also to fear and the uncanny unveiling of 'something that should have remained hidden and has come into the open' (Freud, 1919 {2003} p. 148). What Marisa calls the undervaluing and under-recording of African American history in mainstream Western cultures is what Chimamanda Adichie (TEDTalk 2009) calls the 'danger of a single story.'

My early life reading of Fagunwa, Tutuola and other Yoruba novels, their themes, context, and language must have impacted my writing, especially the *Pounds of Flesh's* content. The novel is filled with spectres, which are uncanny on many levels. I equate the 'bushes' of Fagunwa and Tutuola, where the brave people forage on quests, to *Pounds of Flesh's* towns and cities – Lagos, Johannesburg, London, Paris, and Colchester, where migrants, legal and illegal, are on quests. Spurred by the hopes of breakthrough, they do everything possible to eke out a living. I conceptualise a transmutation of the fearful and terrifying 'gnomes, trolls, fairies, ghosts, ghommids and kobolds' of Fagunwa's bush, into the oppressive police officers, soldiers, immigration officers, people traffickers, document fakers, detention centres' staff, and neo-imperialists of *Pounds of Flesh*. Also, the natural, supernatural, territorial, social and cultural confrontations in Fagunwa become the divergent worldviews, languages, socio-cultural orientations, lead to the

estrangement which characters like Laja, Jude, Uncle Sam, Gani, and other migrants suffer after leaving their own homes to venture into the new 'bushes' of *Pounds of Flesh*.

Apart from these, the tropes of the uncanny - ghosts, fear of the evil eye, fear, telepathy, death – among others, are like encountering dreadful situations, people, spirits, and places, in Fagunwa and Tutuola's narratives. I explore these further:

Ghosts - Generally, most of the migrants in *Pounds of Flesh* are like shadows; they also live in the society's shadows. They inhabit the periphery of societal significance; are seen but not seen, speak but are not heard, as they struggle to become people of substance. However, their worldview and experiences, which are mostly different from what is prevalent in their host societies, make their emergence from the rut difficult. Also, a character like Father, who does not bother much about his children, besides Toke, is like a ghost because though he is alive, those who need him do not 'see' him or feel his impact. Andy comes out like a ghost into his mother and half-siblings' lives to unveil Mother's secret about his birth and, consequently, create an emotional disruption for everyone involved.

The appearance of liminal characters like Isaac and Candy is comparable to metaphoric and ghostly characters, disturbs the peace and certainty of people and places. They only work at night for people who pay them cash for fear of being seen and arrested for working illegally, as they do not have permits and national insurance numbers to work in the United Kingdom. Riba does not have a British driver's licence, and his car is a liminal object as he only drives it at night for lack of documentation. Ben, the landlord's son, also has a liminal identity. He lives in the garret and rarely comes down during the day.

Fear of the evil eye - At the beginning of *Pounds of Flesh*, Laja sees Fali, his father's other wife, moving from the bathroom into the house they share. He becomes afraid because his mother told him and his siblings that Fali is evil and a witch who must not be seen. Setting eyes on her has portentous repercussions. The fear of Fali haunts the children. Later that night, a fight ensues between Laja's parents, at the end of which Mother decides to leave her marriage and the house they have always known as home. This belief of the evil eye by Mother and the children inflects my story with the uncanny nature Freud calls the dreaded 'evil eye' where 'anyone who possesses something precious but fragile is afraid of others' envy.' (1919 {2003} p.146). Fali's eyes might not have been responsible for the kerfuffle of the night, but the sad events which followed – homelessness, poverty, and illness - haunt them throughout the novel.

Laja becomes afraid, believing that Uncle Sam's picture, hanging on the wall, is staring at him as he makes love to Candy, the dead man's girlfriend, a few days after his death. Subsequently. He wants to avoid the 'staring' eyes of the wall. Moreover, the surveillance, checks and immigration and security enforcement, and the seemingly judging eyes of others, are evil eyes which are set on migrants, making the self-conscious and uncomfortable.

The Past – The breakdown of his parents' marriage, besides the ensuing financial sufferings on Mother and the children, might have impacted Laja's love life. His uncaring, domineering nature affects his affair with Bola, his girlfriend. Their separation leads to more psychological uncertainties, fear, and hesitation to fall in love again. Maria Tartar (1981, p.169) quotes Adam Smith, that this types of 'hesitation' emanates from unpleasant and strange experiences. Mother's past so haunts her that she cannot tell her other children about Andy, a son she had with

another man and gave up for adoption. Andy later gets into an abominable marriage to Bola, his brother's girlfriend. The uncovering of Mother's secret, which was hitherto 'concealed, kept hidden, so that others do not get to know of it, or about it, and it is hidden from them' (Freud, op. cit. p.129), is a significant trait of the Freudian uncanny and relates to my project's study about the change of the familiar into the familiar, or the unfamiliar becoming the familiar.

Fear – Most migrant characters in *Pounds of Flesh* live in loneliness and lonesomeness, with the persistent fear of their papers not being renewed or being arrested and deported. Laja lives under this fear until he is arrested and detained. The fear of being deported to Ghana also hangs over Isaac as he waits eagerly for his sister to secure American documentation for him. Laja tries to push aside the fear that Uncle Sam's picture, hanging on the wall, is staring at him. He also realises that there is a hidden part of himself which he never knew existed and was fearful of what it could make him do. There is the pervading fear of failing in their quest, and not achieving their purposes of leaving their original homes, in every one of the migrant characters.

Death and Death drive - The sudden death of Uncle Sam is not only debilitating, but it also robs Laja of a vital mentor and adviser. The death drive makes Chuks prefer dying than going back to Nigeria:

O'l' boy, I'd rather die here than go back o. I will make them kill me here before the plane moves, I tell you (*PoF*, p. 306).

Laja lives in fear of paying his bills, paying back his debts to different people, and still sending money home for his mother's care. Later, the news of his mother's death while in detention makes Laja think of committing suicide as her death casts a

thicker shroud of failure and futility on all his efforts – from leaving home to detention. Not knowing when she died becomes the most painful experience of his life.

Telepathy – combined with fear of the evil eye, ghosts, liminality, and fear of the past, makes Laja believe that there must be some irresistible power pushing him into destruction. He reflects as he is being taken away into detention:

He had not believed Mother when she said Fali was diabolically attacking her with cancer. Now, he was sure what he was experiencing was not ordinary. How else does he explain what he was going through if not that there were unseen hands in it? Fali might be behind his predicament. She was probably attacking him so that he would be unable to take care of Mother. Besides Fali, who could it be, and what could be their reason to attack him?

It couldn't be Bola, but could it be her mother, Mrs Junaid? She'd threatened him at the wedding. It could be a curse from the vice-principal back at Newland; she'd never liked him. Ah! Now, he was sure. It was Karma; Uncle Sam's spirit was fighting back. It was wrong to steal his money and sleep with his girlfriend just after his death. He sighed. But what made him do it? It was a force he could not control. It was *Asise*, an irresistible power that made its victim misbehave, leading them to self-destroy (*PoF*, p. 278).

Laja might be uncertain of the source, but he is sure that diabolical forces beyond his control are behind his misfortune.

In *Pounds of Flesh*, I recast the motifs of liminality, with its ambiguity and uncertainty; ghosts (as people and conditions); evil eye; telepathy; death and death drive, through the scope of haunting into contemporary migrant labour identity.

Socio-Historical Background

After the Berlin Conference of 1884 and the subsequent Balkanisation of Africa, the British took charge of territories called protectorates. According to John Campbell and Matthew Page (2018, p. 18), these protectorates had 'no overarching cultural or political unity among what were disparate territories' until 1914 when the hitherto

Northern and Southern protectorates were amalgamated by the British to form Nigeria. The country gained independence from England in October 1960. Laurent Licata (2011, p.1) says, 'the colonial experience continues to impregnate the cultures and identities' of the colonised and the colonisers. The political elite which took over the reins of governance have been faltering ever since and has instituted continued socio-political and economic systems of inefficiency, corruption, and crises. Military juntas' forays in unseating elected officials and ruling through the gun's threats have made things worse.

Distortions, including colonial deculturation and acculturation, political disarticulation, physical and psychological displacement, among others, often affect the ideas of home and identity, which are significant themes in *Pounds of Flesh*. The colonial administration's heritage of centralisation of governance for convenience led to urbanisation as young people often resent local industries and work on the land continued. Young men and women abandon agriculture and the hinterland for the big towns and cities searching for white-collar jobs. For example, Laja's namesake tells him it will be easier to get a job in Lagos:

Come back to Lagos after your Youth Service, man. It's the best place to get a job as quickly as possible," the new guy had told Laja.

"I know, but I don't have a place to stay in Lagos."

"That won't be a problem. I'll host you for some time," he'd said (*PoF*, 48).

Laja's determination to stay with an uncle he barely knows, is typical of desperate moves by young people for cities where they believe there are better opportunities. This often leads to overcrowding and slumisation in the cities. Unfortunately, when young people, like Laja and other migrant characters, cannot find the jobs and lifestyles they yearn for, they want to leave for other places. The cities of Western

countries, where they believe opportunities abound, including earning currencies of greater values than local ones, often become attractions that they want to reach by whichever means. Laja leaves Nigeria for South Africa, then migrates to England.

The United Nations International Migration Report (2017) states that between the years 2000 and 2017, over 10 million Africans became transnational migrants. Mojubaolu Okome and Olufemi Vaughan (2012, p. 2), in adducing reasons for this type of exodus, claim that the 'intersections of colonialism, post-colonialism, and globalism are essential to a critical understanding of African transnationalism.' They cite the 'tensions between national and global forces' as a major cause of mass migration from the continent. For some, migration often leads to better socio-economic lifestyles and gains for their country. However, I argue, based on the themes in *Pounds of Flesh*, that exiting local and national home spaces to yield to the push and pull of globalisation has not, in most cases, provided the home which the migrant desperately seeks.

The 1980s was the era of mass transnational migration in Nigeria, like in many other parts of the world. This period called the era of 'brain drain' because of 'large emigration of individuals with technical skills or knowledge from one country to another in order to enjoy better conditions of service and a better living environment,' according to Stenman (2006, np), has impacted negatively on Nigeria. Though official figures are hard to come by due to illegal migration and disappearance from identification and monitoring systems, millions of Nigerians emigrated and now live outside the country. They are mainly in Europe, the United States of America, and Canada. Eurostat (2015 np) reported that 'Nigerians have also been identified as the largest cohort of migrants trapped in Libya in the protracted Mediterranean migrant crisis.' A recent report by Afrobarometer (2019) also claims

that one in three Nigerians have considered emigrating. These highlight the inability of the country to meet the needs of its people.

Due to the African economic disintegrations, 'the heyday of western academic and public interest in African writing about Africa declined' (Wilkinson, 1992: 92). This decline has negatively impacted both the reading culture and the developments of new creative talents. Consequently, opportunities and recognition for both writers in local and foreign languages have become slimmer. The worsening recognition of local languages' use is predated by the collapse of folkloric orality or storytelling, which was the predominant African narrative style. The void created by the consequent loss of interest in African creative writing has been filled, to some level, by African migrant writers.

Nigerian Migrant Literature

Nigerian migrant writing is an offshoot of postcolonial literature, which evolved from what used to be termed world literature in academic circles. Postcolonial writing aims to promote colonised peoples' identities by rewriting single and subjective narratives of colonised people's cultures, beliefs, and experiences. The relationship between postcolonial and migrant literature is rooted in the colonial era when administrators merged colonised people into places, communities and even nations for ease of governance despite socio-cultural differences. Postcolonial economic and political developments have

In claiming that the issues of ambivalence, hybridisation, shifting identities, and transnationalism are most prominent in migration, Pourjafari and Vahidpour (2014, p. 680) say migrant literature deals with 'the ways migrant characters cope with their new life, places, the uncertainties and insecurities they suffer from and the

communication problem.’ This claim not only link migrant literature to the uncanny but also the search for home and identity. Migrant literature, thus, projects migrant displacement, experiences, and the migrant’s dilemma between different homes and cultures.

Migrant writers, according to Girma Negash (1999, p. 79), “have privileged themselves with unique artistic consciousness attributed to their homelessness which permits them to speak of matters of universal significance....” The questions invoked and left unanswered by Negash are the definition of 'unique artistic consciousness', whether homelessness is *the sine qua non* to achieving this consciousness, and where the location of the 'home' that the migrant writer must reach is located. Ayo Oniwe (2017, p. iv) also says that what has given African migrant writers new faces, and a shift from concentration from 'parochial and national issues' to more contemporary ones, has been their spatial transition into migrancy and through 'the forces and processes of globalisation' (2017, p. vi). Whether national issues are too parochial to be focussed on by migrant writers, or if the migrant writer's location is a prerequisite to writing on global and contemporary themes, remain questions too complicated for this study's purview.

Parekh Bhikhu (1994, p. 106) has, however, argued against the idea of migrant ‘homelessness.’ For him, the migrant, “far from being homeless, (he) has several homes and that is the only way he has increasingly come to feel at home in the world.” Having several homes is about the ambiguity and uncertainty that are inherent in migrancy and the uncanny. While spatio-temporal detachment and estrangement from the original home are characteristic of contemporary Nigerian migrant literature, the socio-political developments at the home left behind are often the topical setting and thematic location of such writing.

First-generation African writers like Ngugi Wa ‘Thiongo, Wole Soyinka, Rajat Neogy, J.P. Clarke, Okot P’bitek, and Chinua Achebe have argued and written about cultural, colonial and postcolonial issues during and after their African Writers Conference on African Literature in 1962. Contemporary African writers, whatever their location, have continued in the tradition of addressing issues that are ‘universal’ stemming from their socio-political exposures and experiences. Topical issues of home and identity have only boosted the worldview and literary scope of the African migrant writers who themselves often straddle dual or multiple identities.

My socio-cultural and historical backgrounds and consequently that of *Pounds of Flesh* is located within postcolonial literature, which Ashcroft et al. (1989, p. 8) say is about ‘placement and displacement’ that are characteristics of the homely and unhomely experiences. The novel explores, highlights, interrogates and reflects on these issues. Like other third-generation Nigerian writers whom Adesanmi and Dunton (2005, p.16) say are more concerned with “nomadism, exile, displacement and deracination,” I have been impacted by the dialectics of migration and globalisation. It is preposterous to say that the corpus of Nigeria's third-generation writers has been about issues of placement, movement, and displacements alone. On the contrary, it has been an intertwining of divergent themes across globalisation, migration, and the nationalist, socio-cultural, and political developments, which were also the focus of the first and second-generation writers.

The themes listed by Adesanmi and Dunton hinge on movement, non-settlement, and uprooting, are linked to the notions of home, leaving home and identity in *Pounds of Flesh*. The said third-generation of writers who are also prominent in contemporary Nigerian migrant literature include Helon Habila, Chris Abani, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Segun Afolabi, Teju Cole, Sefi Ata, Chika

Unigwe, and Olajumoke Oyeyemi. They are based outside Nigeria and therefore have experiences that transcend two cultures. These, I believe, broadens their orientation, enriches their constructs, deepens their narratives, and sharpens their thematic focality(ies) and engagements. Despite Adam Smith's (2005, p. 281) observation that 'it is as hard for Nigerian novelists writing in a language with national reach to find a domestic audience as it has been at any time since 1960,' these writers and others have been able to promote Nigerian literary writing across national borders.

Like other Nigerian migrant novel, *Pounds of Flesh* highlights the dystopian experiences of migrants who encounter the other side of home's realities against the backdrop of their high expectations of utopian 'homes' in unfamiliar places.

According to Oniwe, African migrant writers are not only 'impelled by a transitional and cosmopolitan imagination', but 'they also focus on the experiences of migrants and their relationship with home (2017, p.14). These experiences and relationships with home - economic, political, and socio-political challenges – which make people leave their homes searching for another are often interrogated by African migrant literature.

Unlike Bhabha's (1992, p.146) perception that the new generation of writers is moving world literature from 'the transmission of national traditions,' to the border and frontiers of 'transnational histories of migrants, the colonised, or political refugees,' I believe that these engagements could be overlapping but not interloping since they are not stand-alone without roots and branches. Bhabha's 'national traditions' are not the same as Oniwe's 'parochial and national issues.' While national traditions might go into crisis or extinction if they do not transform or

coalesce into contemporary national issues, they, 'national issues,' may change, but they remain ever-present and evolving.

Chapter Two

Home

Home is somewhere definite; anywhere; I'm-not-sure-where; somewhere-yet-to-be; or an imaginary and distant somewhere.

(Fox, 2016, p. 14).

The quotation above sums up the ambiguous nature of home as radically unstable and shifting, can be real or imagined and transcends the past and present into the future. *Pounds of Flesh* engages in this idea of the ambiguity of home, which Jean-Michel Quinodoz (2004, pp.167) says is 'rooted in the paradox of the known, familiar, homely,' to demonstrate that within the familiarity of home, there is unfamiliarity and that while home is everywhere, it is nowhere. The novel does this through the experiences of a character like Uncle Sam, who leaves Ghana, believing that his home country had become unhomely. Unfortunately, he arrives in England to be confronted with the unhomeliness of discrimination, debasement, and estrangement. He dies from overwork.

On the contrary, Laja is surprised to learn that Ciara, his nurse at the hospital, wants to leave England for Kenya to join her boyfriend, a successful farmer. Until then, Laja had believed that everyone wants to leave Africa for lack of opportunities; he had not heard or known any English person leaving England for Africa without a job offer, contract, or business. I use ambiguity as a literary tool to create suspense. Laja was put on a plane home with others, but he gets a reprieve to stay longer in England.

In many migrant novels, the nature of the homes which characters leave behind, and the factors which make them leave, are often overshadowed by the narratives of non-acceptance, discrimination, and loss of identity in the places where they seek a new home. In Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*, for example, the lead character, Ifemelu, says, 'I came from a country where race was not an issue,' and 'I did not think of myself as black and I only became black when I came to America' (*Am.*, p. 290). Of course, race cannot be an issue in Nigeria because it is not a multi-racial society like the United States of America. However, issues of difference and discrimination are still prominent within Nigeria in the novel. For example, another character, Edusco, in his conversation with Obinze, sees a problem with his tribe, the Igbo:

You see, this is the problem with you Igbo people. You don't do brother-brother. That's why I like Yoruba people, they look out for one another.... a Hausa man will speak Hausa to his fellow Hausa man. A Yoruba man will see a Yoruba person anywhere and speak Yoruba. But an Igbo man will speak English to an Igbo man (*Am*, p. 456).

Edusco's statement highlights the difference within his tribe in terms of class, gender, and beliefs. His stereotyping of the major tribes in Nigeria is an indication that discrimination is not exclusive to race, certain individuals, people, places, or to Ifemelu's America alone. The fact is that Ifemelu is black; her colour did not change on getting to America. Her claim of becoming black on getting to America is Adichie's use of rhetorical literary exaggeration to underscore discrimination and racism. On the contrary, Ifemelu's colour is only made more pronounced by her otherness, her racial difference. The reality is that she was 'pushed' to leave her home country, Nigeria, by the discomfort of incessant closure of schools and lack of job opportunities.

Ifemelu's 'discovery' of her blackness and the social and psychological appendages which come with it is like what Du Bois (1903 {2018}) calls 'double-consciousness.' Her experience is similar to the 'sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity' (p. 5). The multiplicity of 'eyes of others' here is comparable to uncanny (unfamiliar) eyes coming to measure 'one's self' (the familiar) with a strange measuring tape. Consequently, the black person is made to think of themselves in an unfamiliar way. This self-alienation creates an uncanny doubling or multiplication of the self. First, the black person sees themselves as who they are, in their own eyes. Secondly, they see themselves being seen or watched by eyes that are different from theirs and that of their 'world', making them feel stranger still. Thirdly, they see themselves with a multiplicity of eyes or 'measurements' while stuck in 'one dark body' (Du Bois (1903 {2018})) p. 5), like a place of hibernation, a home from which they strive to emerge.

I see Ifemelu's case as one of multiple consciousnesses – upper-middle-class, woman, migrant, black, and non-American Nigerian. However, unlike 'a Negro' black American, she has another home, Nigeria, where she could escape to find some sense of familiarity. She eventually returns home to Nigeria, where she finds her root and happiness.

The physical home

It is the change or newness which happens to the familiar that makes it unfamiliar and uncanny. Bennett and Royle (2009, p. 36) say the 'uncanny has to do with making things *uncertain*: it has to do with the sense that things are not as they have come to appear through habits and familiarity, that they may challenge all rationality

and logic.’ This aligns with Laja’s fear of the unknown when Mother threatened that they would leave home when he was a child.

Even if they managed to leave the streets and find a place to live, how would he cope in a new environment, with new neighbours? He didn’t want to leave. Unable to sleep for a long time, his mind became muddled with doubts, fear, and uncertainty (*PoF*, p. 5).

The house is the only place he and his siblings have known as home. It is their space of protection, provision, togetherness, and security. Unfortunately, it becomes a place of uncertainty, generating unimaginable estrangement and infantile fears in Laja because Fali has come to make it unfamiliar. To him, it is strange:

He’d heard that Osegun, the maddest woman in town, often attacked people at night. The *Oro* worshippers too, picked homeless people for their human blood rituals (*PoF*, p. 5).

Being exposed to homelessness generates dread and uncertainty for the children. Besides the fears of the present, there is also uncertainty about the future.

From this point, home becomes any place they can afford to rent. However, as they find out later, home is more than affordability of space, because ‘leaving home produces too many homes and hence no Home, too many places in which memories attach themselves through the carving out of inhabitable space, and hence no place in which memory can allow the past to reach the present’ (Ahmed 1999, p. 330). For Laja, the various homes he knows cannot be like the one he grew up in. He keeps longing, looking back with nostalgia for the familiarity and certainty of the old house they left:

Though he didn’t have to pass through Owaluwa Street on his way from school, something always pulled him toward the longer route. He went to see the house to feed his curiosity. Is the house still standing? Could he see his father? Maybe if he saw him, he’ll ask him where they lived and come and

beg Mother to bring them back home. Just maybe. There was no change to the house, nor did he see anyone, but he kept passing in front of it (*PoF*, p. 10).

His passing by the house becomes an effort to recall and invoke the past homeliness and familiarity. Despite different houses, new friends, and physical and emotional distancing from his father, Laja keeps wishing they could return there.

Similarly, after leaving Nigeria for England, he does not think there would be any reason to miss Lagos, where he had schooled and worked but which became so unfamiliar that he could not wait to leave:

He never knew he could miss Lagos. The 5.00 am waking up after sweaty nights in his airtight room which vagrant mosquitoes still found space to enter; the shove and push to get on the buses within maddening frenzies; the morbid fear of crossing the lagoon in a wooden canoe to the school complex, and the harry and the hurry of shuttling between jobs. The late-night return home, tired and drained; the strained pissing of orange-urine aimed at an angle of the blackening toilet bowl. Then, the troubled sleep, dragging on to burst into another dawn when he still needed more sleep but had to get up. He had thought that Lagos was not worth missing. But now, he found himself missing the things he disliked about Lagos; the madness of the city (*PoF*, pp. 226-227).

For Laja, dislocated and estranged, nostalgia for what used to be familiar, even while not wholly homely, becomes an escape from the gruelling realities of the failure to find a new home in England.

In the passage above, I employ Yoruba *Ofo's style* or invocation, which involves a sacred uninterrupted recalling of historical events and feats to tackle and overcome current challenges. I use it as a stream of consciousness to capture Laja's thoughts and feelings about his predicament.

The emotional home

Apart from the emotional attraction to places and structures, some people serve as psycho-social and emotional stabilisers in individuals' lives. The expectations of the emotional home include love, peace, trust, and reliability, among others. In *Pounds of Flesh*, these expectations are short-circuited by Fali's infiltration into the home, leading to divided loyalty by Father and frequent quarrels between Fali and Mother. Later, the uncanny exposure of a long-held secret that Mother had another male child, Andy, whom she had given away in adoption and never mentioned to her other children, further strains the emotional home they are rebuilding after the first is lost:

How could she have kept such a secret from them after telling them often that they had no father or family besides each other to trust and depend on? Laja wanted to go far away and never return to the afternoon mess (*PoF*, p. 46).

The revelation raises further questions about Mother, her hypocrisy and the belief in openness and loyalty in the family.

The emergence of Andy, which ordinarily should be a thing of joy for a family, throws up unsettling dust. It brings back the memory of their homelessness experience and creates a further disturbance that makes everyone uncomfortable and sows the seed of uncertainty. First, the reason Mother took them out of the familiarity of their first home becomes questionable as she now appears as an ambiguous and unreliable character. The new home she is trying to build is unsustainable as her children now doubt her real intentions and identity. Trust, as a salient part of an emotional home, is destroyed.

Later, Mother's diagnosis with cancer takes away the known image of a healthy, strong, and domineering woman and replaces it with one of an unfamiliar sickly woman:

She grew leaner and frailer. Her once vibrant face, always shiny in the mornings when oiled with coconut oil, was becoming ashy. On a couple of occasions, she had to rush back from the market because she felt very ill. She spoke little; when she did, her voice was hoarse, almost inaudible. She frequented the latrine, and when she wasn't quick enough, she vomited everywhere inside the house. A strange smell covered their home. Gradually, the number of days she went out reduced. Frustrated by not being able to do her buying and selling, she spent her days at home, singing, reading her Bible, and praying. Those were good days. At other times, she moaned in pain, her groaning searing into the hearts of her children. When overwhelmed, they cried (*PoF*, p. 90).

From the trauma of being 'homeless' and having a strange brother, Mother's cancer makes Laja and his siblings become 'motherless.' Unfamiliarity sets in to create a double of their mother – a sickly strange one. Not only does her physical appearance change, but she also becomes a shell of her former self. Her voice is gone; the smell and pain around her illness emotionally punish and distress her children. Cancer has crept into their new home and cast an uncanny shroud on it.

With the estrangement within his family, Laja focuses on finding an emotional home in his relationship with Bola, his girlfriend. Unfortunately, his hypocrisy and insensitivity lead to a quarrel between them after blaming the much younger Bola for becoming pregnant despite having unprotected sex with her. Thus, Laja, who earlier in the story had become very angry and blames the boy responsible for his sister, Toke's pregnancy, is unveiled as a selfish and non-committal character. However, after Bola leaves Nigeria for England, he is distraught as he suffers another disruption to the certainty and emotional stability he seeks. When Andy

returns after a couple of years to get married, Laja attends and is shocked on seeing who the bride is:

Laja sat dejectedly, supporting his head with his left hand. Almost immediately, Jude, who seemed to have identified the bride too, tapped him, “Yes. That’s Bola nau? Your Bola! I thought” (*PoF*, p. 109).

While the wedding is to be a new beginning for the couple, it marks the end of the hope of Laja’s search for an emotional home through reuniting with Bola. He feels that what is left of the sought-after home has been completely stripped off by the happenstance of him and Andy, two brothers, having a sexual relationship with the same girl, a culturally abominable act.

The economic home

The economic home is in the confidence and ability to meet financial responsibilities when they arise. Mother's sickness not only drains her children emotionally, but her care and medication also require much money. Laja takes up the responsibility of providing for her care and medicines. He sells some of his property and borrows more money from his uncle, Dele, to buy *The Consultancy*, a university admissions preparatory school that bribes examination officials, from Jude. When they fail to get a soldier's daughter into the university, Laja is beaten by soldiers and locked away in an abandoned building. The consequent closure of *The Consultancy* sings the swan song to a significant source of his income. This links back to the inherited colonial system where certificates or paper qualifications were prioritised over talent and ability, leading to a system of sleaze, quick-rich syndrome, and corrupt profiteering in Nigeria.

Laja resigns from his teaching job after getting a query for being absent from school and learning that the news of his encounter with the soldiers has spread. As his finances dry up, with debts to be paid and his mother to care for, he feels trapped:

After another sleepless night one Sunday, he decided to leave Nigeria. He had to do it for his sanity and for his sick mother. Where he would head to, or how to do it were questions that kept popping up in his mind but which he had no answer. He had no answers and he'd boasted that he didn't need Lati's help, that he would make it in Nigeria (*PoF*, p. 139).

With the decision to migrate, Laja goes back on his earlier determination never to become a migrant.

The psychological home

Finding the psychological home is finding all or some of the most important forms of home. Though they seem similar, I separate emotional home from the psychological here because while the emotional is often limited to feelings, especially love and peace, the psychological home, I believe, comes with the overall satisfaction derived from all the other forms of home. It also relates to how these others have shaped the overall mental state of the home seeker. Sigmon et al. (2002, p. 26) stress that: 'Throughout history, home has had both spiritual and emotional connotations.' These spiritual and emotional connotations and what they convey impact the psyche of the individual. For example, Laja's failure to feel at Home in Nigeria emanates from his inability to find a physical home and emotional and financial homes. He migrates for a further search. Unfortunately, with the idealisation and myth 'that home is the place where we can unproblematically be ourselves' (Harte 2017, p. 2), Laja faces new realities about the home he searches for in England.

The rejection that comes with unhomeliness often generates melancholia, fear, and the death drive, which are uncanny emotions that migrant characters like Chuks. The death drive is one of the uncanny characteristics seen in the example of Nathaniel's death, a character in 'The Sandman', the E.T.A. Hoffman's story, which Freud uses to illustrate his thesis on the uncanny. Whereas it is the re-emergence of Giuseppe Coppola, the Sand Man, the embodiment of his fear from the past, which makes Nathaniel commit suicide, the fear of going back to his original home, a place in which he grew up, makes Chuks prefers death to be taken home. As enunciated by Freud in *Beyond Pleasure Principle* (1920), death-drive or death wish characteristics include aggression, destruction, repetitive compulsion, and self-destruction. These are all uncanny tropes that some characters in *Pounds of Flesh* display.

In *A House for Mr Biswas* (1961), which has a similar theme of the search for Home as *Pounds of Flesh*, V.S. Naipaul uses the house as a metaphor to illustrate how Mr Biswas, the eponymous character, moves between homes after leaving the original home where he is 'born in the wrong way' because of having six fingers (*A House*, p. 11). The sixth finger, however, falls off when he is nine days old. He marries Shama from the affluent Tulsi family and moves to his inlaws' house at Hanuman House into a persistently cantankerous affair. From there, he keeps moving in and out of different family and rented houses. Like the incessant movements of Mother and her children in *Pounds of Flesh*, Mr Biswas moves from Hanuman House, in Arwacas, to The Chase, Green Vale, Shorthills, and then to Port of Spain. These movements are filled with dissatisfaction, uncertainties and frustrations until he can finally fulfil the lifelong desire of owning a house.

Unfortunately, the house comes without the homeliness he would have loved. After the old owners leave and the Biswas family move in, they see many defects:

They discovered the staircase: unhidden by curtains, it was too plain. Mr Biswas discovered the absence of a back door. Shama discovered that two of the wooden pillars supporting the staircase landing were rotten, whittled away toward the bottom and green with damp. They all discovered that the staircase was dangerous (*A House*, 1961, p. 606).

The house's dilapidation does not come alone, but with potential future harm, making Mr Biswas' uncanny experiences move the full circle.

In a similar vein, Laja travels out of Nigeria thinking of finding a home and enough money to pay off his debts and meet salient responsibilities, only to be enmeshed in financial enslavement by human traffickers and slide deep into estrangement. Just as Mr Biswas dies not owning the house. Uncle Sam dies suddenly, not able to reunite with his family. Other *Pounds of Flesh* migrant characters like Riba, Isaac, and Candy live a life of dissatisfaction, broken dreams, and forced changes with sad consequences.

Chapter Three

Leaving Home

Tell us what it is to be a woman so that we may know what it is to be a man. What moves at the margin. What it is to have no home in this place. To be set adrift from the one you knew. What it is to live at the edge of towns that cannot bear your company.

(Toni Morrison, Nobel Lecture, 7th December 1973).

Morrison's statement above is about gender, but it still highlights the complexities and estranging experiences of otherness and the uncertainty of leaving one home for another. Similarly, in Condé's rumination, identity within and outside the home seems to have become non-specific and ambiguous. She wonders if identity has not been left to whims and convenience of choices.

The concepts of migration and identity are so complex and nuanced; thus, in this chapter, I concentrate on chosen aspects of migration and identity in relation to the uncanny. Besides the pains of leaving home, I use selected tropes of identity, body and naming, to portray these uncanny characteristics and experiences. These tropes of the uncanny are vital because they pervade my novel. I believe globalisation and its attendant hike in migration have contributed to this fluidity of home, culture, belonging and identity. Ursula Kelly supports these views, saying that: 'gain can also accrue through migration,' its 'severing moment from established homeplaces, cultural practices, and identities throws into chaos any held belief about cultural identity as fixed or stable' (2009, p. 5). This statement raises another salient question of whether the benefits of migration are more than the disadvantages.

Perhaps an overall view of the root of African migration and its logical consequences may proffer answers. Mariam Musonye (2007), in an analysis of Ike

Oguine's *A Squatter's Tale* (2000), says African migration has mostly become about the allure of the 'American Dream' and has become about affluence rather than about living a decent life. She categorises African people's migration into the West, especially the United States of America, into three phases:

The first generation was of slaves, who were forcibly carried away to captivity, never to return home. The second generation was of intellectuals, who reluctantly went to America in pursuit of education. The third generation is the current economic exiles, who migrate to America willingly for a new form of enslavement. Although they feel alienated and homesick, they continue to stay, chasing after an elusive dream. (p. 81)

Musonye's claim about third-generation African migrant supports the realities of the amalgam of otherness – estrangement, alienation, and homesickness – which Morrison underscores in her contemplations. It also provides a helpful insight into the condition of African migrants, and consequently a significant aspect of the thematic concerns of African migrant literature, including those of personal, cultural, national and racial rootlessness which experience, and history have foisted on African migrants.

In Nigerian literature, we see examples of Musonye's first generation in Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself*, published in 1789. The autobiographical narration explores the estrangement and traumatic aftermath of a boy's forced dislocation from his village's familiarity into the unknown as a slave. Chinua Achebe's *No longer at Ease* (1960), in which a character, Obi Okonkwo, goes to England to study and returns home to Nigeria to be trapped in a dilemma between the traditions and cultures of his home and the foreign ones that have become part of him, falls into Musonye's second-generation categorisation. Besides

equating migration to the unhomeliness of enslavement, Musonye also portrays uncanny ambivalence in the claim that though the migrants of the third phase 'feel alienated and homesick, they continue to stay, chasing after an elusive dream' (p. 84). Being in such a condition of alienation, homesickness, willing enslavement, and chasing elusive dreams is typical of uncanny experiences in *Pounds of Flesh's* characters. Uncle Sam tells Laja:

England is a good and a bad place, depending on how you use your head. Many young Africans come here with high hopes but end up worse than they came. When some earn little money, they do a currency conversion and smile to themselves, thinking that they have become wealthy. They overlook many things - the rent, bills, tax – and embark on a flamboyant lifestyle (*PoF*, p. 188).

While Uncle Sam's caution is mild, Musonye's paradox of being 'homesick' and 'continue to stay' paints a picture of getting lost within the maze of estrangement but unable to make the right decisions.

Laja's arrest and detention at the Brook House Immigration Detention Centre cut short his ambition and dreams. The news of the death of his mother casts a shadow on all he believes he has sacrificed. Not knowing when she died and getting no consolation from anyone besides Isaac makes it sadder. He sees his impending deportation as an opportunity to see her body if she is not buried yet. Thoughts of a sad journey fill him as he and others march toward the plane at Gatwick Airport:

He was far into the plane's nosy take-off into the skies and the rituals of air travel; the hours of seated boredom, dozing, and waking up to gape at the on-board entertainment. His imagination took him further to the plane's landing kiss on the runway, and the jolt of the heave-filled stop on arrival. Then, the numerous, antsy mufti and badge-wearing officials in uniforms, up till Immigration (*PoF*, p., 306).

However, his choiceless longing for home terminates when he gets a reprieve to stay back in England. The belief that staying back is a reward for what he sees as his wasted years in England overcomes his voluntary return plan.

There exist disparate views of the characters in *Pounds of Flesh* about the ideas of home and identity.

Hhm. There is no place like Home, That's the

“Which home are you talking about, Bros?” Isaac, who had walked in and was removing his shoes by the door, said.

“Home, of course! You guys always say it is bad in Africa, but graduates don't clean floors and shit in public places there. I mean, after all the frustration, discrimination, and homesickness one copes with, you still”

Forget that, Bros. Home is where food is; where hope is,” Isaac said. On his face was a despondent look, as if he was confused or regretting what he'd just said. He removed his backpack and put it on the sofa near the door. “I think Africans should not be talking about homesickness and how home is the best place to be. With what's happening across that continent, we should be talking about sickness-home, not homesickness (*PoF*, p. 218).

Here, unlike Uncle Sam, Isaac does not see anything worth praising in his original Home in Africa. He plays on words, turning the familiar word 'homesickness' into 'sickness-home.' Not only does he defamiliarises the word, but he also creates an uncanny image of a place full of sick people.

An illustration of the disruption which unhomeliness causes can be seen in Dieu Hack-Polay's claim that 'studies have shown that African migrants often find it difficult to settle down because they have more dissimilarity with western cultures.' He explains further that African's communal lifestyle has proven 'incompatible with the individualist western cultures' (2012, p. 16). These dissimilarities often lead to psychological disruptions that make it difficult for the migrant, like the *Pounds of Flesh* characters, to find home and homeliness. The incompatibility of cultures hinges on differences in identity, which, to no small extent, is rooted in the idea of culture itself. These make the difference among people more pronounced and deepen uncertainties.

The relationship between home, identity, and migration, though symbiotic, is at the same time confrontational. Whereas the one who has left home wants to settle and be at home in a new place, the hosts - people and places - that they want to settle into have their personal, emotional, physical, territorial, national, or racial identities which they want to project and protect as well. Such protectionist tendency has long been established in sociology and ethnology. G. Sarwer-Foner states the importance of this that the:

Possession of a territory by a territorial animal increases his strength, his energy, and his aggressive drives towards intruders. The phenomenon of ritualisation of behaviour in terms of sign stimuli, taxes, innate releasing or inhibiting trigger mechanisms is important (1972, p., 117).

Thus, the human instinct to own and defend personal spaces and places against others is the natural yearning for identity. These instincts, difference, and confrontational protectionism are what people who leave their homes for others confront.

With its scepticism about truth and reality, postmodernism has presented identity as fluid, relative, and impersonal. Bennett and Royle (2014) say postmodernism challenges the 'logo-centric' and ethnocentricism notions of identity and that psychoanalysis 'has promoted an awareness of the extent to which any 'I' or human subject is decentred.' This decentralisation, they say, has got to the extent that an 'I' 'can never be simply or precisely who or what 'I' think' (p. 287). Thus, identity, too, in its fluidness due to displacement, estrangement and uncertainty, shares the ambiguity and complexities that come with the idea of home, leaving home and identity.

In a 1986 interview with Neisbit Ujubi, a Ugandan novelist, Moses Isegewa, highlights the impact of stereotypes that come with identity. He says:

When you first leave Uganda for Europe, you think, 'At last, I'm free to do what I want.' But when you arrive there, you become an African for the first time, in a sense. Because you are responsible for Somalia! They call you up and say, 'What do you think about Somalia?' And you can't say, 'I'm Ugandan, I have nothing to say about Somalia.' You have this big, huge chunk of experience to defend - and you will defend it, because nobody else is defending it. You become some sort of an ambassador and for the first time you become conscious of what Africa means (np).

Isegewa's realisation of the burden of identity here is comparable to Ifemelu's discovery of her blackness only when she got to America (Adichie, *Americanah*, 2014, p. 290). Unfortunately, this realisation is about fighting preconceived negativity about Africa. Such an experience can only sour the hope of freedom on Isegewa leaving Uganda, for example, and generate uncanny feelings of estrangement.

The catastrophic impact of unhomely difference and developments can also be seen in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958/2010), where the lead character, Okonkwo, becomes a 'stranger' in a community in which he grows up, cherishes, defends, and becomes one of its leaders. After his tragic death, one of Umuofia's men tells the District Commissioner that:

We cannot bury him. Only a stranger can. We shall pay your men to do it. When he has been buried, we will then do our duty by him. We shall make sacrifices to cleanse the desecrated land (*TFA*, p., 196).

Okonkwo, the highly respected and titled man in the community, familiar with his people's traditional and cultural ways and wanting to uphold them, paradoxically becomes the stranger, the untouchable, in life and after his death. The land's

deseccration is no longer through the strangers, the colonial masters and their 'strange' religion and culture, but through the one who thinks he is protecting the land from deseccration by strangers. Okonkwo ends up being defamiliarised by strangers from what he has always known. He becomes the collateral damage in the conflict between the ambiguous forces of home and identity.

Having experienced what Edward Said (2002, p., 137) calls 'the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home,' people like Laja who leave home for other places, have their hopes and ambitions curtailed by unhomely developments. Laja experiences living between expectation and hopelessness at Brooklyn House Detention Centre. He believes he is wasting away despite the people around him, and the facilities provided:

And he could learn a new language, or a trade – barbing, masonry, tailoring, carpentry – but while the work engaged him physically, his mind was not calm or settled enough to learn anything new. What was the use if he would be deported at the end? He would not be a tradesman in Nigeria; he was above that back home.

There was freedom of movement but the 9.00pm to 6am lock-in; the midday and 5 pm checks during which they must be in their rooms; the batch-opening of the doors to control crowding the dining room at supper, the count and recount in and out of the rooms like chicken, was inhuman. This was no life to live (*PoF*, p., 290).

Laja's state of mind has snuffed out the desire to do anything but wait in apathy and forlornness day after day.

Chapter Four

Identity

What is identity if it is not defined as we have said, by the place of birth, the colour of the skin and language? One wonders if identity is not merely a matter of choice.

(Maryse Conde, 2000, p. 35)

Human identity, at various levels, defines individuals or groups and separates one from others. In Condé's rumination above, identity seems to have become non-specific and ambiguous. She wonders if identity has not been left to whims and convenience of choices. However, the concept of identity is so complex and nuanced; thus, in this chapter, I concentrate on aspects of identity that relate most to the concept of the uncanny. I use selected tropes of identity – voice (language and mode of expression), colour (hair, body), and naming (classification and stereotyping), to portray this. These tropes are important because they pervade my novel and link back to the core analytical concept of the uncanny as enunciated by Freud.

Postmodernism further challenges the notion of both 'logo-centric' and ethnocentrism of the notions of identity (Bennett and Royle 2014, p. 287). The authors further say that psychoanalysis 'has promoted an awareness of the extent to which any 'I' or human subject is decentred.' This decentralisation, they say, has got to the extent that an 'I' 'can never be simply or precisely who or what 'I' think' (p. 287). Thus, identity, too, in its fluidness due to displacement, estrangement and uncertainty, shares the uncanniness that comes with home, leaving home or migration.

Naming

Liseli Fitzpatrick (2012, p. 25) says, 'For Africans, your name is your soul – your name has celestial powers and embodies spirit.' Names in African societies thus have tribal, religious, and ancestral roots. They often symbolise or depict current experiences, beliefs, prayers, or a prophecy into a child's life at birth. It is, therefore, crucial that others pronounce people's names right and use them appropriately. Not doing this is disrespecting the import and significance of such names and disregarding the spiritual signature they convey. Bennet and Royle (2014, p. 131) have also established the link between the individual and their name to language and cultural practices. They say: 'You cannot be an 'I' without having a proper name, and in English-speaking countries, you usually acquire a proper name around the time of birth or even before.' The individual (I) is thus not just who you are but also how you are seen and categorised by others within specific places and cultural traditions. However, colonisation came with changes to the names of people and places in colonised societies.

According to Hussein Bulhan (2015, p., 247), people who experience colonisation, in many instances, had to 'change their indigenous first names to European names like Peter, James, and Joseph.' These changes were done to curry acceptance and favours in the new socio-cultural milieu that colonial masters created. The African migrants in *Pounds of Flesh* and supporting texts often lose their names, either wholly or through shortening and abbreviations for convenience, acceptance, and aid integration into the places where they seek new homes. Laja has to bear the name Indy to match the identity documents he uses at work. Though Chima raises doubts about the genuineness of the passport, Laja's plan is to start

using it with the fake National Insurance procured for him by Chuks to be able to work after his study permit expires.

Early in the morning the door opened and Chuks came in. He gave a card in blue and red colours to Laja. “Dat na National Insurance number wey you go use when your student visa go expire. Indy na your name now o. You still get long time. Stand in front mirror make you practise well well.”

Laja smiled, thanked Chuks, and put the card into his inner jacket pocket. He was confident he wouldn’t need to use it. His study permit would be renewed in his real name (*PoF*, p. 184).

Laja thus becomes a doppelganger of himself, changing from the familiarity of his real name to the unfamiliarity of a new one to which he must adapt.

Uncle Sam becomes frustrated with correcting people at work who mispronounce and misspell his name. He accepts whatever people called him, saying it does not matter if he has his job. The mispronunciation and misspelling of names are common mistakes that people of different backgrounds make, but this becomes atrocious when naming or misnaming becomes a deliberate form of stereotyping and denigration.

Changes also come into migrant national and racial identities. Isaac is eager to get rid of his national naming, his Ghanaian identity, for the American one his sister promises to secure for him:

She said America doesn’t allow dual citizenship; I said *hakuna matata*, no problem. What’s the value of a Ghanaian citizenship anyway? I would gladly throw my passport into the Thames to take to Ghana Immigration for me (*PoF*, p. 241).

To him, national identity and whatever patriotism comes with it is disposable on the altars of need and desire for a better home. However, to Riba, his identity makes him unique, and he would not change or trade it for anything. Unlike Isaac and other

migrants whom he believes are hypocritical and trade their identity for social acceptance and money, Riba wants to remain an original African.

Both Laja and Uncle Sam have fears about the future of the children of Miss G, Uncle Sam's girlfriend.

Now, those Miss G. children, what ...who do they identify as? Ghanaians, French, English?" he asked.

Uncle Sam shrugged. "It's scary. They are not the only ones. We have a whole generation of African children who are in limbo all around the world because of migration." He hissed and shook his head (*PoF*, p. 227).

They see a lost generation of children who will live in identity limbo because their parents left home to find other homes. The implication of this is that children of migrants born in foreign countries like France, whatever passports they have, are never seen just as citizens but are labelled as 'second-generation' migrants, which may imply second class citizens.

Aunty Uju, in *Americanah*, thinks that the manipulation and obliteration of identities are possible because 'All of us look alike to white people' (*Am.* 120). The obliteration of migrants' identities by others is both metaphoric and symbolic. First, it illustrates how migrant characters are stereotyped as being the same in all negative manners. Secondly, it shows that others do not regard them as important enough to be unique individuals in the places where they seek new homes - the way migrants are seen but 'not seen' by their host societies. Taking over someone else's identity is comparable to the death of the original individual. Of course, Ghosts and Death are tropes of the uncanny.

Body

I do not intend to analyse colour as race because the concept is too broad for the context, space, and time of this project. Still, I consider the ambivalence of the concept of colour through the body. I consider the body - skin colour, head, hair - as aspects of identity. This is because the body combines the aesthetic with the erotic and the physical with the emotional. Thus, changes to the body may not just have physical impacts but psychological ones as well.

Changes that occur to an individual's body may come directly or indirectly from forces outside the individual's will or control. Nicholas Royle (2003, p. 1) explains that the uncanny is 'a crisis of the proper: it entails a critical disturbance of what is proper.' Therefore, if natural bodily identity is the 'proper' identity, any changes or alteration that is not natural and willingly done to it is uncanny. I categorise changes made to the natural body because of necessity, societal pressures, survival needs, subtle coercion, and the need for acceptance, among others, as defamiliarising changes to the 'proper.'

Laja's perception of beauty is of that which he sees as natural. He loathes women who wear wigs and those like Madam Naked Neck who bleach their skin.

But he did not like the changing looks that the wigs gave her – Indian, Chinese, Caucasian. She looked strange, he'd said, cautioning himself from adding that she looked like a cheap street girl on one occasion (*PoF*, p. 63).

Toks Oyedemi has argued that the wearing of foreign hair or hairstyles by black women is 'not necessarily a dismissal of their natural identity, but an embrace of multiple identities that describe the notion of postmodern self' (2016, p., 7). Monica

tells Laja that she bleaches her skin because she must pay her bills and meet set goals.

Wetin you sabi? Dark girls no dey too get customers for here o,” Monica added, shaking her open palm. “If I no get customer, how I go survive, pay my rent, and save small money wey I wan use travel go Italy?” She tightened her wrapper around her body. “I hear say for Italy self, if your skin no dey light, like white person own, you no go get customer (*PoF*, p. 61).

To Monica, Laja is ignorant of her world. Since most men who patronise her and other prostitutes prefer light-skin girls, she has to do whatever it takes to acquire more customers and meet her daily needs and plans. I believe that Bola, Monica, and the girls who commercialise their bodies at *Green Spot Inn*, only present changes to their ‘proper’ body identities as offerings to please patriarchal and economic gods - men.

Similarly, Miss G uses her body to secure what she and her children need to survive. She has children for different men in Ghana, France, and London and is Uncle Sam's girl for companion and financial benefits. Sharon accepts Riba's sexual exploitation because she believes he is British and will help her get citizenship through marriage. Candy befriends different men and sleeps with Laja, mainly because of the money that she wants to collect a few days after the death of Uncle Sam, her lover. These examples show that women, especially migrant women, often commodify their bodies and trade their identities because of the need to survive the uncertainties in their quest for new homes. Laja's sex with Tessy without her consent caps the abuse, preying on, and the rape of women and their identities in *Pounds of Flesh*.

In many cultures, the head is not just a natural part of the body; it also stands for the individual's supernatural being. One unique racial and cultural symbol of

identity is the woman's hair. I know that in many African cultures, the woman's hair serves as a symbol of adherence to religious vows and beliefs and is regarded as having spiritual or mystical powers. The world's major religions preach the sacredness of the hair. I use the hair as a synecdoche for the head, which represents the whole person. Among the Yoruba of Western Nigeria, the head is called *ori* and believed to have physical and metaphysical symbolism. Laja, the lead character in *Pounds of Flesh*, is Yoruba. According to Akin Makinde (1984, p. 197), the head, *ori*, is 'responsible for human destiny. Its function, like that of the soul, is a metaphysical one. The choice of a good *ori* in heaven brings success, while that of a bad *ori* brings failure to its bearer on earth.' Thus, the mystique about the head makes taking care of it of primal significance to the Yoruba. They do this by taking good care of the hair, which covers the physical head.

Uncle Sam says he prefers going to London for his haircut because he would not allow just anyone to touch his head.

It's not just about the haircut, my brother; you don't allow just anybody to touch your head. I'm okay with the Ghanaian barber I've known for a long time. I trust him (*PoF*, p. 240).

Though it might not be for others, the identity of who touches his head is important for Uncle Sam. The pastor at the church also alludes spiritual significance to the head:

Even the women among you go about with dirty hair, covered with some smelly wig, saying they are too busy working, too busy to find time to do their hair. Oooh! You are only dirty by nature, Sister. You go contrary to the instruction of God in 1 Corinthians 11:15, that you take care of your hair, your crown. Soon you will be too busy to clean up after using the toilet!"

Another roll of instruments followed as the congregation burst into unchurchly laughter. The pastor wiped his face.

“The Bible says a woman's hair is her glory. So, don't blame God for not answering your prayers. He distances himself from you because your head smells and your glory dims. If you can't do it up, cut it off! (*PoF*, p. 219).

The pastor's conclusion, though misogynistic, creates the fear of being distanced from God. For a Christian, this is a fearful, uncomfortable, and unfamiliar feeling to have.

Similarly, in *Americanah*, Adichie uses Ifemelu to blog about the hair as a race metaphor. Ifemelu is not happy that she must travel from Princeton to Trenton to do her hair because the people in Princeton are “so light-skinned and lank-haired” that they could not wear braids like her (*Am.*, p., 3). However, she needs to find a place with people who share her identity and do her hair type. She raises concern about Auntie Uju's losing her personality to blend into the American system. Nonetheless, when necessity calls and she is desperate for a job, Ifemelu changes her image to the American one. She straightens her hair.

Just a little burn,' the hairdresser said. 'But look how pretty it is. Wow, girl. You've got the white-girl swing!'

Her hair was hanging down rather than standing up, straight and sleek, pasted to the side and curving to a slight bob at her chin. The verve was gone. She did not recognise herself (*Am.*, p., 203).

After the event, she cannot recognise herself as her original identity, with its 'verve' has been traded for a survival identity. The burn Ifemelu suffers becomes a metaphor for not recognising herself, the pain of lost identity. Not recognising herself is like becoming someone else, as if a doppelganger has emerged out of her. The hair straightening becomes a euphemism for getting straight with the truth of American identity where 'white-girl' hair is a mark of beauty. When she can no longer cope with the estrangement and loss of identity, which become like 'cement in her soul'

despite being relatively successful in comparison to other migrants, it became apparent that:

Nigeria became where she was supposed to be, the only place she could sink her roots in without the constant urge to tug them out and shake off the soil
(*Am*, p., 6)

She decides to return to Nigeria on discovering that the home she had left is the only place where she can find what she wants in a home.

Voice

Voice is an ambiguous literary tool used stylistically, metaphorically, and contextually to convey characterisation along the lines of background, experiences, and idiosyncrasies. Bennet and Royle (2014, p. 77) say it is important to see 'literature as a space in which one encounters multiple voices.' Since literature represents society, real or imaginary, multiple voices represent the multiplicity of opinions, beliefs, and cultures. The totality of these voices subsumed in a literary work often determines the creative writer's choice of narrative voice. Thus, voice, as 'the person (the same or another) who reports [the action], and, if need be, all those people who participate, even though passively, in this narrating activity' (Genette (1980, p.213), covers the multi-voicedness in *Pounds of Flesh*. Therefore, I have created character voices at many levels to portray unique experiences, and an overall narrative voice that coordinates these varying voices. Voice thus equates empowerment, the ability and freedom of expression, which is recognised, accepted, respected and deemed worthy to be listened to by others.

This coalition of voices touches on David Lodge's reference to Mikhail Bakhtin's assertion that 'there is no such thing as *the* style, *the* language of a novel,

because a novel is a medley of many styles, many languages – or if you like, voices’ (1990, p.6). This shows the complexity of the nature of the novel concerning style, language and voice in a narrative. However, I believe that the mention of 'style' and 'language' in their 'medley' necessitates the need for clarity through contextualisation, which this commentary aims to do. Bakhtin's idea about the novel, including that of the united ambiguous voice, is a helpful concept to illuminate the narrative in *Pounds of Flesh*. Moreover, the idea of medley and multiplicity of styles, languages, and voices, ties into the concept of the uncanny which embodies multiplicity, ambiguity, and uncertainties.

Bakhtin's definition of the novel as “diversity of individual voices, artistically organised,” (1981, p. 262) further lends credence to the fact that voice is both a unique vehicle of expression and an embodiment of heterogeneous modes of expression. It also indicates that a novel, like *Pounds of Flesh*, is a compendium of diversities, interactions, and unification of multiple voices. Martin Wallace adds to this assertion by saying that “the author imposes a homogeneous, unified style on the diverse voices of heteroglossia and materials from various genres” (Wallace 1986, p. 52). Bakhtin, whose idea it is, defines heteroglossia as a “double-voiced discourse” which “serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author” (1981, p. 324). The diverse voices in *Pounds of Flesh*, and my use of the limited third person, using Laja as the internal focaliser, without any delimitation, I believe, is heteroglossic and places *Pounds of Flesh* as a ‘dialogical’ novel in Bakhtin’s classification.

Narrator's voice

Initially, *Pounds of Flesh* was written in the first-person mode, using the lead character, Laja, as narrator. However, I later felt that the story was claustrophobic, like Laja reading from his diary. I wanted to open up Laja, to explore his feelings and thoughts from outside as I desired for the novel to have some 'objectivity,' not the guarded self-consciousness of the first-person narrator. I eventually settled the limited third-person, using Laja as internal focaliser. This not only allowed me some distance from the character, but it also created more voices in the narration.

In writing *Pounds of Flesh*, not only have I become a maker and unmaker of characters, but I have also had to play the role of an arbiter among various choices and voices. David Mitchell (2006, np) puts this type of experience into perspective:

Sometimes writing is controlled personality disorder. It's controlled because in order to make it work you have to concentrate on the voices in your head—AND get them talking to each other.

This 'disorder' is about the complexity that comes with creative imagination – the amalgam of voices, some familiar, some unfamiliar, which speak, compete, and trade places in the process of crafting a creative work.

Characters' voices

The voices of the characters in the novel are shaped and determined by their historical, socio-cultural, and personal experiences and worldviews. The postcolonial background of the education system in Nigeria, for instance, presents the acquisition of Western education and the use of foreign languages as a platform for accessing 'civilised' statuses and better socio-economic life. While I was at school, local languages were termed 'vernacular' and banned on schools' premises, even in some

government offices. Only the privileged few who could speak Western languages were the 'voice' of the people. Others were mostly indirectly silenced and disadvantaged. In *Pounds of Flesh*, the headteacher at Laja's school continually tells the children that they cannot have a successful life without passing and mastering the English language.

You can't go anywhere or amount to anything in life without passing English," he often said during students' assembly. "Stop speaking vernacular and practice English more. "Read it, write it, speak it." He said it time and again that immediately he started saying, "read it," the whole assembly would complete the "write it, speak it" part with him (*PoF*, p. 20).

This relic of colonial education, which makes English compulsory in teaching all other formal education subjects, also makes passing the language compulsory and a condition for passing other subjects. The 'voices' of the indigenous languages and other subjects are silenced by the power of English, a foreign language in the Nigerian setting of *Pounds of Flesh*. One of Laja's friends, Gani, cannot go to university because he fails the English Language in his school certificate

Patois as voice

Pounds of Flesh is mostly written in the English language, but I infuse local parlances and Nigerian Pidgin English. Nigerian Pidgin came into being from earlier contact between Europeans and the coastal populations and the 'need for communication between the colonisers and the colonised' (Dadzie, 1985, p.115). Pidgin has risen from that earlier pragmatic tool to become 'an auxiliary interlingua for communication between speakers of mutually unintelligible languages' (DeCamp, 1977, p.3) and a national integration vehicle of solidarity among the users of hundreds of local languages spoken in Nigeria. It is also used where there is mutual language intelligibility.

In explaining the use of dialogue in *The Return of the Native* (1878), Thomas Hardy calls it 'the spirit of intelligent peasant talk' (see Mullan, 2000, p. 129). This style of voicing is based on the dynamics of socio-cultural and political realities. Power relations, determined by discriminatory traditional orientation and practices, often shape and impact voice. I use Pidgin as a sociolinguistic canvas to portray the different people and their experiences within the novel's societies. Besides characters who speak formal English, I use Nigerian Pidgin to show the social statuses of characters like Uncle Dele and Monica, who use the dialect to communicate because they are more at home with Pidgin as their mode of expression. I enhance their ability to communicate in a familiar language or voice rather than in an unfamiliar one.

Secondly, I portray Nigerian Pidgin as a language of intralingual communication, national identity, and unity among characters of all statuses, like Laja, Chima, Chuks and others who use it in communicating with one another. Pidgin is also used as a switch language among formal English users who use it as a language of familiarity, friendship, and shared identity. Characters like Jude, Gani and Laja, though fluent in English, use Pidgin to show their affinity and closeness to one another. Overall, I employ Nigerian Pidgin as a recognisable and acceptable voice of communication that is not inferior to other languages or communication modes.

Hybridity

The hybridity of voices - English, Pidgin, and local parlances - in *Pounds of Flesh* shows the uncanniness in a multilingual and polyglottic society that does not have a singular, familiar means of expression. Moreover, from which Pidgin evolved, the English language becomes defamiliarised to the native English speaker because of its

transformation into another form. In the same vein, I have moved cultures and continents to create links, use intertextuality, and draw on works of a hybrid mix of writers – Achebe, Adichie, Fagunwa, Hardy, Shakespeare, Spivak, and other theorists and critics, led by Freud, to bring this thesis together.

examination and refuses to retake the paper.

Second-language user limitations

Being made voiceless or being denied self-expression are not just disempowering but dreary. This is also true of having an opinion and thoughts which cannot be communicated. *Pounds of Flesh* gives voice to the 'voiceless' while also giving me a voice. As a second language user of the English language, I have to go through a rigorous writing process. First, after generating my creative ideas from my socio-cultural perception and orientation, I have to put them into English thought processes to find the right syntactic and semantic expressions. After that, I still have to cross the hurdles of making sense to the first language user or English speaker. As in this commentary, I have to conceptualise my work within the known and acceptable Western theoretical framework. This evokes uncanny experiences of ambiguity, uncertainty, and the estrangement of using a foreign language.

The need to reach a wider audience through making 'sense' and being meaningful often limit free expressions that would be most familiar and more intelligible if I were writing for my first language readers only. However, I do not subscribe to Ngugi wa Thiong'o's (1981, p. 27) notion that 'African literature can only be written in African languages.' Globalisation, multiculturalism, and the world's skewed socio-economic situation make Western languages the avenue of reaching a wider audience. Besides other inherent opportunities, writing in a Western

language has become proof of the African writer's ability to cross socio-cultural divides.

Silencing

Voice, either semantic or social, is often shaped by socio-cultural and historical background, worldviews, and experiences, so is the silencing of voice. Silencing here is not just being denied voice or the ability for self-expression directly or indirectly. However, it is also the inability to have the language or the intelligible and acceptable mode of expression in an economic, historical, socio-cultural, or political milieu.

In postcolonial study, the Indian coinage, 'subaltern' refers to the excluded, oppressed, and voiceless colonised populations deemed to be of lower status and without a recognised voice. They often need others, people of higher status, to speak on their behalf. Gayatri Spivak touches on this in her 1983 paper 'Can the subaltern speak?' where she relates colonial silencing to the subaltern, the less privileged and unheard. Citing systemic colonial cultural hegemony, misappropriation, and subjugation, using specific examples like the widow immolation practice of the *sati* in India, Spivak concludes that 'in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow' (1983, p. 83). She presents colonialism as the suppression of people's rights and power and their humanity by taking away their voice. *Pounds of Flesh* is a voice that also gives a voice to the subaltern, the "Other who has not yet spoken" (Gurevitch 2000, p. 244) through different voices that transcend their backgrounds and status.

At a broader level, Edward Said (1993, p., xiii) writes: “The power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them.” Denying the weak or less privileged their voice and imposing others' opinions on them are forms of subjugation used as historical colonialism and imperialism tools. The inability of most African countries to rise from the ashes of their stagnancy, have silenced their voices in many ways.

Colonial mentality

Historically, colonialism in many African countries, especially Nigeria, created the belief that everything foreign was superior to the local and indigenous ones. Most areas of socio-cultural lives were relegated to promote Western lifestyles and beliefs, and those who held to their old ways were labelled uncivilised ‘bush’ people. Consequently, being ‘foreign’ in all aspects of life became more attractive than being a ‘bush’ person. Colonialism thus led to a persisting imposter syndrome, an atmosphere of self-doubt, fear, uncertainty and sense of incompetence in the colonised peoples. Indigenous human and socio-cultural voices are silenced through the acceptance of inferiority and looking up to foreigners for validation. In *Pounds of Flesh*, Monica argues that she bleaches her skin so that she can get more customers as men prefer girls with light complexion.

Foreign aid

Despite decades of independence from Western powers and abundant natural and human resources, most countries in Africa still look up to the West for support in almost all areas of human endeavour. Incompetence, mismanagement and corruption have crippled the economies of the nations on the continent. For instance, the United

Kingdom Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office in its *Statistics on International Development* for 2019 published in September 2020, reports that ‘Africa remained the largest recipient of UK region-specific bilateral ODA in 2019 – accounting for 50.6 per cent’ (2020, p.4). Nigeria, Africa’s largest economy, received over £258 million from the UK in that year as aid. Thus, the voice of African countries in international politics and diplomacy, when not completely silenced by threats of withdrawal of aids and support, is mostly shaped by what aid has been received from foreign countries. Metaphorically, this governmental ‘looking up’ to foreign countries often filters down to citizens like Laja and his housemates in *Pounds of Flesh*, who migrate to Western countries in the quest for a good life.

Foreign education and language

Colonisation fostered the notion that Western education was the only good and acceptable system of learning which had immediate and future benefits. In the colonial administrative system, only the privileged few who could speak Western languages were the ‘voice’ of the people. Those who could not were mostly indirectly silenced and disadvantaged. The Nigerian system of education was built on this system of education. When I was at school, local languages were termed ‘vernacular’ and banned on schools’ premises. It is still same in government offices.

Patriarchy

The cultural practice of patriarchy in *Pounds of Flesh* muffles the voices of women and children. While men are the dominant power in society and can philander in sexual and marital relationships, women are still expected to sort out the consequences of such waywardness. They are supposed to persevere and keep marriages together, no matter what the man does. Laja has unprotected sex with Bola but is angry that she becomes pregnant. Though she is younger and comparatively

naïve, the older and more streetwise Laja insists that she should have 'protected' herself from becoming pregnant. Mr Junaid, Bola's father, though well educated, still shouts down his wife, expecting her to be quiet while he speaks. Earlier, we see Mother's friend, Mrs Coker, abandoning her because she is afraid her husband would be unhappy with her association with a woman packing out of her husband's house. These women's voices become silenced because of their gender. Father, for example, wants Mother silenced for her condemnation of his philandering.

Matriarchy

On her part, Mother does not consider her children's welfare in her decision to leave their home. Though she tolerates Father's bigamy until physical violence cannot allow her to continue, her financial independence makes her and the children suffer. When Mother tells the children to refer to their father as 'The Adulterer,' they have no voice or choice other than obeying her. However, though she rules her children with an iron hand, she becomes voiceless on meeting the affluent Madam Naked Neck, whose son impregnates Toke, her daughter. The woman makes the police arrest and detain Ola, Toke's brother, for confronting her boyfriend. Madam Naked Neck also insists that Toke have an abortion. Mother cannot do or say anything but hand Madam Naked Neck over to divine judgement.

Socio-economic status

No one raises a voice to challenge Alhaji Sule, a paedophile and a bully, because he is wealthy, and the street is named after him. Children keep flocking to his house because he is the only one who allows them to watch television in his house while he abuses them. Uncle Dele thinks Laja cannot do the type of work he does (runs a brothel) because Laja is better educated than him but insists that the prostitutes he

supervises must adhere to whatever he tells them if they do not want to be evicted. The tenants at 5 Redemption Street, where Laja lives in Lagos, cower whenever the landlord visits. He tells them what to do and ejects non-compliant tenants at will. Status thus makes the voice of the affluent louder while silencing the less privileged. All these characters' voices become subalternised because of their conditions or one weakness or another in power relations.

In England, Laja is removed from the wards and made to do general cleaning at the hospital where he works for talking back at the ward Sister.

The Sister first fixed her gaze on Laja, then her face turned from her right to the left, her mouth opened. No one on the ward, not even the brashest among her nurses, had ever spoken to her in such a manner. They all feared her (*PoF*, p. 216).

His removal from the ward shows the silencing of alternate voices by the higher placed and influential. The unheard and subdued voices become dominated by fear to express themselves or raise a voice against any unfairness they suffer. They become visible ghosts, seen but not heard.

Lack of 'right' mode of expression

Silencing is also naturally imposed through the migrant or foreigner's inability to use their 'tongue' like the native speaker without sounding foreign and incomprehensible. Laja, in his conversation with Gani, explains that having a voice is about the proper use of language, accent, and intonation (*PoF*, p. 287). Not having these is limiting and silencing. Claiming that his inability to get a decent job was due to his accent, Laja tells Gani:

Ha! Discrimination dey everywhere sha. For here, I don learn sey: 'the line is bad, I can't hear you properly,' mean say your accent na rubbish. Wen dem

say: 'Sorry, I'm deaf, could you speak louder and slowly,' na polite British way to say meaning 'speak English like an Englishman if you must' (*PoF*, p. 238).

When Gani tells him that even black South Africans label other Africans *querequere* because of how they speak, Laja understands but feigns ignorance.

The problem of silencing pervades migrant writings. Even migrant characters who have gained their voices through having a settled status in the United Kingdom, for example, still lack the confidence to 'speak' and assert themselves. They exhibit what Obinze, in *Americanah*, describes as the 'exaggerated gratitude that came with immigrant insecurity' (*Am.*, 2013, p.119). Obinze is worried about his predicament on the train to Essex reading a newspaper story with the headline: *Speak English at Home: Blunkett tells immigrants* (*Am.*, 2013, p. 258). Thus, speaking English becomes not just what has to be done at the physical location of home but also a metaphor for those who want home and homeliness in England.

Aunty Uju tells Ifemelu not to speak her language, Igbo, to her son Dike (*Am.*, p., 108). Though raised in America, his identity confusion makes Dike attempt suicide (*Am.*, p. 380). Also, Halima, the hairdresser, laments the beating of her son for not having the right accent:

When I come here with my son they beat him in school because of African accent. In Newark. If you see my son face? Purple like onion. They beat, beat, beat him. Black boys beat him like this. Now accent go and no problem (*Am.*, 2013, p., 187).

Beating the African accent out of the boy is metaphorically silencing his African voice and identity. Dike's attempted suicide and black boys beating up Halima's son underline the fact that the problem of finding and being comfortable at home and

maintaining an identity is complex and beyond a white-black dichotomy. However, for a character like Nicholas, having gone through a traumatic experience before securing his papers, he is insistent on his children having an acceptable verbal identity.

He spoke to them only in English, careful English, as though he thought that the Igbo he shared with their mother would infect them, perhaps make them lose their precious British accents (*Am.*, 2013, p., 239).

He is not worried if Igbo, his home language of identity, is lost forever.

Darren Chetty illustrates this identity confusion with his experience as a children's teacher in his contribution to *The Good Immigrant*. The biographical short story, 'You Can't Say That! Stories Have to Be About White People,' tells how black children refuse to write stories with characters from their ethnic background because they believe stories are about 'white people.' The title of his essay, 'You Can't Say That! Stories Have to Be About White People,' being actual words a boy from African background reportedly says to another boy who uses the name of his uncle in a story during their story writing and reading lesson.

Silencing their verbal identity and voice becomes one of the realities that those who leave their homes to live in other societies must accept. However, Ifemelu in *Americanah* becomes fed up with pretending and 'decided to stop faking her American accent,' because:

It took an effort, the twisting of lip, the curling of tongue. If she were in a panic, or terrified, or jerked awake during a fire, she would not remember how to produce those American sounds (*Am.*, 2013, p. 173).

She regains her ‘freedom’ of being able to speak naturally in her original ‘tongue,’ or accent after this.

However, silencing may arise through the individuals’ natural characteristics, actions, or reactions. Laja, who should carry the narrative in *Pounds of Flesh* as the lead character, remains passive and does not seem to have real opinions of his own about significant issues for a long time. This is because he is naturally passive. Uncanny experiences of his early life have emotionally damaged him. Towards the end, he becomes more reflective and vocal as he becomes toughened by socio-economic challenges. While under psychological pain and pressure of being deported to Nigeria, he gains his voice and speaks for other deportees on the plane.

We are not going anywhere. If you can’t take us home, leave us here,” he heard himself say. Before he could finish, a babel of voices joined in support. “Yes. Take us home! Take us home! Or leave us here (*PoF*, p. 311).

Here, Laja's voice becomes a unifying identity for the people who share his plight and identity as African migrants being deported by the British Home Office.

Labelling

Labelling, as the voice of the other, is used to derogate, limit, and deny the target their voice. In *Pounds of Flesh*, characters suffer labelling because of their difference and categorisation in individual or group’s perceptions. Tazreena Sajjad (2018, p., 45) observes that one of the reasons for labelling is to 'simultaneously impose boundaries and define categories.' These, she says, have political and bureaucratic implications and serve to perpetuate the European Self and the non-European Other dichotomies. She further categorises people and places through terms as ‘civilised’, ‘uncivilised’, ‘western’, ‘Third World’ are neither objective nor innocent, but are

designed to institutionalise asymmetrical social capacities” (p. 46). Most migrants are, of course, from places with negative categorisations. Labelling cuts across gender, status, and race in migrant texts like *Pounds of Flesh*, *Americanah*, and *The Good Immigrant*; it leads to feelings of inferiority which kill creativity, limit potentials, and create an atmosphere of uncertainty and fear.

When Jermaine, who is from the Caribbean, and a black person himself, says: “You put too little water. Add more water, man. It's squash. Don't you take this type of drink in Africa?” (*PoF*, p. 208), Laja becomes angry because he views the comment as derogatory. He lodges a complaint against Jermaine to the hospital management. Also, when Mr Broston says that Africa has no technological invention (*PoF*, p. 211), Laja does not just think of him as an older man with dementia, but as someone challenging and despising his roots and identity. Laja becomes hypersensitive to others' voice - what they say to him and about him - because of historical and racial labelling.

Unfortunately, categorisation is commonplace even among migrants too. According to Ahmed, ‘other migrants are already known as not known; who are already assigned a place as strangers before the identifications can take place,’ (1999, p. 334). Thus, besides migrant being the foreign other who believe local people discriminate against them in their new homes, there is also discrimination and class stratification. Laja stops going to church because of what he sees as a silent class war between the settled, ‘papered’ and ‘non-papered’ or unsettled congregants. He tells Riba:

A class war between those with papers and those who do not have.”

“You are relatively new in the place. How d’you ...”

“Anyone can see it. The nurses, doctors, and a few others in that class behave settled after service. They sip tea, chat, and exchange banter with one

another. The others, who have no papers, are always in a hurry. They slip through the doors with the end of Grace, grinning at best, to escape meeting the others ... (*PoF*, p. 234).

Laja is appalled that a part of the congregation sees their new identity as a power to use over others. This shows that there is unfamiliarity in the church where there is supposed to be familiarity of faith and brotherhood. Secondly, even the privileged congregants have not found the satisfaction of homeliness despite their statuses. They still suffer from insecurity and need the assurance that they are different and better than the others. Unhomeliness thus appears as part and parcel of the spiritual home where people expect to find homeliness.

Furthermore, for Laja's friend, Gani, racial stereotyping is commonplace and expected between races. He cannot understand the discrimination and derogatory name-calling happening between Africans on African soil in South Africa. He tells Laja:

Which home? E dey worse for here. Na trouble tragedy. You dey home but you no dey home where fellow black Africans de tell you say make you go back to your country."

"Really? For South Africa?" Laja said, feigning ignorance.

"Yes o. Dem they call us *querequere*, say we de talk like bird and make we commot for dem country" (*PoF*, p. 238).

Gani's observation shows that difference and otherness are beyond place, race, and colour.

The Sudanese asylum seekers who are to be settled in Colchester are labelled terrorists and 'migraine' by the English Defence League, shouting that "*Migrants are migraine, send them home; migrants are migraine, send them home*" (*PoF*, p. 284).

As Laja finds himself stuck between expectations from back home and the reality on the ground in England, he is troubled. He regrets and cries:

As he ruminated on such occasions, something would move from his chest to his throat, then to his nose, and come out of his eyes as tears. It often happened when he was alone. If he heard any movement, he'd quickly wipe his face dry. After some time, he started enjoying the feeling which the crying gave him. It made him feel light and gave him solace (*PoF*, p. 216).

Dinesh Bhugra and Oyedeji Ayorinde say depression is prevalent among migrants. They claim this may be because of 'political and economic factors,' 'helplessness,' 'hopelessness,' and the possibility of 'discrepancy between aspiration and achievement, which can result in poor self-esteem, leading to depression' (2004, pp. 13-17). Thus, the migrant's failure to find home also affects them mentally. Such mental health deterioration does not just make homeliness impossible; it creates a negative image and identity.

In a similar vein, in Nigerian literature, the voice of foreign-based migrant writers has overshadowed that of those based at home because of better exposure, education, socio-economic advantage, and more publishing opportunities.

Conclusion

The processes of writing *Pounds of Flesh* have been exciting and challenging. The composition has passed through many stages, twists, and turns like the uncanny's ambiguous nature. The novel and its critical commentary have existed in many versions. I wanted *Pounds of Flesh* to "establish its contact with its reader" and "make its own way in the world" (Mullan, 2006, p., 9). While that is the focus of every writer, mine came with an extra burden of making my writing fit into Western thought processes because of difference in beliefs, worldviews, and conceptualisations to those of the West around the characters and settings in my novel. The import of this is that I had to temper and shape the nuances that exist in the original setting of the Nigerian socio-cultural environment and the worldviews of my characters to what the 'world' can understand. However, *Pounds of Flesh* is neither a historical narrative nor a complete work of fiction. It is a blending of fictional episodes and historical events which have been mostly fictionalised.

Second-language user limitations

As a second language user of the English language, my socio-cultural perspective and points of view are different from those of the English language's original speaker. I have had to go through a rigorous process of generating my creative ideas from my socio-cultural perception, orientation, and worldview, fit them, to some extent, into English thought processes, and then find the suitable syntactic and semantic modes of expressions. Making 'sense' to the reader and the first-language user of the standardised English language requires, to a large extent, shared socio-cultural knowledge, worldview, and experiences. Context and content in *Pounds of*

Flesh would have been more enriched and impactful with shared perceptions and identities.

Besides the limitations and frustrations of foreign conceptualisation and re-conceptualisation, I have had to contextualise my work within known and acceptable Western literary theoretical traditions. My narrative style - voice, diction, and perspective – mainly shaped by my background and the Yoruba novels I read as a child would have been original, richer, and devoid of limitations if I had written in my mother tongue. Finding appropriate and socially meaningful interpretations for some terms, and situating socio-cultural realities from one place into another, have been limiting and frustrating. For example, Laja's fear of seeing Fali earlier in the novel, and his dread of Osegun, the maddest woman in the town, do not carry the same weight in a Western society like England. Unlike in the setting of the novel, Nigeria, the fear of witches is rare in England. Also, the picture of a fearful, dirty, ragged, homeless 'mad' woman which I wanted to paint, is lost to the English reader because mental health patients are well treated and do not roam the streets in their society.

Writing a 'long' story

Before embarking on the PhD, I had experience in writing short stories, poetry, and plays, some of which were published. In 2014, one of my plays, *Ajaka*, was a finalist in the Wole Soyinka Prize for Literature in Africa, and it was published in 2016.

These had given me the confidence that writing a full novel would be easy, but the PhD experience demonstrated that this confidence was misplaced. I found the transition from short stories to novel challenging and exhausting.

Mode of narration

Initially, *Pounds of Flesh* was drafted in the first-person, using the lead character, Laja, as narrator in a linear manner, following his experiences from leaving his father's home to leaving his country as a migrant to South Africa and then to England. However, I later felt that using this style of narration was claustrophobic and tied to a unitary perspective. I wanted the novel to have some form of 'objectivity,' not the first-person narrator's guarded self-consciousness. I thought the continuous use of 'I,' 'me,' 'my' was not working as it did not allow for the distancing of me and my experiences as an African migrant from the story. I thought using an omniscient narrator who is ever-present, has knowledge of all the characters, hears their voices, and accesses their thoughts and feelings would suffice. However, this would involve rewriting almost the entire story, reshaping characterisation, and having to make changes to the thematic structure of the novel. It would be complex and would have consumed much of the limited time I had.

Eventually, I settled for the limited third person, following the lead character, Laja's feelings and point of view as the internal focaliser. Though he is the protagonist, he is not an absolute homodiegetic narrator. The use of the limited third person allows the readers to see what Laja cannot see. This, I believe, gives the story a sense of objectivity as I could still portray him and other characters how I wanted the reader to see them. Thus, I acted not only as a maker and unmaker of characters but also got the characters 'talking to each other.'

The problem of voice and using the most suitable mode in narration is one which I think I have not quite resolved. In future, I would like to experiment with using different focalising character voices and uniting them in a narrative.

Detachment

One other challenge was the inability to completely detach myself from the narrative. In many feedback, my supervisors, who have given invaluable suggestions and guidance in completing *Pounds of Flesh* and this commentary, questioned the tendency to make unfounded, general claims and statements. I believe this was because I did not completely detach myself from the narrative. My experiences and biases as a migrant from an African background and my reading of the works of other third-generation migrant writers must have also influenced my perspective and writing. I wanted to show that the points I raised were prevalent and persistent in the African migrant experiences.

However, working on *Pounds of Flesh* has developed my research objectivity, writing skills and broadened my knowledge, theoretical education, analytical competence, and critical reasoning. More importantly, the novel is relevant to its time as it addresses one of the most critical socio-political development of contemporary times. In telling a human story, it addresses the persistent issues around migration and the challenges which confront migrants, especially the African migrants in the novel. Every day, desperate African migrants leave home without proper documentation, aiming to reach Europe by any means. Some of them die in the desert; many drown in the Mediterranean Sea; the lucky ones who manage to cross are stuck in camps in France, Greece, and other European borders, with many dying in make-shift camps. Unfortunately, many of those who arrive at their destinations do not find the home they had expected. These struggles paint an uncanny picture of the search for home, which remains uncertain and ambiguous for many African migrants.

Besides personal, family, and financial challenges, which necessitated delays and intermissions from my study, I have overcome the nagging fear of failure to complete this PhD. There was a persistent contention between self-belief and the pains and frustrations of negative feedback and slow progress. In these and other instances, the uncanny is not just a theme in *Pounds of Flesh* or a mere analytical commentary tool. It has been a domineering factor in the overall process of writing, rewriting, writing up, and completing this research degree.

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