

SARO-WIWA

A FOREST OF FLOWERS

417

**Ken Saro-Wiwa**

# **A FOREST OF FLOWERS**

"Extremely accomplished collection"

— Graham Hough in *London Review of Books*



**Short Stories**

## *A Forest of Flowers*

Ken Saro-Wiwa was born in Nigeria on 10th October, 1941. He took a scholarship to the prestigious Government College, Umuahia, and studied English at the University of Ibadan. He has taught at Nsukka and Lagos Universities. He served in the Rivers State Cabinet (1968-73) holding among others, the portfolios of Education and Information. He is an established businessman and has travelled extensively, world-wide.

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# **A Forest of Flowers**

*Short Stories*

**Ken Saro-Wiwa**



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*For my children*

*Part One*

## **Home, Sweet Home**

'Progres' spluttered lazily down the long, dirt road which stretched before us like the coated tongue of an ailing man. She bore a precious and varied cargo of rice, salt and beans, cartons of soap and sugar, some yams and cassava; a basket of fowls tied by their legs loudly protesting their temporary imprisonment; a few goats too stunned to bleat; and men and women pressed together on the wooden benches in the body of the lorry like fish hung on a string to dry. I sat in the front seat beside the youthful driver who wore his cap facing backwards.

*the world nearly*  
— 'Progres' was Dukana's pride, its only fast link with the modern world of the brick town where ships berthed and foreign goods were bought and sold. It made the journey daily and was much valued by all. It was proud witness to the progressive and co-operative, modern spirit of Dukana. In spite of the ominous warning on its tailboard, 'Look B4 you put head', I was happy it was available; but for it, the journey to Dukana would be intolerable. I would have had to ride pillion on a bicycle for some distance and then walk to Dukana.

The arduous journey to Dukana was not one to which I normally looked forward. I had to do it once a year when I returned home from college for my annual holiday with my mother. What made the bumpy, dirty ride worthwhile was the thought that at the end of it, there would be Mama, smiling and happy to see me, embracing and hugging me and walking me home by the hand. I always looked forward too to seeing my childhood friend Sira, who, though our paths had diverged,

was still my best friend. We had attended school together and we loved each other, even as sisters. Like most Dukana girls, her education had been terminated abruptly; she now had four children and was again pregnant when last I had seen her. Sira was always the one who regaled me with tales of the buffoonery of Dukana's wags, Duzia and Bom. And she was full of the latest town gossip. I had, as usual, bought some sweets for her children.

On this particular day, I had reason to be more excited than usual about returning home. I had concluded my studies at long last, and I was returning home to teach in Dukana's only school, St Dominic's, my alma mater. I cherished the idea that I was going to give back something to my home and I was glad that I was going to live in Dukana and be part of the community. For Dukana is home, and as everyone will proudly tell you in these parts, 'home is home'. This cryptic saying means that it is far better than all those places you have visited or read about. That the dirt in which it wallows comfortably is to be preferred to the paved streets of the best cities of the world. And its mud houses greater and more beautiful than the palaces of kings and queens of other lands. And how could anyone disagree? For to disagree was to be disloyal to communal wisdom and to be disloyal to that wisdom so carefully distilled through the ages was arrogance. And arrogance is a deadly sin in Dukana. Therefore Mama had advised me often to get to understand Dukana, to know all the men and women, the rich and the poor, the strong and the weak, the juju priests and the christian evangelists, the wicked and the kind, the very genii of the town, because it was only in this way that I would know what to do, what to say, when to say it and to whom, and thus be saved from the sin of arrogance. Mama's counsel was law, the more demanding of obedience because it was given in a soft, kind, reasonable way against which it was impossible to argue.

Of course I knew Dukana as well as any young girl who had been born there might be expected to know it. But as I grew older and travelled, its delights had diminished in my eyes and comparison had dimmed its supposed qualities. Some, taking a cursory look at it, would have considered Dukana a clearing in

the tropical rain forest peopled by three or four thousand men, women and children living in rickety mud huts and making a miserable living from small farmlands in the forest or from fishing in the steamy creeks around the village. Some such, not being of Dukana origin, would hold that the absence of a health clinic, of a good school, of pipe-borne water, of electricity, was a blight on the town, and would think it primeval. Such ill-informed, malicious people might look at its emaciated, illiterate population and assert that there was malnutrition, that disease was rampant, that life for its inhabitants was brutish and short. And they would dismiss it as doomed in a modern world where man was headed for space and science had transformed man's ability to control his environment.

No one worthy of his or her name and who owned any allegiance by birth to Dukana could be expected to agree with such a viewpoint. And I, for one, could not agree. The Chief of Dukana, we all knew, lived in a palace. The occasional letter from the District Administrator was addressed to the Palace. Our elders sat in a Council of Chiefs handing out justice according to pristine and unwritten laws. And if anyone dared suggest that Dukana was not a kingdom equal to any other on earth, we poured scorn and contempt on him. Had not Dukana fought and won wars against neighbouring kingdoms? Had she not preserved her independence from time immemorial? And did the people need anyone to feed them? Was there not peace? And did not people go about their daily chores in tranquillity? And if anyone thought Dukana was not progressive, what about the school they had established which had been duly approved by Government to present pupils for the elementary six certificate? And what of their lorry 'Progres' which was the only vehicular transport serving Dukana and her neighbours? And for water there was Maagum, a narrow stream, full of vegetation, flowing lazily between the stems and roots of giant trees. It came fully alive in the rainy season. To ensure that she continued to flow in the dry season, Dukana had deified her, finding in her lean thin watery harvest, the breasts of a goddess whom the sacrifice of a chick would pacify. If she did not respond charitably one year, the next year would be better. And so on and so forth.

Such were the thoughts which crossed my mind as 'Progres' gathered speed and careered dangerously towards Dukana. Its driver was a 'son of the soil', that is to say, his umbilical cord was buried in Dukana. He wished everyone to know the fact. 'Don't talk when a freeborn is talking,' he would gruffly shout at the conductor. I could see that he wanted to impress me. He yelled at his brakes, he exhorted 'Progres' to move like a lady, a fine lady, an educated lady. He cursed the goats and chicken which crossed the road leisurely, oblivious of the power of 'Progres' and himself to inflict instant pain and death. And every village on the road to Dukana at which he was forced to stop so that passengers could disembark and embark, was described as 'this bush town'. I must have exasperated him by my silence and studied indifference to his antics. And he took it out on me by pressing harder on the accelerator. And when the passengers at the back of the lorry complained and wailed aloud for caution and care, he drove even more furiously, whistling noisily the while, careless of our limbs and lives.

We drove past sleepy little villages hacked out of the forest, fondly embracing the earth and foliage. We drove past farms planted with a mixture of yams, cassava, maize, pepper and melon, mostly stunted and crying for fertilizers. We went swiftly past men riding rickety bicycles and women with large bundles of firewood or huge white basins on their heads and babies tied to their backs with dirty rags. Once in a while, a building of modern construction, properly painted and maintained, would peep out of the bush, a reminder of other possibilities. Now and again we would drive past a gas flare reminding us that this was oil-bearing country and that from the bowels of this land came the much-sought-after liquid which fuelled the wheels of modern civilisation.

I felt then that excruciating pain which knowledge confers on those who can discern the gulf which divides what is and what could be. And my mind drifted to the men and women of Dukana acting out their lives against a backdrop of great forces they would never understand. I thought at length about them, the men and women whom I knew were awaiting my return because they were my relatives – aunts, uncles, cousins, my kin. And I felt for them.

I must have dozed off because when I opened my eyes, 'Progres' had screeched to a stop. We were in the Dukana town square, an opening in the middle of the town where the motorable road abruptly stopped. On all sides of the opening were mud houses, of a square construction covered by raffia palms. Now and again, in the confusion of houses was the odd mud house covered with rusty corrugated iron sheets and, much more rarely, a brick house, unplastered and unpainted, its windows boarded with planks or old newspapers turned dull yellow. For you must understand that building a brick building in Dukana is the task of a life-time. When its proud owner finds some loose change he buys a bag of cement, makes bricks and adds them to the existing structure. In this slow, laborious way, the blockwork might be completed over five or ten years. Then a bundle of corrugated iron sheets is added each year until the entire structure is roofed. The doors and windows might come later or not at all, for after all, is not a house the roof over your head to keep out rain and sun? Once there is a roof, and there are walls, the owner moves in. This might be ten years or more after the commencement of construction. Time does not matter in Dukana.

As I expected, Mama was waiting when 'Progres' arrived. She had been waiting all afternoon. I climbed out of my seat and fell into her arms. We cried for joy. Duzia, the lame one who never misses a scene of this sort, was there, reporter-like, taking in the scene and obliging us with a running commentary.

'That's what I have always said,' says he. 'There is nothing like having a beautiful, educated daughter. That's the way I always hug mine when she returns from a long journey. I say, young woman, I could do with a bit of a warm embrace myself.' Everyone knew that Duzia had no children. They greeted his words with derisive laughter.

'Eh, you good-for-nothing man, Bom, come here and help our young Miss. You don't expect her to carry her box home, do you?'

In the twinkling of an eye, a small, lean man in a tattered and dirty singlet had stepped forward to help bring my portmanteau from the back of the lorry. He made quite a show of carrying the box, pretending that it was very heavy.

'Bom, say, our young Miss has arrived heavily laden with all the good things of this earth. I should think Dukana will soon be floating on a sea of wealth,' Duzia interposed.

'I should think so, Duzia,' Bom said. 'I won't say any more till we get home and I see our young Miss open this box and share her wealth with us.'

'Ah, there you have things wrong. Don't you see her mother hovering hawk-like around her? You think she'll allow anyone to touch a pin of her daughter's? You don't know that woman.'

'Go to, Duzia,' Mama said. 'You know a lot more about me than I know about myself. I wonder what you'd do if you could walk upright like the rest of us.'

'I shouldn't be here with you, then. I'd just take your luscious daughter away to the end of the world.'

We all laughed. We were already on our way home, Mama and I. Bom carried my portmanteau on his head in front of us.

By the time we got home, just a few hundred yards away, a small crowd had already gathered in Mama's sitting room. They came in the usual assortment of rags: gowns picked up from the stalls of second-hand clothes traders, singlets bearing the words 'Oxford University', mildewed blouses. Some women wore shirts that were meant for men; one of them was in a printed cotton nightgown that had faded beyond recognition. The men tied loin cloths round their waists; some had neither shirt nor singlet. They kept up a stream of conversation, chattering excitedly and laughing. They either stared at me, or politely bade me welcome. There was pride in their eyes, I think. Pride that I had gone out to the world to acquire the new knowledge, new treasures; and that I had returned to plant some new seeds in the Dukana earth. It was Duzia who put it most succinctly when he finally crawled up to us and ordered me out of my seat, so he could sit down.

'Daughter of mine,' says he, 'you don't know what your arrival means to us. We are poor and we are ignorant, but we know a good thing when we see it, even though it is beyond our reach. You're going to change the life of the women in Dukana. But whatever you do, don't teach them to disobey their husbands. I'm not going to spend the rest of my life judging cases of wife-beating.'

I laughed.

'Ah, so you laugh. And laugh you may. The advice I give is good and it's free. I say I hate all wife-beaters and I hate beaten wives. I won't touch them with the smallest of my flabby toes.'

The crowd giggled.

'What I want to know is, when is Miss going to open her box? I could do with a few of those goodies from the township,' Bom said.

'Go then, you good-for-nothing fellow,' said Duzia. 'You should be giving her gifts, and here you are begging for dogs' droppings for your wide nostrils. I say, woman, give us a pinch of snuff.' This latter to my mother.

Mama had already prepared for this contingency. She opened the door to her room and after rummaging in there for a while, returned with a bottle of gin and a snuff box. The snuff box passed from hand to hand and was soon emptied. The house was filled with the noise of sneezes and nose-blowing with mucus generously spread on the floor followed by the hard rubbing of bare feet on the screed floor. Then the tiny glass passed from hand to hand, the hard liquor lubricating the innards of the men and women.

And soon the men and women turned to song and dance. They composed extempore, praying to the gods that there be happiness, that they send their blessings so that a new day might dawn in Dukana. And they prayed the gods of Dukana that they bid the waves of the mighty ocean be still so we could cross the seas together to the realms of peace beyond. And as they sang, they danced their prayers, their wishes and their hopes. In the twirling and twisting of waists and shoulders, in the rhythmic beating of the simple drums, I heard the call of nativity and I saw what united me with them inextricably, a bond which neither education nor distance nor time could destroy. And I leapt to my feet and joined them in their expression of joy.

It did not last long, that spontaneous outburst of joy. Gradually, the song died down, the music ceased and the room thinned out. Night had begun to fall. Dukana slunk off noiselessly, the surrounding darkness swallowing them as they disappeared from Mama's house.

Left alone, Mama and I had dinner together. It was a simple meal – pounded yam and hot peppery fish broth. I was tired and did not speak much. Mama said how happy she was I had returned and how delightful that Dukana had turned out to give me a fitting welcome.

We had hardly finished our dinner when Waale, Mama's best friend, came in. She was a small emaciated woman with a pointed nose and small, sharp teeth. She came in, almost ghostlike, out of the enveloping darkness into the wan light of the hurricane lamp. I did not recognize her immediately, but when she greeted Mama, I knew the voice could only be hers. I sprang to my feet and fell into her outstretched arms. I could feel her arms tighten around me as a sob escaped her involuntarily. And when she held me gently away, the better to see me against the light, I noticed how much she had aged. Her face was wrinkled and grizzled and there were many grey spirals in her hair.

'Ah, my beauty, my lovely girl, the song in my heart, the joy of my life, you are back. How you've grown. The baby of yesterday is today's elegant woman,' said she half to me and half to Mama.

'It's incredible,' Mama said with a hint of pride.

'She's going to make a grandmother of you sooner than you realize.'

'The sooner the better. I've waited long enough as it is. I should love to hold a grandson in my arms before I die.'

'Don't think of death. Life is what matters. Your life. When you see her, you should pray for long life.'

'Amen,' Mama said.

My friend, Sira, was Waale's only daughter. As I said, we had grown up together, and had attended school together. She had not been able to complete her elementary schooling, although she was a brilliant girl. It was said that her mother could not pay her fees. But that was only an excuse. Her parents had wanted her to have children, to procreate so that the family would not die off. And she had had to obey them. She had not married and her four children were by four different men. I suspected her fifth pregnancy was by a fifth man.

I had not seen her all evening and I wondered what the

matter was. It was most unlike her to be absent on the day of my arrival in town. I asked her mother after her.

Her face fell immediately. 'She's travelled,' she said evasively.

'Where to?' I asked.

'I don't actually know.'

'When is she coming back?'

'I'm not very sure.'

Mama kept looking hard at me. I was at a complete loss as to the meaning of Waale's evasiveness and Mama's evident distress at my questions. I decided against asking further questions. Mama offered her friend some supper. She sat down to it with a 'There, there, that's a darling. What would I do without you?'

I watched her as she dipped her fingers into the food and took the morsels into her mouth. She did not eat much, and took her leave as soon as she had finished, slinking into the night like a cat.

When she was gone I asked Mama about Sira. I could see that Mama did not want to answer.

'Is she dead?' I asked, anxious.

'No, she's not dead.'

'Is she ill?'

'No, she's not ill.'

'Then what's the matter?'

'The questions you do ask! You must be tired after your long journey. Why don't you go to bed? I've laid your bed already in the spare room and your box is in there.'

'I won't go until you tell me what's happened to my friend.'

Mama saw I was determined to know; then she said, enjoining me to secrecy. 'Well, you remember her last pregnancy? She had twins. She could not stay in the town anymore. She went away across the river.'

I looked at Mama very closely. She averted her eyes from mine.

'She's not dead?' I inquired.

'Oh no, she's not dead.'

'And the twins?'

'I believe they died. And don't ask me any more questions.'

The words I wanted to say came flooding into my lips, but

died there. I got up and walked heavily to my room and lay down. For a while I could not sleep and lay staring into the darkness.

And out of the bowels of the night came the rhythm of drums in the distance, the hooting of owls, the swooping and beeping of bats, the burping of toads, the humming of night birds and the words of a mournful song welcoming me to the embrace of the spirits of my home, my sweet home.

## 2

## The Inspector Calls

A plague is a vexation and a horror when it comes suddenly and unannounced to destroy the people. This is what scares Dukana of plagues. The lack of information. Because you do not know how to prepare for it, you do not know how to face up to it, you do not know what gods to appeal to, you do not know how to appease the demon and free the town of pestilence.

This was precisely what happened the last time we were struck by influenza. So Mama says. People woke up one morning and found themselves unable to move from place to place as though a heavy weight had been placed on their feet; they were unable to eat because they lacked the appetite and their tongues were full of blisters. No one seemed to have been free of the affliction and try as much as they would, even the most perspicacious citizens of Dukana could not divine the source, human or otherwise, of the terror.

Birabee the Chief had it, as did Barika the Pastor, as did Yorgu the juju priestess, as did Duzia the lame one, Terr Kole the wizened old man, and Duson the one who ground tobacco for all. Maybe the only one whom anyone could remember not having it was Bom. And since the man was a joker, no one could really accuse him of 'poisoning' the town. And oh, did men and women die? There was no stopping the deadly disease as it plucked whom it liked, morning, noon and night.

It was the fearlessness of some sons of Dukana which finally stopped everyone from dying. A few of them went across the river to Ko to consult the oracle and before anyone knew

anything, a few goats had been slaughtered at the edge of the forest, a few headless chickens had been left on each road and path leading to Dukana and that was that. When the medical team later arrived and began to plant needles into everyone's posterior, the people knew that the problem was over. It was not the needles surely, that made the difference. The needles, in any case, would not have arrived if sacrifice had not been offered to the gods. It was the sacrifice which invited the needles. And it was the sacrifice which made the needles work. And so ended the pernicious plague which had brought Dukana to its knees. After some time people began to eat again, to walk to the streams and the farms and to compare notes.

In the end, no one could argue that Dukana did not know how to take care of itself. It had been there since anyone could remember; that was to say about seventy years, since the oldest woman was seventy-five years and she might be credited with remembering things from the age of five. Yes, Dukana was as old as remembered time – recorded time being a recent acquisition from beyond the river – and perfectly capable, I repeat, of minding its own. Which was the clear reason, as everyone knew, for the indestructibility of the town. Every town had its genii; Dukana's genii were for ever on the alert.

When therefore another plague arrived in the form of a circular letter, no one was caught napping. A letter, any letter, was always a mysterious arrival. You returned from your farm, and there it was on your front room table. Someone had dropped it in your absence. You were having a bath and your little girl ran up to tell you that a letter was waiting for you and when you arrived dripping with water, there it was. You never knew who brought it. And more often than not, at least in Dukana, it brought bad news.

The last one did, for certain.

The circular letter stated that the Sanitary Inspector would be coming to Dukana within the fortnight and from the way people spoke, it was as though another plague was due, a plague worse even than the influenza epidemic. The only difference, and it was real, was that whereas the influenza plague had come unannounced and took some time to avert,

this plague was definitely avoidable, and the wise men of Dukana were going to do everything to avert it.

'The Inspector is coming.' 'The Inspector is coming.' 'The Inspector.' The words were on everybody's lips. And so great was the consternation in everyone's eyes that I was forced to ask Mama whom the Inspector was, what he did and why he caused such terror. Mama said he was a local man from another village who was employed by government to ensure that every village was kept neat and tidy. A great idea, I thought. Dukana, with overgrown grass everywhere, food crops among the houses, excrement from dogs and children liberally spread on the footpaths, and the only road leading into the town suffering from gross neglect, required the services of the Inspector.

And indeed this should have been the case if Dukana had not been Dukana.

Or if there had not been in town such worldly-wise men as Duzia and Bom, Terr Kole and Chief Birabee, Zaza and Ada and a host of others who were determined to keep Dukana free and independent of government interference. These men, had, quite independently of each other, weighed the matter carefully, consulted the wisdom of the ages and come to the conclusion that the Sanitary Inspector was an unnecessary intrusion on the privacy of the town, and as such had to be ejected before he, or his principals, could do the town harm, any harm whatsoever.

'What I simply cannot understand,' said Duzia, 'is who told them that Dukana is not neat and tidy?'

'Neat and tidy, neat and tidy,' said Bom, 'who asked them to worry about us?'

'Haven't we paid all our taxes? Why do they bother us with these visitations?' asked Terr Kole.

'You would think the town was stinking with the putrefaction of the dead, or the smell of excrement, the way they are always nitpicking about sanitary conditions,' said Zaza.

'I'm sure it's all born of jealousy. All the surrounding villages have always been envious of the success of this town. From time immemorial,' said Chief Birabee.

The signs of the success of Dukana were all around. In the



nine or ten churches in which the sons and daughters of Dukana prayed regularly; in the single primary school with its dusty floor, broken windows and rusty, leaking roof; in the erratic journeys of 'Progres' the co-operative financial investment of the leading lights of Dukana; in the uncompleted, unpainted brick houses which here and there dotted the environment of Dukana. These were enough to engineer hatred, jealousy, fear, envy and fantasy. And the distinguished citizenry of Dukana knew it. Therefore did they, at the first sign of a threat against their accustomed way of life, unite to fight.

The plan laid out for avoiding the plague this time was bold, imaginative, and original to Dukana. Some might say that other towns and villages had conceived of, and implemented, similar plans in the past. But that could be attributed to their envy, their refusal to concede to Dukana its place among the inventors of the world. However, the fact stood that in the reckoning of the lights of Dukana, the plan as proposed could not but succeed. They had deliberated over it at a secret meeting. Just one meeting. Not more. Because the best things in life are simple and do not require extraordinary debate or complicated argument.

The meetings of the lights of Dukana were something instructional. There was always Chief Birabee whose grandfathers had founded the town. He was closest to the ancestors and it was through him that the latter spoke to the living. His were words of wisdom and when he ruled, none dared to dissent. Around him were lesser mortals, whose daily intercourse with the citizens of Dukana made them indispensable to Chief Birabee. There were eight of them. And they carried upon their scrawny shoulders the burden of responsibility for their inheritance. A meeting could start whenever two or three of them were gathered in the premises of Chief Birabee. These meetings were always scheduled for early in the morning. More often than not, they did not start until the sun had cast its shadows upon the earth. The leading lights of Dukana were not bound by the constraints of time. No. Time did not matter. There were no records kept of meetings; each member could be trusted to remember what the others had said at previous

meetings. Reading and writing were the pastime of the children at Dukana's school. The elders could not indulge in such child's play. Consequently, a lot of time was spent recalling and recapitulating what each and everyone had said on previous occasions. And as might be expected, this led to misunderstandings, disagreements, and outright quarrels. But not on this occasion when the coming plague was on the floor.

And so it came about that in Dukana, every household was required to pay a special levy. The town-crier was about the town at dawn declaring in a loud voice that it had been decreed by the lords of the town that each man should pay a specified sum of money within the week to the chief or his subordinates. The lords of the town did not want to force anyone to pay, but whoever did not would be compelled to obey the law of the land. The town-crier declared that he was only a messenger, no more, no less and he did not have to answer questions or tell anyone why they were being levied.

In ordinary times, a special levy would have caused deep consternation and the grumblers would have gone about spreading discontent with wild rumours of Chief Birabee's intention to fleece the townsfolk and line his pocket. On this special occasion, everyone was in agreement. The levy had to be paid and quickly too.

'Have you paid up?' Bom asked of Duzia.

'How do I pay up when I earn nothing? Did you ever see a lame man who was rich?' Duzia replied.

'It is either your money or the plague. Which do you prefer?'

'I don't trust that Chief Birabee fellow. What's he going to use all that money for?' asked Duzia.

'How do I know? I expect he'll make some sacrifice to stop the Inspector from coming into Dukana at all,' Bom replied.

'Or restore the moat of Dukana so the unsuspecting fool falls into it when he arrives on his famous motor-cycle,' Duzia said. 'I should like to see the man gulp down a few mouthfuls of ditchwater. That will keep him away from places where he's not wanted.'

'Eh, Bom, you're beginning to speak like a wise man or a poet or both. Have you paid up to Chief Birabee?'

'Man, if I had money, I'd find two meals a day and a pinch of

snuff to go with each meal. I haven't eaten, I haven't bought myself a shirt for two years, I haven't paid my taxes for five, how do I pay a levy?"

"Your money or the plague. Which do you want?"

"I've got an idea. I'll hand over the mat on which I sleep to Chief. I'm sure he'll accept it in lieu of payment."

Chief Birabee did. As he accepted yams, rabbits, pepper, tomatoes, pears, dried fish and cassava in lieu of money. Dukana was a great town. Nobody could accuse its noble citizens of hoarding money. They held the commodity in healthy disdain and the commodity itself finding no comfortable home among them, naturally fled. So it was that Chief Birabee fed rather well the week of the levy. For pears, tomatoes, dried fish all have the sad habit of deteriorating in the clammy air of Dukana. Not the same could be said of the coins and paper money of which Chief Birabee was also custodian. But then, the only use of money is to spend it and Birabee did put what he had levied to that only use. So as the days passed by, the money mysteriously escaped as did the yams and other food.

In fairness to the Chief, he did let his ancestors partake of the feast: in tiny morsels of food thrown into the yard at mealtimes, in portions of gin splashed liberally onto the earth before anyone drank. Nor did he forget the dreaded visitation of the Sanitary Inspector. Indeed, as he himself confessed, it was in the hope of gaining their assistance in averting the evils of the visit that he fed the ancestors so liberally. They had told him through the usual channels of communication that all would be well. This assurance he had passed on to the leading lights of Dukana when they dropped by for a drink or a chat.

Some clever fool had asked how much money the levy had yielded. What daring! Chief Birabee had put the blackguard in his rightful place by asking him exactly how much he thought should have been collected. The fool had not been able to say, and that had been that. The elders ate and drank and Dukana continued to luxuriate in its accustomed inertia. There was pride in the knowledge that by their energy and ingenuity whatever calamity threatened had been obviated.

So the good people of Dukana returned to their occupations

fortified in the knowledge that all was well.

On the day appointed in the circular letter, you would not have thought that anything extraordinary was going to happen. That is if you were not an old Dukana hand. But for us, there was electricity in the air. In the knowing glances we cast at each other, in the brisk walk of the women going to farm, in the hurried pace of the men with their paddles and matchetes heading for their canoes moored to the mangrove roots of the simmering swamps. Cautious as ever, Dukana had decided to empty itself of its distinguished citizens, just in case. For, you never know. The Sanitary Inspector might decide to do something funny. Arrive with the local police – the kotuma – to make one or two arrests just to appease his superiors. Or decide to supervise personally some manual labour. He was as unpredictable as they come, and it was better to be out of sight, his sight, that particular day.

Arrive the Inspector did. And it was left to Duzia and Bom to tell the story of the event long after it had happened. And since it was handed down by word of mouth and passed round times without number, and since Duzia himself was apt to add whatever embellishments each occasion and each particular audience demanded, the visit rapidly passed into folklore and went to emphasize once again the everlasting wisdom of the people of Dukana.

For didn't you know, on that occasion when the Sanitary Inspector himself came riding into town on his motor cycle, raising a storm of dust in his wake, he was confronted by the dollops of faeces of children, goats and dogs and by the bushes growing luxuriantly between the houses and along the footpaths. And the gods of the town decreed that the Sanitary Inspector should not see these blemishes which he was duty-bound to obliterate. And he found no one in the town lest he be tempted to ask any citizen where he and his children defecated. The spirits took over his motor-cycle and led him to the house of the Chief where Birabee and his assembled assistants fed him with the good things of life and gave him a good, fat envelope containing you know what, and made sure he drank alcohol to his heart's delight, and then they led him out again, on the same path by which he had come. He took away with him, in the dust

clouds following upon his now heavily-laden motor-cycle, all those ill winds which, had they remained behind, would surely have plagued Dukana.

And once again, Dukana returned to its accustomed peace, somnolence, tranquility, dirt and happiness.

### 3 The Overhaul

Daniel Dekor woke with a shout, beads of perspiration trailing his face. He wiped the sweat off with the back of his hand and lay back in bed, relieved to think it was only a dream, and yet apprehensive. He feared dreams because he believed in them. He abhorred bad dreams because they meant evil; and he hoped no evil would befall him on that particular day.

He turned round in his bed and found displayed on his sometime white bedsheet an irregular red patch. Then he saw a second, a third, a fourth and yet a fifth and then some more. Blood blisters! 'Phew', whistled he, and he fell to observing the blood on the sheet more carefully presumably to ascertain that it was really his. Satisfied that it must be, he turned a contemplative, critical gaze on his body. Protuberant spots as big as oranges met his eyes. 'Bedbugs!' The thought flashed through his brain and his eyebrows met in a frown. Bedbugs had been feasting on him all night; satisfied with the night's repast, they had retired into the hard grass mattress to digest what they had had till night should herald another feast. Daniel heaved a tremendous sigh. To his mind, mosquitoes were tolerable. They bit rich and poor alike; to be bitten was to emphasize your link with the rest of humanity. But bedbugs were another matter altogether. They spelt one's poverty; the protruding spots were eloquent of the fact that one slept on a filthy, grass mattress. A grass mattress! The idea pained Daniel enormously.

The sun had now shot its rays into his room. It was a mud hut

with conspicuous cracks in the wall. A cockroach like a large blood patch flattened on the wall. He jumped out of bed and flung his New Testament Bible at it; it flashed into hiding immediately. Daniel went back to bed. In the same instant, a lizard flicked across the wall and came to rest again, the wings of a moth in its small crocodile jaws. 'The bigger preys on the smaller, the powerful on the weak,' thought Daniel, settling more comfortably in his bed.

Beside the bed was a wooden chair on which was placed his life-long companion - a Bible. A hurricane lamp hung from a piece of wire suspended from the roof of the hut. When he woke up each morning, he laid his hands on the Bible and lantern and walked up the small path to the little church three hundred yards away to say morning prayers for the two or three women who cared to report for matin song.

But that morning Daniel thought neither of matin song nor of his flock. He had earlier told them there would be no morning prayers that day. All were to prepare to receive the new Bishop who would be honouring them with a visit.

Catechist Daniel had made hectic preparations for the visit.

He had been looking forward to it because he secretly hoped that it would bring about the overhaul in his fortunes for which he had longed ardently and prayed passionately for many years. It had not yet come, but he believed in the goodness of God, and he felt sure that one day, God's light would shine on him and His blessings would shower on him. Now that a new Bishop was due to visit the area, Daniel felt especially hopeful. His case would be viewed by a fresh mind, and who knew, he might receive a more sympathetic hearing? He hoped for this in spite of the fact that in that country you did not get a thing because you merited it, but because you had someone to speak for you or you belonged to a favoured group. A parishioner only too conscious of this had named his child 'If God na man, some people no for chop.' And the man had wanted his son baptised in this name. Daniel had protested vigorously, but the man had insisted strongly and the catechist had had to yield in the end. And the child was named 'Godnaman' for all time.

One might well feel upset by all that, but then that was the secular life. It could not be the same in the religious, where corrup-

tion would be tantamount to driving God out of His own home. Daniel was sure that would never be. He pinned his faith unalterably to the Message and its benevolent influence. It was as well, for it gave him hope that better days were ahead; and assured him that to endure the present hardship was to enjoy later pleasures. He had endured the past six months during which he had not received his monthly stipend. He had waited month after month and still it had not come. But it had been the same these last twenty-five years.

In his early days in Dukana, the entire village had looked up to Daniel Dekor as the bearer of the torch of enlightenment and as the herald of the new civilisation. His opinions had been avidly sought, his very remarks hailed and his judgement accepted without question. His salary at that time had been paltry, but sufficient for his needs. The villagers often made him generous donations, and he had been able to live in contentment in a world all his own.

But a man does not live on prestige alone. Besides, after twenty-five years, he has a family to look after. And things change. In that country, change came fast. Daniel's school-mates now held important offices in the state and earned many times his own salary which, anyway, came six months late. His very pupils had risen far above him in society. In the village of Dukana itself, his word was no longer law. New influences were seeping into the lives of the villagers. The village lads paraded the roads at night, booming transistor radios hung round their proud necks. Before these signs of prosperity, Daniel felt secretly discontented. If only they would pay his salary regularly and give him a raise so he could cope more competently with his family! After all, a man does not go looking for a new job at forty-five. He did not want much; a little would satisfy him. He turned round in his bed.

It was now broad daylight. He heard the strains of a song in the distance. He sighed; that was another of his problems. There were now nine churches in Dukana. And were they prosperous! His very cousin had established his own church and had won converts too! Each morning and each night, Daniel would hear them singing songs, clapping hands and beating drums. There was something swinging, exciting,

something appealing and moving about their services. They sang and drummed and they danced. They saw visions. They healed the sick, they performed miracles. And the converts paid up, huge sums of money. Their leaders were wealthy. Could it be spiritual? Such gaiety contrasted strongly with the solemnity of Daniel's own services. These new churches were an ever present challenge to Daniel Dekor's spirit and example. He must show that his was the first church in Dukana. He must not bow in the face of adversity. He refused to behave like Pastor Okere who had quit the Pastorate because his flock had been unable to pay his salary. More than once, Daniel had thought of breaking away to form his own church. He had even fashioned a name for the new church – The Holy Spiritual Church of Mount Zion in Israel. He liked the name, and he had turned it over in his mind several times. He would love to own his own church! But just as often, he had given up the idea. He would toil on in the Niger Delta Pastorate. He would work for eventual victory. For, does not God move in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform? Daniel pinned his faith on the new Bishop's visit. He was going to do his very best on this day, the day when the Bishop came visiting.

As the sun rose in all the glory of the dying days of the dry season, Daniel jumped out of bed and chased a cockroach unsuccessfully. The creature ran back into a crack in the wall. He pulled on his khaki trousers and went out of the house. The members of the church had already turned out in huge numbers to clean and decorate the church premises. Even those who had defected to other churches turned out also, proud to have a Bishop visit them. Daniel's own cousin who was a Bishop of the Brotherhood of the Cross and Star also came to help in the preparations. Daniel Dekor worked and sweated; he felt magnificent. The church premises were soon swept clean and were brightly decorated. From time to time he looked at the sky to see if the rains would come and so mar the visit. There were no clouds in the sky. He felt happy.

By three o'clock the crowd along the road had swelled. Pot-bellied, naked children, women with babies dangling from hanging breasts, men with flabby broad feet all milled along the route. They were not all members of St Paul's church; but

the visit of a Bishop was an honour for the village, and they all wanted to return the courtesy paid them. Daniel himself was resplendent in a white suit starched stiffly for the occasion; it hung rigidly on him. Encased within it, he looked like a tortoise in its shell. He felt hot and uncomfortable, but he was happy. His necktie, black and broad as an oar, clung to his neck as though to strangle him. He flicked his neck from time to time. At four o'clock, an hour behind schedule, a lovely Mercedes Benz car drove in amidst a waving of hands and joyful yells.

Daniel Dekor, sweating profusely from excitement and the excessive heat, came forward with the Church Committee to welcome His Lordship.

'Good afternoon, my lord,' said he.

'Good afternoon, Catechist . . . er . . . what's your name now?'

'Daniel Dekor, sir.'

'Ah yes. Daniel. How's the work of God going on here?'

'We do our best your Lordship.'

'I'm happy to hear that.'

'We've been waiting a long time for you, sir.'

'I'm sorry. I was delayed in the last parish which I visited.'

'Would your Lordship like to see some aspects of our work here . . . ?'

'Such as?'

'Your Eminence could examine the school buildings, the church; we need . . .'

'No. I'm afraid there's little time for that today. Some other time perhaps.'

'But . . . but your Lordship, we've prepared a lot for this visit. The people will be . . . er . . . disappointed if you . . . don't . . .' and he faltered.

'We are pressed for time, Daniel. But I have a few words for the Committee of Church Elders.'

Daniel led the way into his hut where the Elders had gathered to meet the Bishop. It had taken on a new look for the occasion. He introduced the Elders who felt honoured as the Bishop took their hands with a smile; then he said a brief prayer. Bishop Okoro then cleared his throat and began in a booming voice loud enough to wake the dead:

'Brothers of Dukana, the news of your good faith has come to my ears. I enjoin you to continue in the ways of the Lord. But let your faith be joined with good works. Be charitable. For the good book says in the epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians: "Though I speak with the tongues of men and angels and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass or tinkling cymbals." Good men, let it not be said of the members of the Church in Dukana that they have become as tinkling cymbals. You must all contribute to the upkeep of the Church. Your Parish has not paid its annual dues for the past three years. Under such circumstances, the work of God cannot continue . . .' And then looking more pointedly at Daniel, he concluded: 'This unhappy situation must be rectified immediately . . . And now the peace of God which passeth all understanding, keep your hearts and minds . . .' Everyone said Amen. They offered him gifts – fish, tins of corned beef, a goat. He thanked them and requested that they send them all into his car. The Elders filed out of Daniel's hut. Daniel seized the moment of their departure to speak to the Bishop.

'Your Lordship.'

His Lordship turned a questioning eye on him. What could this one be wanting, he wondered silently. Then he said aloud:

'What's the matter, my son?'

Daniel cleared his throat.

'Your Lordship, I've been here for twenty-five years.'

'Glory be to God,' replied the heavenly worthy. 'May he give you more years for His work.'

'For twenty-five years, your Lordship, I have weeded the Lord's garden, tended his plants.'

'Rejoice therefore, for it has been a marvellous opportunity.'

'Your Lordship, my salary is meagre.'

'Lay not your stores on earth; for what shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?' A wave of anger flashed through Daniel Dekor's being but he regained control of himself.

'I have a family to care for, your Lordship.'

'Thanks be to God who giveth.'

'Your Lordship, for the past six months I've not received my salary.'

'You are only sharing in the general misfortune of our country. The times are difficult. Your Parish has not paid its dues, remember.'

'Your Lordship, the people are very poor. And our membership decreases day after day. The young men have left for the towns and there are other churches here now . . .'

'That doesn't speak too well for you as the Catechist.'

'What can I do, your Lordship? It's not my fault. It bothers me. And I'm fighting on. If only they'd pay me something, your Lordship . . .'

'My child, you think too much of the material comforts of this life. Remember, his Kingdom is not of this world.'

'Highly paid people in the Church earn their salaries on time, your Lordship,' said Daniel as he cast his eyes momentarily on the glossy car outside which had remained the focus of attention for the villagers.

'Rather impertinent, I should say, Daniel. You are a worker in the Lord's garden. The good book says in the First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians, in the ninth chapter, at the thirteenth verse: 'Do ye not know that they which minister about holy things live of the things of the temple? and they which wait at the altar are partakers with the altar?'

Does the fool mean I should take the church offerings, thought Daniel. And the anger welled up in him again. He quickly suppressed it, it being against his upbringing to be angry.

'Your Lordship, I will resign.'

'Daniel, I enjoin you to do no such thing; consider what impact you have made on Dukana. We expect a higher sense of responsibility from men of your calibre.'

'Most of my colleagues are now important men, living in ease and . . .'

'Look not on them, son. Remember that God is good. Behind a frowning Providence, he hides a smiling face. Recall the wandering of the sons of Israel in the wilderness. Forty years they wandered; then at last they came to the Promised Land. Your salary will be paid, very soon.'

Daniel Dekor, broken and dispirited, found nothing else to say. He shook the hand which His Lordship extended to him limply, and gulped.

The Bishop walked away. 'Another victory for God,' he thought. He had had to speak in this same way to the twenty odd catechists he had met in the course of his tour. 'The church is in a bad way,' he thought. The car started, and the people waved the Bishop a happy farewell.

As he drove off, the goat which had been presented to him let forth a long, loud bleat from the boot of the car. The Bishop sat more comfortably in his seat.

Daniel Dekor stood in the verandah of his hut, his white suit clinging limply to him, the buoyancy of mid-morning having deserted him. As the Bishop's car disappeared in the distance, it thundered and rain drops came down. He remembered to his dismay that he had not rethatched his house for the rainy season. As he stood there, his seventh child came skipping breathlessly in to inform his father that the rainy season had come. He stopped, mouth-agape with surprise when he found moisture in his father's eyes.

'Papa, are you crying?' he asked.

'No, son,' he said, smiling through his tears. For at that moment, the Holy Spirit had descended on him. In a vision, terrible in its beauty, he saw himself, a balding man of fifty, performing great miracles. As Pastor Barika of Dukana's tenth church – the Holy Spiritual Church of Mount Zion in Israel – he moved with power among the people, receiving ample reward both in cash and kind.

Dukana was to sing of him in later years as a great messenger of the Lord.

## 4 A Family Affair

When one morning Dabo, one of Dukana's most successful fishermen, instead of heading for the creeks, suddenly burst out into song, there was consternation in town.

Every man is entitled to his private enjoyment, and anyone who chooses to may entertain his friends. Certain times are apt and proper. Such as when the harvest is over and the hard-working and hardy men of Dukana take time off to enjoy their wealth such as it is, in leisurely and manly pursuits: in song and dance, in chats in the playground, in revels in bedrooms far from the rumour-mongers and gossips. But, when a man of dignity and substance, having arranged his affairs properly, and given orders to his subordinates to meet him early at dawn so they can set out on a trip; when such a man suddenly forgets himself and greets his staff and friends with lewd songs, well, Dukana does not laugh.

That morning, Dukana was not amused. Ripples of worry gradually spread around town and drew everyone to Dabo's house.

It was like Duzia to trivialize matters as soon as he got there. 'I say the man does have a powerful voice. He's been in the wrong profession all along,' laughed he as soon as he found opportunity.

'Cha, cha, you flabby-footed son-of-a-bitch, give your tongue a rest. This is no joking matter,' Terr Kole chastised him.

'Who's joking? I say the man has my type of chest, and I'm not joking,' Duzia replied.

Nor was Dabo joking. Because he soon started dancing and you could not have faulted his nimble feet and the rhythmic swaying of his body.

'I should say this is something different,' muttered Duzia, as the import of the event began to register on his mind.

'Something different, indeed,' replied Terr Kole. 'You do hide your brain among your flailing toes some of the time, I should say.'

'I believe you, Terr Kole,' Duzia said. 'You are certainly right this time.'

'So you should learn to shut your trap some of the time.'

'I'll try to, Terr Kole. If only I had the legs and could dance like our friend there, I'm sure I should talk less.'

'Oh, you're quite incorrigible,' said Terr Kole. And he moved away.

Dabo sang and danced. And then he started removing his clothes, peeling them off his body one by one until he was completely naked. Dabo had gone mad. Plain mad.

The news ran through Dukana like fire in a dry wind, leaving everyone who heard it dumbstruck. And the story was told how members of his family did everything in their power to calm him down, but he would not be controlled. Even after the family had him thoroughly bound hand and foot with ropes, he still sang blissfully.

Such an unmitigated disaster was bound to invoke bright ideas in Dukana. And now they poured forth by the score. Some said he should be taken to a church so they could pray for him and cast out the devil that was tormenting him. Not one of the regular churches where they only prayed to God and sang. But a real church where members saw visions and healed the sick. Others said Oyeoku the powerful juju should be consulted. He was the only one who could restore the man to his normal senses. And for all anyone knew, he might be the one who had brought this visitation on Dabo.

Some, in the sanctuary of their living rooms, said they were not surprised. For a man did not make the wealth which was Dabo's by just working hard. You had to have sold your soul to the devil to earn that much money. It began to be said that Dabo had even murdered a young girl years back and offered

her as a sacrifice to Sarogua, the rain-maker and ancestral spirit of Dukana, so that he could be the richest man in town. And when you sell yourself to the devil what do you expect? Dabo had been a living lie. After making his pact with the forces of darkness, he had turned to the church and no man was a better son of the church. But he was going to be caught some day, wasn't he? The chicken had to return home to roost. Money was a good thing, no doubt, but if in its acquisition you did certain untoward things, why, you had to bear the punishment when it came, as it was sure to do.

So the whispers went, until it became the common talk away from the ears of members of Dabo's family. All the latter heard were words of sympathy, of advice as to where the eminent man could be cured in a matter of days.

The Holy Spiritual Church of Mount Zion was suggested and thence Dabo was taken. After a month, he continued to sing and dance; not all the prayers said and the sacrifice made or the fees paid could cure Dabo.

Then it was said that the Brotherhood of the Cross and Star whose membership extended from Calabar to London and America and God knows where else in the world would be sure to drive away the millions of devils who had conspired to drive Dabo to dance and song. Accordingly, he was taken across the river to the headquarters of the Brotherhood. They poured holy water on him; they anointed him with holy cream; they fed him on holy bread; they manacled him head and foot to the foot of his bamboo bed; they saw visions on his behalf; they prayed for the salvation of his soul. Yet Dabo continued to sing and dance. And when the Holy Spirit ordered that all his earthly goods be sold and the proceeds given to the church because in one of the visions it had appeared that his great wealth was the scourge of the man, the family duly complied. They dug into the grass mattress on his bed; they dug the floor of his bedroom; they dug the soil in his yam barn, and as was suspected, found a bag of money there. They sent all proceeds to the Brotherhood. Still Dabo sang and danced from morning to night. So the family decided that the Brotherhood was not the right place for him.

Now there was in Ko, a town famous for its powers, a man, a



doctor who advertised himself on a painted notice board. He was very famous because even the government had given him a certificate with a long number on it. The notice on the board said so. Those who could read, and there were not very many of them, had said that his number was very long, beginning with several noughts; government must have known of his many abilities otherwise they would not have given him such a tremendous and impressive number. It was said that his notice board proclaimed him to be a doctor who owned a herbal healing home, in which Veedee could be cured; madness could be cured; infertility could be cured. This native doctor's potions were the mortal enemy of witchcraft and necromancy, of snake and dog bites, of bee and scorpion stings. In short, he was the one to whom all could turn when everything else in heaven and earth had failed.

Dabo's family heard of the doctor in Ko rather late in the day. But they went to him as soon as they heard of him and placed Dabo in his powerful hands. And he beat Dabo night and day with a big leather belt, leaving wicked marks on the man's back and bottom. The devil had to be beaten out of the madman. It was the only way of curing madness. And now instead of singing and dancing, Dabo let out frightful and horrendous howls as of a beast in pain. With a shaven head, cicatrices around his wrists and ankles and now deep lacerations on his back, Dabo was a terrible sight. One day, he bolted from the doctor's famed herbal healing home and found his way, nobody knows how, back to Dukana. And to his empty house.

He no longer danced and sang. He went around in the nude begging for food and water. Once each day, precisely at noon, he would yell out the words 'You are all liars, all.' He was the town's only beggar. And he was a shame to his family. A walking scandal. They discussed him often in subdued tones far from the prying eyes, the sniffing noses and the flapping ears of the lights of Dukana. And came to an unspoken and menacing agreement; 'One day shall be one day.'

As the days passed into months and months grew into years, Dabo became a familiar sight in Dukana. Strange to say, he would sometimes recognize a relation or an old friend and greet them normally as in the old days. Such occasions, though

rare, went to show that there was somewhere in his madness, a lucidity which could break through his brain as the sun sometimes breaks through rain-bearing clouds.

In Dukana, there is a proverb which states that it's an unfortunate man who feels like easing himself on a rainy day. For, among us, the bush does not only hold the terrors and beauties of nature; it has been designated a toilet. A rainy day is a terrible day therefore on which to answer the call of nature. Even if one can find a banana leaf to give protection from the falling rain, even if one can wade through the muddy, running water and arrive in the bush, the wet branches, the wet undergrowth, the wet leaves hold further discomforts. Therefore a rainy day is a day to stay indoors, and refuse to answer the call of nature.

On one particularly rainy day, when the roof of the skies were open and the gods were pouring the waters by the bucketful into Dukana, the beggar could not do his usual rounds. Nor did he feel the urge of nature. Or did he? Because he fell asleep in his empty house. There is another saying which everyone in Dukana knows well. 'If you don't know death, look upon sleep.' So the beggar slept. His relatives, however, believed him to be dead. An ululating female carried the news through the length and breadth of Dukana.

When a mad beggar dies, it is not much news, and nobody really cares. Some even heave a sigh of relief. For it is a well-known fact that should a pregnant woman see a mad beggar first thing in the morning, or should she hate the beggar and refuse to feed him or give him money, she is likely to give birth to a child who will look like the beggar or grow up to be an imbecile. But it being criminal not to mourn a departed one and a relative at that, the family raised a loud cry for the benefit of the listening public of Dukana. In the midst of the noise and fuss the beggar woke up from sleep.

The beggar was confounded to find himself the centre of attention. Never since he could remember had so many of his relatives taken an interest in him. He threw them a weak greeting. No one answered him. He repeated the greeting. Again, no one answered him. He repeated the greeting a second time.

'You are dead, so shut up,' one of the relatives whispered hoarsely.

'I'm not dead,' the beggar replied. 'I was only sleeping.'

'Sleeping. Huh! What's the difference between sleep and death? You are dead.'

'I'm not dead,' the beggar said weakly, beginning to whimper.

'You are dead. Brothers, help me carry him away.'

'But I'm not dead yet.'

'You will die today. You died this afternoon.'

'God, I'm not dead. I'm not dead yet. I don't want to die,' the beggar whined like a dog.

The brothers joined hands and heaved Dabo from his seat. They wrapped him in a raffia mat and picking up machetes, hoes and an axe, moved in the direction of the bush.

Rain poured down heavily. From time to time lightning streaked through the dark sky. The relatives waded resolutely through the running stream of rain, firmly holding their precious bundle. And Dukana, fearful as ever of the numbing rain, sat indoors oblivious of everything.

Eventually, the party arrived in the depths of the forest. The silence was deep. The thick foliage of the trees shut out the rain. The dead leaves dampened by rain lay soggy and silent underfoot. The birds had all, it seemed, gone to sleep. In the eerie, weird silence the party set down their miserable bundle.

The relatives dug a hasty grave, not deep, very narrow. From within the bundle, a voice could be heard.

'I am not yet dead, oh God.'

'Then you must die today, you eyesore, you disgrace of the family. You must die today.'

'I'm not dead yet, oh God, I'm not dead yet.'

The relatives were surprised at the amazing clarity of the man. Was he not mad? How was he able to distinguish between life and death? Could even madness know the difference between these two? Each asked himself the question. Each resolved within himself to bury the answer with the mad beggar.

The grave was dug. From the confines of the enveloping dirty mat, the voice could still be heard. They picked up the

bundle roughly and tying it firmly with cord cut from the forest, lowered it into the shallow grave. The voice persisted ever so faintly, ever so insistently, even as they covered the grave with the wet earth and huge logs of wood.

Then when they heard no more sounds, when they felt sure their troubles had been buried deep in the bowels of the earth, they looked at each other, turned upon their heels and picked their silent way through the secretive forest back to Dukana.

Death always sends a chill through Dukana. It is the more harrowing because everyone is well-known to everyone. And each death is a reminder of the ultimate and unwelcome end for us all. And though it happens ever so often, the question persists as to why it should happen to a particular person at a particular time. This question often sends people scurrying across the river to make inquiries of the wise priests in Ko or even further afield. And it often happens that someone is held responsible for the event and he or she has then to swear an oath to establish his or her innocence. Some have met their death by such oaths. Once in a while, the town indulges in a great witch-hunt to pre-empt all evil and evil-doers. This cleanses the town in a most welcome manner so that people can go about their daily chores without the horrifying fear of death. And yet death persists.

Among us, death has been divided into three categories. The death of an ordinary man or woman who lives in a house, owns one or two pieces of land, a canoe, one or two pieces of cloth and not much besides, causes a ripple, hardly a stir. A ripple by Dukana standards is like an earth tremor. A stir is an earthquake. And an earthquake happens when a big man dies. The town is torn apart and the heavens weep. There is yet a third category. And that is when several people die in quick succession. As happened in one quarter of Dukana recently. Very serious questions then arise, as they did on that occasion.

Why were so many people dying? No one bothered to find out how each person died. Heart attacks, ruptured kidneys and

livers, pneumonia, senility; these noted killers of man are happily unknown in Dukana. All the deaths within a short period of time were attributable to a culprit who had to be identified.

And they were duly traced to a young man called Nedam who was thin as a rake, taciturn and ugly. From the day he was born with two teeth in his infant mouth, there were rumours of his wickedness; of how he refused to attend school and was envious of all his friends. He had grown to be a man of few words because envy was eating him up. He was loaded to the teeth with things dangerous, things mysterious, things potent, things powerful and things supernatural. He was to be feared and dreaded. He was sneaky, disappearing into the thick surrounding forest for days on end to do what nobody knew. He was an evil man. But no one dared say any of these things to his face.

Fascinated by these stories, I wanted to know what the man was really like and I sought him out. I found Nedam an extremely interesting character. He had been to our school all right but had not wanted to study. He was not given to book learning. He had accepted the fact graciously. Nor did he want to fish as all the men in Dukana did. He had often wondered, he told me, why the people of Dukana left the task of farming to women and children. He thought the occupation elevating. He loved to see things grow, and to see the results of daily labour in the abundance of nature, in the reward of the harvest. He had therefore put much effort into his farm. And it was not the usual patch of land planted with food crops for human consumption. No. He wanted to grow cash crops. Unlike most of the people in Dukana he knew that there was a government interested in farmers. He listened to what the government said on radio, and he knew that the government supported farmers in many ways, particularly farmers who wanted to help themselves. He was making use of these facilities to develop an oil palm plantation. He had to work very hard and all alone, deep in the forest of Dukana where the land was owned by nobody in particular and where no one dared go because it was supposed to hold wicked terrors by day and night.

True to his reputation, Nedam was taciturn, even reticent.

But he talk to me quite easily. He did not like to talk to people in Dukana because there was a shadow between him and them. They were a superstitious, rumour-mongering lot who truly did not understand much. Their limitations were many and to live among them in their way, was to drag oneself down. Did I not think so? I refused to commit myself. For instance, he said, he had not married because he wanted to ensure that he had the wherewithal to support a family before taking a wife. This was contrary to the collective wisdom of Dukana. And everyone had called him a ne'er-do-well. Every young man in Dukana was supposed to marry as soon as he turned twenty or thereabouts. It was a mark of success. Success? Even though wife and children starved thereafter? Even though they lived as beasts in mud houses? The lights of Dukana did not know anything about money. Theirs was a subsistence economy – he actually said they only had what they could eat and drink for the day. But he had seen beautiful brick houses, well laid out and painted in Egwanga. He had wanted to own a house like that. In short, his sights were set well beyond Dukana. He had not had much of a formal education and he felt the loss keenly. But he admired educated people. Maybe, he said, that was why he liked me and was telling me exactly how he felt, what he was doing, and what his hopes were.

Once Nedam offered to take me to his farm. I accepted the offer gladly. He warned that it was going to be a long trek. I said I did not mind. We set off early in the morning through bramble and bush, past tidy little farm plots planted with food crops and into the forest where the trees stopped the light of day. Benefiting from Nedam's familiarity with the way, we walked through the darkness to his oil palm farm.

I was amazed at the considerable care and efficiency with which the farm was laid out. It was evident that careful thought and intelligence had gone into it. Hard, tiring labour too.

Even more surprising was it to learn that he had done it all single-handed. He said he had no money to pay for hired labour and as for the system of co-operative labour which was practised in Dukana, whereby people worked on each others' farms by turns in a group, he said he could not afford to let anyone know what he was doing. That would cause envy and

he might return one day to find his farm burned down or vandalized.

The palms were growing well and healthily. In between them were rows of food crops: peppers, tomatoes, cassava. He lived, he said, on the food crops for the moment, while he waited for the cash crop to mature. They were two years old; he would start harvesting in the fifth year. He thought he would earn some money then, build a decent little house for himself and perhaps find a wife. It all sounded eminently sensible to me. I congratulated him on his hard work and sound common sense. He looked at me gratefully and, for the first time, smiled. I was proud of him, very proud and I did wish there were more like him in our town. I told him so. He smiled again. Soon, we were on our way back to Dukana.

Already, the sun was high in the sky and the forest was no longer so dark and frightening. Shafts of light shot through the leafy branches and dead leaves crunched away under our feet. I walked behind Nedam. We were both silent. A thought raced through my mind, and I agonized as to whether I should ask him the question whose answer I most wanted to know. I did finally take a chance.

There were ugly rumours flying around Dukana about him. What did he think of them? He was silent for a long time. Finally he said he was not aware of any rumours; he did not care for gossip, he was too busy tending his farm, and pursuing his ambitions to worry about what the people of Dukana thought. And from then on he did not say another word. I walked behind him, and did not see his face. We parted on the outskirts of Dukana. I did not see him again.

Shortly after that there came news of the death of Alee. He had died in some far away town whose name no one knew. As you might expect, I did not know Alee. He did not live in Dukana. He was one of the few young men who had gone to school and then ventured out into the world beyond, there to seek his fortune. It was widely held that he was doing well. No one knew exactly what he was doing, but all agreed that he was doing well. In practical terms, that meant he wrote his mother regularly and sent her money for her upkeep. But even more importantly, and this was not lost on the town, he had begun to

send money lately for the purchase of cement and, as he himself put it in one of his letters, 'the moulding of blocks'. This meant that he wanted to build a house, a real brick house. And this was a sign of wealth!

His mother was excited, but scared. She knew how things like that bred jealousy. Oh, she was proud of Alee, no doubt. Anyone who had so sensible a son would be proud of him. But she was afraid for him. If only she had been able to read and write and did not have to beg someone to write her letters to him! She'd have told him to tread carefully because Dukana was full of evil and envy. Someone, somewhere might decide to cut him down in the flower of youth. The world was full of wickedness. One had to be careful, very careful.

But she had not been able to warn him well or often enough and before long, the combined hatred of Dukana had finished him. The autopsy conducted in far-away Kano where Alee worked in the dental section of the Army spoke of diabetes. Dukana spoke of envy, magical spells, poisons, mumbo-jumbo and necromancy, all emanating from Dukana, of course. All of them so potent that distance was nothing, and their victim was struck down in a far-away place.

Dukana wept many tears, the sort no one had seen for a long time. Because Alee was one of the shining lights of the town. One of the very few men who had broken free of the usual constrictions and who had sought the rewarding adventures of the new life. Alee was a new man. He was about to transform Dukana to greater heights. He had a government job. And now because of man's wickedness to man, he had been cut down in the flower of youth and Dukana with him. All this in private, surreptitious conversations. In words passed from ear to ear.

The corpse was due to arrive within one week. Two weeks passed and still the corpse did not show up. The rumours increased. The evil-doer had pursued Alee to the grave. He was even delaying the return of his corpse. To hate a man down to his very corpse was the height of wickedness. And the anger of the town grew. Three painful weeks later, the corpse finally did arrive in a common coffin and everyone turned out to give Alee a befitting burial. No one could afford to be absent for fear that he or she would be presumed to have wished the deceased ill.

Nedam himself was there. I gathered he had been a friend and classmate of Alee's.

The burial of a 'big man' quickly turns into a carnival in Dukana. Often the burial carnival determines whether the deceased was a 'big man' while he lived or not. In the case of Alee, the man and his burial carnival were well-matched. And of the dancing, drumming, drinking and displays, more need not be said. Except that the tempo rose by degrees and reached a crescendo at mid-afternoon when the grave having been dug, it was time to lay Alee to his final rest.

The sun burned hot in the clear skies; the breeze itself was hot and the leaves were scorched by the hot sun as Alee's coffin was lowered into the ground and the grave covered.

And then the pent-up anger of Dukana unleashed itself. Suddenly, quickly and without evidence of prior planning. The manner of it was simple. One of the young men raised a loud cry above the voices of ululating women.

'Dukana, do you keep quiet, while you die a painful, slow death?' asked the young man, the pain in his voice obvious.

Whereupon, as one man, the youth of Dukana rose and pounced upon Nedam.

It was over in a flash. They seized him by the throat so that he could utter neither word nor cry, and dragged him away towards his house. They threw him in a heap into the house and locked shut the door in his face. Then they struck a match and set the house ablaze. There was first the fierce crackling of bamboo and thatch as the eaves blazed away in the fierce noonday heat. Soon a whirlwind of fire raced upwards and rose into the sky like the tongue of a huge torch. And as the building went up in flames, a blinding glare lit up the insides as in a gigantic furnace. And now came a horrendous clamour of human screams, a shriek of anguish and terror which rose above the bonfire. As the house burned, the youth of Dukana formed themselves into a ring round it to ensure that their victim did not escape. The huge flames leapt up and burned fast and soon there was nothing but ash and mud and a vile sooty smoke which spiralled upwards into the sky.

And the youths, without a word, hurriedly disappeared in different directions.

Whoever heard of a cloud without a silver lining? The war might have brought death and destruction to Dukana but it also brought wealth – not just money, but wealth. Money is a few coins with which to buy a tot of gin, a pinch of tobacco, a bite of fish, a ball of foofoo. But wealth comes in bags and each bag holds a hundred and there is nowhere to keep it because it is so heavy, so inviting to greedy people that you have to find it a safe hiding place in the earth, under the bed whereon you sleep, in the most secret part of your dwelling. It arrived in Dukana through the unlikeliest of its citizens – Bom.

Everyone had long since given Bom up as a ne'er-do-well, a layabout. He was that man with the dry skin whom all nicknamed 'Stockfish'; that penniless sluggard whom none would marry, who had never built a hut and who had always lived with his mother. It was inconceivable that he could do anything beyond telling a good story at various fishing villages the while skilfully avoiding Nna the bailiff who perpetually carried papers summoning Bom to court for tax evasion. Bom had accepted all that in good spirit. And when anyone teased or rebuked him, he would reply: 'A good story is as good as a good wife, a good house and a good bicycle. I have not one, but several good stories. What else can I want? I am rich.'

But Dukana knew, as did all the world, that a good story will only feed the storyteller when the audience is large. And the audience in Dukana was small. Bom could not be fed by his stories. So the Good Lord gave him very swift feet. He had

practised feet, running away from Nna the bailiff, and running little errands at funerals, at marriages and at sessions of the village court.

It was only natural that when the soldiers arrived in Dukana, he should run to them when others were running away from them. Bom became a servant to one of the corporals. Nothing pleased him more than being seen in the company of 'that soldier with two ropes'. He was even seen dangling from the tailboard of an Army jeep, waving excitedly to the ladies of Dukana on their way from market. Bom ended each day a much wiser and much better man.

One day, he informed Kara quite casually that those soldiers liked crayfish and that they wanted to buy the stuff in bags. Kara knew one or two things about buying and selling and immediately bought the idea.

'How much are they paying for a bag of crayfish?'

'Twenty pounds.'

'And how many bags do they want?'

'Twenty.'

'They like to do these things in twenties, eh,' Kara said with a smile. 'And when do I get paid?'

'As soon as they have the stuff. I saw a man stuffing huge bundles of money into his bag this morning,' Bom replied.

'Your soldier friends do have plenty of money, don't they?'

'You bet.'

'I'll let you know tomorrow morning whether I can let your people have their twenty bags of crayfish or not.'

'Good.'

'And you say it's twenty pounds the bag?'

'Twenty pounds or more. Yes.'

Kara had been to school twenty years earlier. Twenty twenties he thought. That makes four hundred. And down there in Ibuno, the stuff sells at fifteen pounds the bag. That makes a profit of five pounds the bag. Or one hundred pounds for the transaction. He would play. He did not sleep that night. The next morning, he was at Bom's door.

'Eh, storyteller, here are your twenty bags of crayfish,' he shouted as he pounded on Bom's door.

'I'm coming, you godforsaken man. Won't you let me sleep?'

What's all this smell of crayfish early in the morning. Have you gone crazy?'

'Look, I don't have time to spare. I have to get to market before sunrise.'

'Curse you and your markets. Can't you take a rest? Money won't run away, you know. There were always rich men in the world. And there always will be rich men. Before you, and after you, you godforsaken man.'

'Right. I won't wait for you while you bind your long thing up. Just bring me back the four hundred pounds from your soldier people. And mark you, no tricks.'

'I never thought of stealing all my life.'

'I know. You don't have the courage to, you son-of-a-bitch. So let me have the four hundred pounds later tonight,' shouted Kara.

Bom opened the door. Kara was already gone. At the front door were twenty bags of crayfish. Bom began to carry them one by one to the Army Camp. It was a slow and laborious process. Many people in Dukana were quite surprised to see Bom the sluggard working hard. But Bom was enjoying himself. His master the corporal was pleased to see he had performed well and quickly. Bom received five hundred pounds for his effort.

The notes were crisp and smelt good. He sniffed them appreciatively.

'A completely new smell is in the air,' muttered he, under his breath.

It was not so easy counting those crisp notes. They had a way of sticking to your fingers in twos or threes so that by the time you got to the end of the bundle, instead of counting five hundred, you counted four hundred and eighty, or more or less. So Bom immediately devised a novel method of counting. Had not his master, the corporal, 'the soldier with two ropes', told him that he was being paid twenty-five pounds for each bag of crayfish? So, he would share the money into twenty places. One place for each bag of crayfish. Good idea.

He sought out a clean, quiet spot behind the school building which served as temporary offices for the soldiers. He looked around to assure himself that no one was lurking about. Then

he began to build the price of each bag. Two pounds in twenty places. Three pounds in twenty places. Ensuring that the notes were carefully arranged with the correct sides facing upwards. And now twelve pounds in each of twenty places.

A slight noise along the road distracted him. He went to investigate what the noise was about reminding himself the while that he had twelve pounds in each place. Twelve pounds in each place . . . twelve pounds in each place . . . twelve pounds in each place. There was nothing really the matter. Only a group of soldiers returning to base.

He returned to his treasure. And began once more to dole out the notes. Thirteen pounds in each place. Now eighteen pounds in each place. Everything was going well. A wide smile on his face. Nineteen pounds in each place. And then horror of horrors. A light wind came up all of a sudden, sweeping the notes here and there. Bom gave chase. He picked up a note on his right and dashed to the left for another note. Back to the counting centre to replace the erring notes. The wind lifted some more notes. Bom went round and round in a circle until he turned giddy and fell on top of the currency notes.

He rested for a while and then decided that there was no point counting the money. The corporal, his master, 'the soldier with two ropes', could not have short-changed him. He would return to his house and there await the advent of dusk when Kara would have returned from his journey.

And so it happened on that bright afternoon that on the single path that served as Dukana's main thoroughfare, Bom was seen sniffing a bundle of you know what, a fat smile on his puckish face. He was in no mood to answer the greetings which were hurled at him from all sides. Even when he passed the village square where Terr Kole and his cronies were seated, a jar of palm wine before them, Bom was unusually unimpressed.

He soon arrived at the hut which he shared with his aged mother. No one was at home. He entered and shut the world outside behind him. Then he fell to arranging the currency notes carefully. He placed the bundle beneath his mat and decided to have a nap. But sleep he could not. He tossed around on his hard, mud bed for a long time. From time to time

he would get up to assure himself that the bundle of notes was really safe under the mat. He prayed fervently for sunset and the return of Kara.

His prayers were soon answered by a tap at the door. Bom jumped up with unaccustomed alacrity. Kara was at the door.

'You godforsaken man, did it have to take you so long to return from market today of all days?'

'Bom, son-of-a-bitch, I'm a busy man. Have you brought me my four hundred pounds?'

'Four hundred pounds? Who's talking about four hundred pounds? Did you lend me money?'

'I mean the twenty bags of crayfish. You said your friends the soldiers would pay four hundred pounds for them. And don't say I didn't warn you.'

'Warn me you sure did, you godforsaken trader. I have sold your twenty bags of crayfish, but money I can never understand. My master, the corporal . . .'

'I don't know your master the corporal, Bom, you understand. I just want my money. You promised.'

'So I did. But what do you expect from . . .'

'Bom, I tell you, a joke is a joke and business is business,' Kara remonstrated, wiping the perspiration from his brows creased by fear and anxiety.

All day, he had lived in torment. He had cursed himself for trusting Bom with so much money. Why had he not gone with him to the soldiers? Bom did not know what money was. All his life he had not as much as handled five pounds at a time. He owed every woman in Dukana who sold tobacco or gin. No trader would touch him with a long pole. His name was anathema in the tax office. How on earth could he, Kara, who owed no debts and was owed none have been so stupid as to entrust so huge a sum of money to an irresponsible man, a rascal and a ragamuffin?

And now as he stood before Bom, he found his world dissolving beneath his feet. Several scenes appeared before his eyes. Bom could have handed over the money to the first woman he met. Bom could have gone straight to the tax office to pay his overdue taxes and so be freed once and for all from the importunate Nna the bailiff. Bom might even have played

with the money as with a toy and dropped it into the river. And he Kara was going to lose four hundred pounds on a clear day, in one fell swoop, by being an ass and trusting a ne'er-do-well. For a profit of but one hundred pounds, he had lost three hundred pounds. Three hundred pounds! God have mercy. Kara wanted to lie down and cry. Shoot himself. Shoot Bom. Burn the village down. Destroy the world. For his four hundred pounds. He had already designated a safe place for the four hundred pounds in his treasure chest. Now there was not only going to be no place for the one hundred pounds profit, but there would be a hole where the three hundred pounds had been. A pox on all contracts. What he knew about was buying and selling. You had your money, you bought. You had your goods, you sold. For cash. For cash. For cash. And all the time you had this exhilarating feel of the notes in your hand. And then there was the magical moment when you locked your doors and counted your money away from the prying eyes of the world. And established your profit. Oh, why had he trusted this Bom of a fellow? Why hadn't he asked the fool to get the money first? He was going to cry. Or could Bom have stolen the money? He had always thought Bom did not have the courage to steal. But a man who, in time of war could go around with soldiers, such a one would find the courage to steal? Surely?

These thoughts sped through Kara's mind in a flood, swift and unbroken. He looked miserable and Bom who saw it all so very clearly was enjoying himself thoroughly. He decided to end the poor man's torment. He went to his mud bed, lifted the mat and produced the bundle of crisp, sweet-smelling currency notes.

'Here,' says he, 'is your wealth. The stuff does smell nice, doesn't it?'

At the appearance of the much-desired commodity, Kara let forth a gasp of stupefaction. The idiot Bom had performed!

He held the bundle of notes firmly, as if to convince himself it was really there and safely so. Then he sat down and began to count, wetting his third finger on his tongue at intervals while he lifted each note one after the other. One, two, three . . . until he got to five hundred. Five hundred pounds. What? There were to be four hundred pounds. Had he made a mistake? He



fell to counting the money once again, his right nostril – the one accustomed to the smell of extra profit – expanding to an abnormal size. Yes, there were five hundred pounds. He stuffed the money into his left shoe and a cunning smile lit up his eyes. His left nostril, the great negotiator, contracted fully.

'Bom, you son-of-a-bitch, you've done well,' says he.

'Oh, if only you knew what trouble I had, you godforsaken man, counting all that money! I say, I couldn't even share the money between the twenty bags of crayfish.'

'You should go to school,' Kara said.

'With the arthritis in my feet? No, my friend, I'm going to stick to what I can do best.'

'Story-telling?'

'Yeah. I wasn't made to count money.'

'Lucky man. I wish I could be like you,' said Kara. And he stood to go. 'You've done a wonderful job, you son-of-a-bitch. Say, do you think your soldier friends are going to need some more crayfish soon?'

'Oh I should think so. I'll let you know when.'

Kara had already stepped out of the hut, dragging his left foot slowly after him.

'Sorry old man,' Bom called, 'won't you let me have something for some gin and snuff?'

'Certainly, my dear friend.'

He dug into his shirt pocket and found two pounds. He handed them over to Bom.

'Thank you, kindly,' smiled Bom. 'You have made me more than rich.'

And he tossed the notes into the air and played with them as they danced to the ground.

And Kara walked away, his heavy left foot following after him slowly.

## 7

## The Divorcee

Lebia walked the sandy pathways of Dukana early every morning, a loose piece of cloth draped round her shoulders, an earthen pot finely balanced on her head. Her neck was long and elegant and her legs straight as a palm. She walked alone, at a fast steady pace, unsmiling, and looking neither left nor right. When other early risers threw her a greeting, she answered with a barely audible grunt. She walked steadily through the village on to the narrow paths covered with dewy grass till she got to the stream from where everyone drew water. She returned as Dukana awoke from sleep, the pot of water prettily supported on a bed of loose cloth placed on top of her head, and she walked unsmiling to her mother's house. When she got there, she would, with both hands, carefully remove the pot from her head, gracefully flick her neck to drop the cloth that had cushioned the pot on the top of her head and carry her burden inside.

Her mother's house. She had said goodbye to it three years before. And now she had returned to it, there to seek solace once more and wait for she knew not what. Her mother's house. She was lucky it was still there, and her mother in it, alive and well. The hut bore the happiest memories of her life; memories which had now dimmed beside the nightmare of those three years whose brutality she would have given the world to forget.

It was a simple hut, of square construction, made of mud and wattle and covered with thatch. There were but two rooms in it. The larger room had a fireplace at one end. Above the

fireplace, running across the room from one end to the other were four or five large parallel poles which served as storage for a wide variety of goods: empty pots, cobs of maize left to dry, fish and pepper to be smoked and dried by the wooden fire. Against one wall was a huge clay pot in which water for the household was stored. The pot was covered with a rusty enamel plate on top of which was a plastic cup from which everyone who wanted water drank. It was into this pot that she carefully emptied the water she had drawn from the stream. Next to the pot was a small wooden table containing an odd assortment of articles: bangles, earrings made of aluminium, plastic or glass, a mirror, a can of bint-el-Sudan talcum powder, a few chewing sticks, a few kola nuts and other odds and ends which loudly proclaimed their owner's wealth. At the other end of the room, opposite the fireplace, was a mound of earth, hard, dusty and uncompromisingly uncomfortable. Covered with an ageing raffia mat, it was the visitors' chair and served as a bed at night, and during the occasional afternoon siesta.

The smaller room was her mother's bedroom. It had no windows, only a door which led into the larger room, and to the rear an open doorway, which led into the backyard. The backyard itself was fenced off with raffia poles stuck into the ground close to each other and bound at intervals with a rope so that it provided privacy from prying eyes. The enclosure was both a barn for seed yams and newly-harvested crops, a bathroom and a comfort room.

This was the house in which she had been born. Here she had grown up. She knew everything about it and everything in it. Nothing had changed since she was a child; in the three years of her absence it had remained the same. And now upon her return after those three bizarre years, it was the same. Although her mother had grown a little older, she had not changed much. A few strands of grey hair announced her advancing age, as did her sagging breasts now growing smaller. But she remained essentially the same.

This sameness, this monotony was the hallmark of their life. Like most children in Dukana, she had grown up doing what her mother asked her to do, assisting her in her daily chores and thus learning at her feet, as some would say. She had fetched

water, helped on the farm during the planting season, weeded with her mother when the rains made the weeds explode on the farm, harvested with her during the dry season. And she had learnt to cook the meagre meals they ate.

She knew too, how to pick the periwinkles on the mudflats and take them to the market to barter them for soap and salt or sell them for money to use in purchasing a secondhand blouse or the rare loin cloth. And she had learnt to go into the nearby forest to get dried, broken branches of trees which she tied into a neat bundle of firewood. She knew that plant of the forest which when dried, was used as a chewing stick. She knew which climbing plant served as an aromatic condiment for their most special broths. And she knew how not to offend the Dukana goddess' tortoises. And on those evenings after all the work was done, and the full moon stood majestically in the night sky, she joined the youth of Dukana to play in the sands. It was there she learnt the rhymes, rhythms and riddles of her forebears. It was there she practised the old dance steps, learnt new ones and helped create the latest ones. She loved these evenings most and it was always with a great sense of dissatisfaction that she returned home to the hard discomfort of the mound of mud in the outer room and the monotony of life with her mother.

Her mother knew that one day, her only daughter would marry. Or perhaps she would not. But surely she would find a man who would take care of her. For that was the ultimate aim of a Dukana woman. To be the only wife of a poor man. Or one of the many wives of a rich man. A rich man being he who owned many pieces of farmland, a few more goats than usual, a mud house covered with corrugated iron sheets instead of thatch, and maybe a tidy, neat, little sum of money in coins and paper tied in a rag and hidden in the earth beneath his bed. The favour of such a one, would go a long way to satisfy the upbringing of a girl, any girl . . . So every mother had told her daughter. So all daughters believed. They in turn, would have to tell their daughters who would have to believe. Of course a girl could remain unmarried. If she was her father's first daughter and he was rich enough to allow her to remain in the family, breeding children who would answer her father's name

and have equal rights with the children of their grandfather.

Lebia would have to marry, her mother told herself. She needed the money. To buy herself one or two more pieces of land, a piece of cloth and maybe an earring. She watched her daughter grow. And she secretly nursed for her an ambition: that a rich man, any rich man would turn up and ask for her hand in marriage. The sooner, she thought, the better. The lucky girls got married as soon as they were born or shortly after. The less lucky ones were married just before puberty while the really unlucky ones did not find a husband at all. It was all a matter of luck. A husband did a girl a favour by marrying her.

Lebia's beauty was going to stand her in good stead. It did. For just as she approached puberty, one of the rare young men in town sought her hand in marriage. He was a driver, in gainful monthly employment, away in the district headquarters. Which meant that he was well-to-do. And when he did Lebia the favour of seeking her hand in marriage, there was nothing to stop him from achieving his desire. In no time at all, and before they had said hardly a word to each other, they had been married.

The manner of it was simple. Both mothers discussed it. Lebia's only part in the affair was one night when her uncle called her and asked if she wanted to marry the young driver. Shy as she was expected to be, she refused to say a word. She was a good girl. If she did want to marry the young man, would she be good enough to go out and purchase a bottle of gin? She did so. Then her uncle opened the bottle, poured a measure into a thimble of a cup and asked her to sip it and pass it on to whoever in the room she wanted to marry. She duly sipped it, and on bended knee handed the cup over to her young man. He too sipped from the cup and returned it to her uncle. Then some money passed hands. He paid two hundred naira and a goat and a chicken. And they were married. The next day, he came for her in his vehicle and took her away to his mother's house. There she would learn to be a good daughter-in-law and a good wife. And be taught by her mother-in-law the ways of the new family into which she was expected to fit quickly. Because she had not only married a man. She was family property.

Lebia's mother was happy. Her daughter had found a good husband and she had some spending money. Two new pieces of farmland, a new blouse and a new loin cloth. And she did not have to feed an extra mouth. She would have some more food to sell and therefore some more spending money. It was not a bad bargain.

In time Lebia moved in with her husband. She cooked his meals, washed his clothes and swept their one room apartment. And at night, when he had had his meal and his bath, she did her duty. Faithfully. Loyally. Every day. The months passed by.

He expected that she would bear children. It was for that primarily that he had married her. For every man had reason to expect that he would be a father some day. Every man was capable of being a father. If he did not become a father, there was something wrong with his wife. Lebia knew as much. And she also prayed fervently that she would bear his fruit and so secure her place by his side. She wanted so very much to have a child, a son preferably. Because sons were inevitably more valuable than daughters. She waited anxiously every month for her monthly pain. And when it arrived, her heart sank. Month after month. And yet she lived in expectation. As he did. Patiently. For a year. And another year. And when it became obvious that she was 'not productive', he made up his mind what to do. He did not tell her. He did not consult her. He knew precisely what was his duty in the circumstances.

One day, he returned from duty and called her. He told her gruffly to get her clothes packed. All her clothes. They would have to return to the village. She obeyed as expected. Quietly. Without a word. What pain she bore she carried in her heart. He drove Lebia home to her mother's house. And told her mother: 'I am returning your daughter. I want my money back.'

It was a matter of honour, of pride. Lebia's mother was proud of her daughter. She was a good daughter, well brought up. And nothing was ever going to be allowed to suggest the contrary. She would redeem her daughter, her honour. She went hawking the pieces of land she owned, pawned her clothes and put together the two hundred naira, a goat and chicken

which she had received from her son-in-law. She paid him off.

Lebia went back home to her mother. Young, divorced but not disgraced. She would return to her usual routine as a daughter.

## 8

## A Death in Town

Adda died yesterday.

And there were bucketfuls of tears and drinks. Idigima the stammerer and Duzia the vulgar cripple were, as usual, the first to arrive. Kole, with several layers of tobacco under his teeth, was also there, his grey hair and beard proclaiming his age and demanding respect from the rest of the company. So also was Bom whose skin was so dry you might think he had not had a bath for years. Duzia alleged that God had forgotten to rub oil on him at his creation. Beke also was there, his shorts torn on the left buttocks. Ita, the one whose shirt had several layers of dirt and mildew, strolled in later, a suspicious look on his face.

There were two subjects which often dominated the conversation at each gathering. The first was when the next tax raid was going to be carried out and what to do at the beginning of the raid. The second, and infinitely more important, was who had what poison or juju. Every death in Dukana made ignorance of so vital a subject a near-disaster.

Once the respectable company had gathered, they despatched Deebari, who had been lurking around for that purpose, with specific instructions. Deezim, they found, had already stepped out on an equally urgent errand. That was well done. The company settled down to business in the sitting room of the dead man.

The women were there too, all tucked anonymously into a corner of the bedroom, crying their eyes out quite professionally. The only exception to anonymity was Duson the woman trader, who mourned quite conspicuously. People could not

determine whom or what she was mourning – Adda or the money which she alleged he owed her. Duson was Adda's snuff specialist. She alone knew what the man wanted; tobacco, a little bit of potash, mentholatum and, what will you have, a drop or two of Bint-el-Sudan perfume. Adda was a particular man when it came to snuff matters, and he gave particular instructions. To which, if you please, Duson complied with marked and pleasurable precision. Which made it the more regrettable that Adda never did pay her promptly. That fact was responsible for the increasing notches on Duson's wall. Each notch it is said represents three pence, and visitors have heard Duson count over one hundred notches. The money that some people do have! Some ill-intentioned people have said of Duson that she increases the notches at will just to boast her hidden wealth. Other wags have said that she was in love with Adda, that in fact she was his concubine and that she had despoiled Adda of all his riches, and only used the notches to divert attention from the fact. There is no predicting what people will or will not say in Dukana. But there are never recriminations at death ceremonies, and yesterday, everyone allowed Duson to weep to her heart's content. The company was quite distinguished, and could be expected to behave with perfect decorum.

All in all, it was some occasion. Tears, running noses, spit and urine mingled freely.

Deezim soon returned with a bottle of 'zini' which he handed rather reverently to Kole who poured a silent libation and put the bottle to his lips.

'Cha, cha, this is good,' says he.

'Oh, it's brewed in Bunu. They're artists over there,' replies Deezim.

'Only Wiye ruins their art. She adulterates the stuff. Two parts of water to one of 'zini'. And she is on the church committee.'

'Dis . . . honest, de, . . . de . . . disho . . . nest,' concludes Idigima.

'Adda left in good time,' Duzia the cripple ventured to add.

'Left? Left? Ha!' shrugged Ita.

This was meant to be ominous and Ita made sure that

everyone got the full import of his words. Ita laughed again, ever so ominously, and spat on the ground. The message went home, for Bom said, 'Deebari will soon return.'

'And we shall see,' Duzia replied and blew his nose to the floor.

Kole gave the bottle of 'zini' to Beke who was a master at serving the stuff. However small the quantity, and however numerous the company, Beke was sure to serve everyone present. It was said that he learnt the art in Panya where a Spaniard had taught it him after the day's work on the plantation near Santa Isabel. Actually, Beke was an artist who found release in apportioning drinks. What else could a Dukana artist do? Now he produced one of the two thimble-sized tumblers which he kept in the fold of his shorts, cast a critical look at the bottle of 'zini' and went to work.

The dead man lay on a bamboo mat in the bedroom, his face covered with a black, dirty cloth. The women sat round him weeping.

While Beke served the drinks, dead silence reigned among the men in the sitting room. When he stepped into the bedroom, the women stopped weeping and each had their share in silence.

'Remember the dead man,' Duzia shouted to him from the outer room.

'Beke will not dishonour the dead,' Beke answered and promptly downed the last thimbleful after having offered it to the dead man.

The women let a wail into the air.

Just as the sitting room filled again with the chatter of the men, Deebari returned. He had been on a long journey. Kole poured another libation to the gods and called on Deebari to deliver his message. Deebari cleared his throat and downed a drink.

'Beka says it's Oyeoku's work,' Deebari announced.

The women wailed 'Oyeoku – oh – oh!, Oyeoku – oh – oh.'

'Silence, silence, ha! What's the matter with you women?' Duzia bellowed. 'No sooner does a man die than you begin to mourn his long member. Let's hear what Deebari has to say.'

Calm gradually returned to the bedroom.

'That's what I said,' Duzia said again. 'They were mourning his long member.'

The men laughed.

The women sobbed more heavily

'Well, you joker, Adda did not only have the longest member here. He was a great hunter too,' said Deebari.

'The best you could find in any part of the world. The beasts could smell him a mile away,' replied Kole.

'And you imagine he did this thing all on his own? Animals don't just get into traps. Adda and Oyeoku were friends. Close friends. Adda should not have betrayed such long-standing friendship,' said Deebari.

'What was it really happened?' asked Kole.

'Well, Oyeoku it was that put those animals into Adda's traps. Adda knew it. But he did not ever return to thank Oyeoku. He kept postponing the promised thank offering from year to year because he was afraid of what the catechist would say. Oyeoku could no longer bear it. Oyeoku punishes hard, mercilessly, when he's angry,' Deebari replied.

A spontaneous wail went into the afternoon sky. The men shook their heads sadly and looked at the floor. Duson grew hysterical and had to be cajoled into more moderate weeping. Duzia felt absolved, and nodded meaningfully to Ita who duly acknowledged his innocence.

A grave silence pervaded the sitting room.

'I say, there isn't a drop of gin anywhere in the whole place. Say, Bom, you haven't bought us a drop yet. Didn't Adda marry from your family?' asked Kole, breaking the silence.

'Leave Bom alone. He's not got a dime on him. Gives all his money to those fat-bottomed Opobo women. That's why he's so thin and dry. They've sucked all the blood and oil from him.'

'Say, old boy, you do like them fat-bottomed, don't you,' inquired Duzia the cripple. 'I've always liked a good pair of lobes in my arms too. And Opobo women are the neatest things one can find around here, eh. They're delicious.'

The company laughed.

'I know my duty,' Bom replied, 'Here's gin in memory of Adda my brother.'

'Oh isn't that wise of you? Give him a hand, everybody,' Kole said.

And they clapped.

When pouring the libation, lay a curse on those church people, Kole. They killed my brother twice over,' said Bom.

'Twice?' asked Duzia. 'They killed him a hundred times over and mangled him into the bargain. Look what they did to him with their one man one wife thing. And don't commit adultery . . . No one to bury him. Is that a way to die? Even a banana tree leaves a sucker in its place. Isn't that why we plant banana trees all over the town?'

Bom said, 'Then that other fellow comes and says: "Drop your papers for me. If we win the election, we will clean up the town, cut down all the banana trees, give you pipe-borne water." I said I didn't mind drinking water from a pipe, but why did he want to destroy the banana trees? "Banana trees bring mosquitoes," says he. But there are no banana trees in the fishing village at Uben Ekang. Yet there are more mosquitoes there in one night than you will find in Dukana in ten years. "But banana trees bring mosquitoes. The experts say so." Oh ho. Mosquitoes do not kill, old boy, hunger does. No one's going to destroy my plants. I know that, but I do not tell him. I know too what to do with my papers. I ate them up on election day, and went to pray afterwards.'

'That's a true son of the church. The catechist will love you,' said Kole, and he chuckled.

'The church people should leave us alone. I don't like their face. Remember when Fade died. There comes the catechist and orders us all out. "Fade was a committee member. He must have a church burial," says he. So no cocks are killed, no drinks are drunk. Only the catechist and his boys singing. And what were they singing? They would meet Fade again on the resurrection morning. Resurrection morning! I choked with anger at the stupidity of the catechist fellow. Is that why we die? How would the clan survive if the ancestors were not there? And were not born again. Tell me, Bom, son of Wayi, how would the clan survive?' Duzia concluded.

'I say I do not like them, that's what. Didn't that long-nosed Englishman from Kira ask us to burn Oyeoku's house? Didn't

they burn it? But is Oyeoku dead? Hasn't he punished Adda home?" Bom replied.

'Give us a song, give us a song, I say,' urged Ita. 'Let's sing Adda home. He was a rare hunter and a man.'

And Idigima, the stammerer who never stammered in song, the beautiful tenor, poet and historian raised a strain which the entire company joined in. Idigima composed ex-tempore, eulogising Adda the brave hunter who brought home a live hippopotamus, the tiger who brought the head of twenty tigers, the tortoise whose cunning snared the boa constrictor, whose prowess did not stop with the terrors of the forest, but extended to the beautiful female form lying prostrate on the bamboo bed at midnight. Oh, Adda was not like Kole who had begged Madam Duson not to play so hard at it or she'd burst his balls. Could such a man die? And the company agreed he would never. As Idigima waxed more poetic, the company warmed to a dance.

The dead man lay on the bamboo mat in the bedroom, his face covered with a black, dirty cloth. The women sat around him weeping, chasing away the flies.

Idigima stopped singing and they all returned to their seats.

'The toes of the dead man are itching,' said Duzia the cripple.

'And no wonder, since you have no legs yourself,' said Bom.

'You should respect my status, my friend. Didn't they say all the troubles of the world originate in the leg?'

'So you have used your hands well, your legs being no problem. You should have made Adda's coffin.'

'Not me. Let them go to Egwanga and buy a gold coffin for Adda. He deserves it.'

'Adda is not a man to be buried in a home made box. Didn't he say he wanted a gold coffin, Duzia?'

'That he did, for sure. And kept five pounds buried at the head of the bed for safe keeping. Only a week ago, he used it in bribing the tax clerk from Bori. Another clerk may come again this week. How we're going to keep his house from collapsing this rainy season, I don't know.'

'The tax-collectors should be as . . . asked to do it,' Idigima asserted testily. 'At least . . . Ad . . . da will rest now.'

'They won't chase him out of the house early in the morning,' said Kole.

'Wretches, wretches, they made Adda defy Oyeoku,' said Duzia.

'But how?' asked Ita.

'Well, Adda did want to fulfil his obligations to Oyeoku. But how could he? Wasn't he saving to pay his income tax? Oh, I remember the day he trekked to Bori to protest. Fifteen hard miles and a dirty, old hat on his head. Then when he arrived there, tired and perspiring, they sat him on a long bench while a boy in khaki kept moving forward and backward. "What d'you want?" asks the boy in khaki of Adda after a while. "I want to see the D.O." says he. "You can't see him today, he's too busy." "Too busy? But he's never busy on tax collection day. Too busy? How many wives has he? I tell you, my son, I'll see the D.O. today. Don't play any tricks on me. I'm old enough to be your father. I have to see the D.O." So at last they let him go in.'

'What happened next?'

'Well, Adda goes in to see the D.O., his old hat on his head. And he's confused when he sees a black boy fresh from school sitting on the D.O.'s chair. "What are you doing here?" asks Adda. "I came to see the D.O. and now they send me to a clerk. What's wrong with you people?" The D.O. rings his desk bell and asks for "this mad old man" to be sent out of his office. Adda returns home completely dazed. "So black boys are now D.Os. Is that why the taxes have risen? Is that why they chase us round at odd hours of day and night?" Adda never got over it,' Kole concluded.

'I say the toes of the dead man are itching. Duson, do you hear me?' Duzia bawled. 'The toes of the dead man are itching.'

'Adda owed me in life. Must I pay again now he's dead?' asked Duson.

'Who takes the blame today? The dead or you who are alive? You'll be embracing Bom next and drawing notches of excitement on your walls. Oh, I'd like to bite you in your most secret place,' said Duzia.

'Leave her alone, Duzia. It's not her fault that God gave you those flabby stumps, you know.'

'But the toes of the dead man are itching,' Duzia maintained.

'Don't get tiresome, Duzon knows her duty.'

Duson stepped out of the room and returned shortly afterwards with two bottles of beer. She gave them to Kole.

'Didn't I say it,' exulted Kole. 'Look what she's brought. Two bottles of . . . BEER. Give her a hand.' And they clapped.

'There's a good girl; there's a real good concubine,' eulogised Duzia.

'I'm going to drown in drink today,' announced Beke.

'Watch out for the catechist then; he'll be preaching you a sermon before you realize it. You're a good son of the church.'

'Away with their church. So we're not going to drink anymore because a long-nosed whiteman once came to Dukana. Don't they drink in their own country?'

'Oh, they do. You did not see Mr Birisibirisi who worked on board ship. He was worse than a fish.'

'I don't complain,' answered Beke. 'When they say "don't drink", I promise them I won't. Theirs is a good God. If you disobey and then you go back to him and say "I'm sorry", everything is forgiven. He's not like Oyeoku who demands a goat and then blows your testicles out of proportion because you cannot supply the goat at the time he wants it.'

'Pass the drink, my lad; forget about bloated testicles tonight,' admonished Kole.

And Beke fell to his vocation.

'We have bathed the dead man,' the women announced, just as the second bottle of beer was being emptied.

'Ah, he'll drink his share now.' And Beke moved towards the room. But before he got there, Ita stopped him.

'Let's bring Adda to the sitting room. I'm sure he doesn't like the idea of sitting among so many women whom he cannot have in any case.'

'Do . . . d'you k . . . know what you're s-saying?' stammered Idigima.

'Never mind. Let's bring the dead man here. He was a churchman, you know. And should be buried like a churchman. It's not his fault, is it, that he did not pay his last month's church dues and so the catechist won't give him a decent christian burial?'

'Aye, bring the dead man here. But don't talk about the

church. The catechist is enough. Bring us the dead man.'

And they placed Adda in the centre of the room, seating him on a deck chair just before the grave that had been dug even before the group had begun to gather. Adda sat there, looking dignified even in death. The lines showed clearly on his face, the very mark of the hard life he had led.

'Isn't death a terrible thing?' asked Beke. 'I tell you, friends, it takes quite some courage to stare a dead man in the face.'

'You're a coward, Beke. What's our life here in Dukana? A daily death? An escape from death? Idigima sing me a song, let me dance Adda home,' said Duzia.

'Sing, Idigima, sing. Let's see a cripple dance.'

Idigima raised the strain of the same old song and Duzia sat on his posterior, gyrating in a dance. The company clapped for him. Beke bought a bottle of 'zini' and offered it to the house.

'That's a good son of the church,' said Duzia.

'Beke! Beke!,' called Ita, 'I say, the catechist is trading with the church collection. Soon his children will become magistrates.'

'And send us all to prison for not paying our taxes,' added Deezim.

The company laughed. The women moaned loudly.

'The sun is setting in the sky. Adda would like to sleep,' Kole said. 'Aren't we going to put him into his gold coffin and ask him where else he'd like to visit before we lay him down in his earthy bed?'

There was dead silence in the room. Everyone avoided looking at each other. Only the noise of gas from an oil well being flared away in the distance came to their ears. Bom who had hardly said a word all day provided an alibi:

'Friends, the man is a friend of Oyeoku. Look what Oyeoku did to him. How do you carry a man with bloated testicles round the town? Oyeoku would kill us all.'

'Aye, that's right. That's right,' they agreed in unison.

'Let's bring him down to sleep then. Night is come.'

They tipped him over into the newly-dug grave.

'Adda's going to sleep the sleep of a poor man. And not a woman to do him the final offices. Look, my lords, let me give him a few parting words,' Duzia said.



And the company made way for him. He sat beside the grave, looking into it. Adda lay there, his face downwards. Duzia spoke in measured tones.

'Lie there, brave hunter. Lie there, poor man, far from the tax gatherers, the big liars. You have paid the final tax to Oyeoku and your god. Lie there and watch us slowly live this death in life, our life a burden and a terror. But see us smile like sunshine, sing like the cricket through it all. And join us at the feast of new yam; celebrate with us, brave ancestor, the feast of the maidens fresh from the fattening rooms. Then watch us succumb at the touch of nature, watch us die a happy death, the final death. Farewell . . . what else is there to say?'

'It's well done. It's well said,' answered the company.

They covered the grave with sand, had more drinks and departed. The women filed past slowly, sobbing heavily, professionally.

When the tax clerks arrived later that night, they found Adda's door shut. They left a summons to the tax office on the door, all the same.

## *Part Two*

# HIGH LIFE

In fact eh, if you know how I was feeling that night, you will be sorry for me.

I was at Aba and it was New Year's Day. Anybody who has stayed in Eastern Nigeria will know or will hear of Aba. When you hear republic, republic, you don't know what it is like until you go to Aba. Christ Jesus! I have not seen one town in this country where everybody is equal like Aba. Just imagine, the taxi drivers can knock big grammar; the traders whack tough suit like big Minister. Then if you go to the hotel, you will see a young man who will come and buy beer, beer not tombo, for everybody in that hotel. Wonderful. And then when you think of fine babies, you can't beat Aba. If you want high society one, you will get; if you want proper teenager who sells in the chemist shop, you will get. And sometimes, you will get them cheap because everything in Aba is cheap. In fact, in the market, if you take care, you can buy very big thing for small price. This is some of the reason why I used to like Aba.

And that is why I went there to spend New Year with my brother who lives in that town. Actually, this my brother loves me very much. His father's mother and the sister of my father . . . or rather . . . what am I saying? . . . yes, his father's mother and my father's sister come from the same mother and father. Exactly. So as I was saying, I went to spend my New Year with him.

On that day, things were very hot. In the morning, I was reading one book which I brought with me from Onitsha. The name of the book was *How to make love without spending*

money.' There are many such books like that in Onitsha market. And in fact if you see the big English they blow in that book, you will respect the writer. So that morning, I was jollying and I was very happy.

My brother's wife, Alice, can cook very well and that morning, she prepared Jollof rice with plenty of fish for us. It is only on occasion like New Year or Christmas that we eat such food, otherwise it is always gari with soup. After we have finished eating, we all went to church at St Michael's.

There are many churches in Aba, for example, Salvation Army, Christ Army which people normally call Chris-amin, Assembly of God Mission where people beat drums and dance, then there is Catholic and many other small ones like The Holy Spiritual Joyful Church of Mount Sion which is at our backyard. The pastor of this church is a trader in second-hand clothes. I like that church; they sing like Nigerians. It is not like St Michael's where they translate English songs into Igbo. And the Pastor does not pretend that God sent him from heaven to come and look after the members of the Church. Anyway, since my father, mother and everybody in our family goes to Anglican, I also go there even though I do not like it. There is one other reason why I go to St Michael's. There are always very many fine babies there.

On that day, they were dressed in very fine cloths, from kente cloth to short, tight skirts. I won't tell you a lie. I like women very much and when I saw them looking fine inside the church, I forgot about the prayer and the sermon very many times, but I had to pray for forgiveness again and again. When church broke, I told my brother not to wait for me because I will go to see some of our towns-people who were living in other parts of the town.

It was a very hot day and there were many people on the road. Some were singing and dancing and others were looking at those who were dancing. In one place, I saw some people in masquerade. That masquerade was very ugly but the man who was inside it was dancing very well. One time that he came to me, I was very afraid, to talk true. I wanted to run away but since there were many babies around, I was forced to wait. The masquerade begged me for money as they always do. I

pretended not to hear him. But he stood there until shame caught me. Then I put my hand into my pocket and was glad to find that I had only one pound currency note. I brought it out so that he may see it and go away because I had no change. But do you know what happened? No sooner he saw it than he snatched it away from me. God of mercy. My eyes began to turn. All the fine babies around me were laughing. To preserve my dignity, I laughed too. That is what my master used to call laughing on the other side of your mouth. To lose one pound in such time of austerity is no joke at all. After some time, I left that place and went to the house of one of my towns-people that I knew very well.

When I got there, lo and behold, many other of our towns-people were congregated. There were more than forty people or even fifty people in that small room. All of them were eating stockfish and drinking tombo. When I saw this stockfish, I swallowed saliva because it was looking very very sweet. As soon as Adibe the owner of the house saw me, he shouted: 'Hei, my brother, welcome. Where have you been all the time?'

I told him that I am working at Onitsha.

'So those who work in Onitsha cannot come to Aba to see his brothers, eh? Is it so?'

'I have been too busy, that is all.'

This one seemed to angry Adibe very much. He turned to everybody who was in that room and said: 'My dear brothers, here is one of us who says he has no time to come and see us. You see what is wrong with our young men of nowadays? They spend all their money running after hotel women and cannot keep even one penny to give their poor brothers at home. In our time, will we have do the same?'

'At all, at all,' everybody answered.

I thought he was going to stop there. Not at all. Adibe was like tap for water. If you turn it, the water will continue to run till you turn it again. Exactly.

So Adibe said again: 'Now you see, my brothers, all of us here are sitting on the floor of this house, is it not so?'

'It is so,' they agreed.

'Now, if we ask this our young man to join us do you think he will agree? Will he not say he is too big to sit on the ground?'

Believe me yours sincerely, I thought Adibe to be drunk. However, to satisfy all of them, I immediately sat on the ground. Then they passed the stockfish and palm wine to me. Everything was very bitter in my mouth because all the time I was eating, I was thinking of my trouser which was dirtying. I had just dry-cleaned that trouser, and now, they were forcing me to sit on the ground with it.

After some time, I took excuse because I wanted to go away. No sooner than Idika jumped up and said we should go to his house. I did not want to go but I knew that our people will say that I was prouiding that is why I did not want to go with Idika. So I followed him like a goat to his house. And do you know where his house is? At Amammongo which is farther away and which is one of the worst quarters in Aba. When I saw that Idika was walking still, I asked him whether we will not take taxi.

'My house is very near,' was what he told me.

So I continued to follow him like a goat. After some time, I asked him again whether we will not take taxi. This time, he looked at me like a tiger and said:

'Why are you always asking for taxi, taxi? Did your father keep any taxi in this town? Or has your father who born you ever entered taxi before? You young men of nowadays have very big eye. Alright, we will enter taxi but you will pay for it.'

When I remembered how I had lost one pound that morning and that I have no more money in my pocket, I shut my mouth like African Continental Bank on Saturday afternoon. I did not ask for taxi again, so we walked till we reached his house.

I did not know that such a house was still existing in Aba. Even the house we have at home is a hundred times better than the house where Idika was living at Aba. But I did not say anything for fear that Idika will think that I was prouiding. Then Idika entered the room and brought some kola-nut. I ate that one. Then he entered into his room again and brought one bottle of coco cream. Because he had only one glass, he gave me that glass and poured some of the coco cream inside it. The remainder which was inside the bottle was for himself. He started to drink that one. As for myself, it was very hard to drink coco cream. I pretended that I like it very much but in

actual fact, I was very annoyed. Why did Idika call me to such useless house and make me walk such long distance for only one glass of coco cream? I was still rolling this thing in my mind when one short man came in.

His eyes were red like palm oil. From the way he was shouting and singing like a bushman I knew he was drunk. He came into that room and the first thing he did was to belch one big belch - 'Etiee'. The whole house started smelling beer beer. I did not talk. Then he said:

'Happy New Year.'

And I replied: 'Same to you.'

'What!', he shouted, 'why you curse me? What have I done to you that you are cursing me like that?'

'How did I curse you?', was my next question.

'You said, "Shame to you" when I told you "Happy New Year".'

'I did not say "Shame". I said "Same to you".'

'Idika,' he called, 'do you hear? He has repeated it again. Shame to me. Is it so? Do you think I am a thiefman or what?'

If you see how this short man's muscles were standing like the wheel of truck, you will be very sorry for me. I was afraid. I looked at Idika but the stupid drunkard was asleep. God in Heaven! Immediately, the short man held my neck and threw me through the door into the street like a ball. I continued to run and did not stop till I reached one hotel near Park Road, which is very near the station. I decided to go in there because there were many people who were jollying.

By that time, night was approaching. When I entered the hotel, they were playing one tough record called "Bottom Belly". I started to dance it and while I was dancing, I saw David eating and giving me a beckon. I went nearer him, and joined him to eat the cock which he was eating. Then he brought another cock plus some congo meat. We two finished them. Then he went and brought some bottles of beer. Christ Jesus. And this David is a common trader and my junior in the elementary school too! And he was now very rich. It is only then that I realised that it is better to be a trader than to work for the government or as cook for your master. David brought

some leaves from his pocket and gave me some part of it. I did not know what it was so I asked him.

'It is called gay,' was his answer. 'That is the name tough guys like us give to what others call opium.'

And so I began to smoke that thing which looked like okro leaf. I drew the smoke into my belly and . . . before I could twinkle one eye, my eyes began to turn. I began to see double. Every man in that hotel was two in my eyes. I looked at David and I saw two Davids – one original and the duplicate. Then as if by force, I began to hala like madman. I made very big pandemonium in that hotel. I went to the part where they normally do business with the hotel babies. There were many people waiting in line. And by that time, my man was struggling inside my trousers. I continued to hala until the proprietor of the hotel came and pushed me out for my rascality.

That one annoyed me very much because I very much wanted to enjoy myself that night. So I went along Asa Road towards the market. It was getting to twelve o'clock and they use to say that there are ghosts in the market by that time. But I was not afraid because the gay removed all fear from my mind and moreover they use to say that some women stay near the market for car owner who will take them home for the night. All I was thinking was how I will get one portable damsel to deposit in my room for that night. I was near the market place when I saw one. That damsel was a bundle of sophistication I tell you. And she was perambulating lacadaisically along the road. I went to her and said:

'Baby.'

'Yes, my dear,' was what she answered.

This one surprised me because girls never use to agree so quickly. So I said:

'Happy New Year.'

'Same to you,' was what she replied.

'To where are you going to?' I asked her.

'I have no place to stay.'

I thanked God. So I invited her to my brother's house. She agreed and I was very very happy. This baby was not very good to look at but she was walking with style! God so kind she

agreed to walk all the way to my house especially as I had no money in my pocket. What will I have said if she wanted us to take taxi? Anyway, as I was saying, we two started walking hand by hand, leg by leg to my brother's house. By this time, the alcoholic metabolism in my system was very great. Finally, we reached our house and we went into the room where I was staying. By that time, my brothers them and all other people in that yard were fast asleep.

I undressed very quickly because I wanted to make romantica with the woman. But all the time, she refused to pull her dress. I thought she was shaming because of the light. So I quenched the electric. Then I went to the bed where she was sitting and removed her blouse. No breast. Ah – ah. What type of woman is this? Only artificial breast. Anyway, that did not surprise me too much because I have heard that many women are using it. Then I began to remove the woman's loin cloth. Although by this time I was feeling very hot inside and I was impatient, I took time to remove that loin-cloth. The next thing I found was that the woman was wearing short knicker. Ah – ah. What type of woman is this? is what I asked myself. Then I tried to remove the knicker. All this time, the woman said nothing at all. She was very very silent like church on Monday. So as I was saying, I started to remove her knicker . . . slowly . . . very slowly . . . God Almighty! the woman is a man! A proper man. I was flabbergasted. I shouted 'Help! help!! help!!!' Then the woman-man picked up all his-her things and gave me three sound slaps on the face and ran away. The gay and beer cleared from my eyes one, two. Soon my room was full of people among of whom was a constable.

'What happened?' was what the constable asked me.

I told him every thing from A to Z. All the people were listening with mouth open. One man said it was spirit, another said fairy and another said ghost. The constable called me and asked what I will give him so that he will look for the person who have played me that trick. I opened my mouth and looked at him, and rolled my eyes three times because, one, police is meant to do his work free; two, I had no money; and three, I could not believe that it was ordinary human being that I brought into that house. When the police saw that I had no

money for him, he said:

'My friend, you are victimised by a magnanimous hallucination.'

All the people who were in that house laughed; then he went out and all the other people followed him one by one.

That night, I never slept. The next day, I arranged my box very early, entered a bus and went back to Onitsha. Since that day, I have not gone to Aba again and even now that I am telling this story, I am still afraid. One other thing is that only last week, I read of identical event in 'Daily Times'.

Terrible!

The night was dark. Black clouds hung in bunches in the sky and from time to time bright streaks of lightning ran across the heavens.

Sergeant Ikeme, sitting in the police office and throwing a lazy sleepy glance before him at regular intervals, could see nothing for miles around. Only in the far distance could he spot the twinkling street lights which burn throughout the night. Safely entrenched on an uncomfortable stool obviously designed to keep him awake, he defied officialdom and promptly went to sleep as soon as it was ten o'clock. And he had taken over the night duty at nine! By his side, his lengthy head embedded in his lap, Private Okeke imitated his superior, lending more atmosphere to the occasion by snoring unmusically - which dissonance had more than once awakened the Sergeant and earned the Private not only a punch on the head but also words of abuse and a warning to remain wakeful. The Sergeant had no sooner delivered himself of the punch and the emphatic warning than he laid his head in his lap and slept again. And Private Okeke, having let both the punch and the words sink thoroughly into his flesh and become part of him, forgot them and went to sleep again, snoring even louder to indicate to his superior that both the punch and the warning had had a superlative effect on him.

'I wan piss,' a voice whined from cell 10.

Neither of the officers of the law heard him. The voice became more insistent. 'I wan piss.' No answer from the policemen.

'I say I wan piss. P.C., Sergeant! I wan piss!' yelled he in desperation.

The noise succeeded at last in penetrating the loud snore of Private Okeke and finally pierced the foggy regions of the Sergeant's dazed mind. As soon as he was conscious, the Sergeant jumped up and said with all his full throat and broad chest:

'Who goes there?'

'I wan piss,' came the answer, and by this time the Sergeant had regained enough consciousness to perceive that the cry came from cell 10. Whereupon he tried to re-establish his official position by asking in a sonorous voice, 'Whasmatter?' 'I wan piss,' again from cell 10.

The Sergeant could not be expected to answer such requests; so he seized Private Okeke's snoring nose, gave it a powerful twitch and when that worthy finally awoke from sleep, seized him by the neck and hurled him towards cell No 10 with a 'Private wey dey sleep on duty, how can he get promotion?'

As Private Okeke was still too dazed, amazed and confused by the entire proceedings, the Sergeant received no answer to this most pertinent question. So he burst into a soliloquy. 'If ever I slept on duty how will I become Sergeant today with possibility of becoming Sub-Inspector tomorrow?'

The night was extremely dark; there was no living creature, visible or invisible, to answer the Sergeant's ponderous question. Only the insistent voice crying, 'P.C., I wan piss'. But that was not the point. However, it was known that a hundred pounds had left the Sergeant's pockets, had gone through one other hand which removed twenty pounds for its own pockets, and the remainder had passed to another person who removed another twenty, and the rest had passed to a very high, honest, hard-working official whose task it was to keep the files and keep an eye on all keepers of the peace for the purposes of rewarding those who possessed some real qualities. This high official had interpreted 'real qualities' in a fashion most suitable to himself and, on receiving the aforesaid sum of money, had singled Corporal Ikeme out as possessed of 'real qualities', and so promoted him to the rank of Sergeant.

'I wan piss,' again from cell 10.

The Private was now wide awake. He understood the message and said, 'You wan piss, you wan piss, everytime you wan piss. Abi you be llama?'

'Yesah,' the voice admitted.

'Awright, you can fit to piss dere,' the Private ordered. 'You can fit to piss dere on de floor,' he repeated to make his meaning quite clear to the prisoner.

Instantly, a sound as of water pouring from a spout in the roof-top was heard. The Private looked at the Sergeant; the Sergeant looked at the Private and spat across the desk into the black night. Private Okeke, to indicate his utter respect for his superior, swallowed his saliva with a very audible gulp. The noise emanating from No 10 ceased. The two law keepers each took their heads in their arms once more and went into combat.

The only forty-watt bulb in the room had burned out earlier that week and no one had bothered to replace it. In its stead, a candle now flickered between the Sergeant and his inferior. With a sudden inrush of air, it went out and all was darkness again. The officers slept on. Then another voice cried, this time from cell 11:

'I wan shit.' No one answered. 'I wan shit,' the voice repeated, briefly and menacingly.

Private Okeke jumped up from his seat, cursed, groped for the box of matches, found it, relit the candle and was on the point of sleeping again when the voice repeated almost tearfully: 'I wan shit.' 'What!' he growled and directed a fierce look towards cell 11 which was however lost in the darkness of the night.

'I wan shit,' briefly, prayerfully and insistently.

'Awright, you can fit to shit dere.'

Great activity in cell 11.

The Sergeant slept peacefully. The Private looked from the candle to his senior, took a whiff of air and spat into the night. Cessation of activities in No 11. Altercation from the inmates:

'Ah-ah, oga, wetin be dis?'

'Oh Gawd I don die for dis prison. Every tin plus urine and shit.'

'P.C., come open de door make man no die from dis kain smell.'

'Abi, prison na your house? You tink say when you dey for prison you go dey comfortaboro like to say you dey for your house?' This from the miscreant.

'You tink say prison ward na latrine?'

'You no hear de time wey P.C. tell me make I shit here? You no hear de time 'e talk 'am?'

'You lucky say I no see your face, oderwise you for regret dis tin wey you do dis night.'

'Ha, dis life self!' This from a despairing prisoner who had not joined in the general complaint because he had his mouth and nose covered with his hands.

The Private sat unconcerned, staring into the black void. A pencil fell from the table on to the floor. The Private started; the Sergeant awoke from sleep and yelled, 'Silence there.' And there was absolute, death-like silence. The prisoners went back to their beds with soul-bruising sighs. The representatives of the law went back to sleep.

The telephone had been purring for well over ten minutes and no one had answered it. Then, as though they had carefully timed it, the Sergeant and his subordinate woke up at one and the same time. Private Okeke moved forward tentatively to answer it.

'Okeke, get back to your seat,' ordered Sergeant Ikeme who was very jealous of his position and always asserted it at the slightest provocation. Okeke slouched back, yawned mouth wide-agape, received a smack on the lips and slumped back onto his stool. The telephone purred more.

'God punish that telephone,' cursed Ikeme.

Then feeling very important for the benefit of the overwhelming darkness and Okeke, he moved first one buttock and then the next from the stool and by this very methodical and scientific process, succeeded at last in removing his bulk from the stool and then moved in any equally calculated manner to the small table at the back of the room where the dusty, once black telephone sat. Then he cleared his throat, looked in the direction of the Private just to ensure that that individual was looking at his minutest action, picked up the receiver and bawled 'Hallo'.

The voice at the other end was apparently speaking very fast

and excitedly for Ikeme had occasion to say in his most official voice, 'Now, now, now, hold on; let us go from one fact to the next; that is the way we work, you know. We are very different from you civilians you see. We believe implicitly in method,' concluded the lecture. The caller seemed to have understood the ways of the police and the business of conversation was continued. 'Yes . . . (the first point given time to sink into the foggy regions of the Sergeant's mind) . . . Yes, hold on . . .'

The Sergeant turns round very methodically, perceives that Okeke is sleeping and kicks him on the buttocks then proceeds to watch him slyly from the corner of his eye as if to say 'Serves you right; think you can trick an old hand eh?' Convinced that Okeke cannot sleep again, he walks back to the receiver and takes the message without an apology to the near-hysterical caller. A horde of 'yeses' is spoken and at long last the message is through. The receiver is dropped with a bang.

'Private, go up to No 3 Abeokuta Street.'

'And do what, sah?'

'Ask no questions and I'll tell you no fibs,' - 'fibs' repeated as though to say, 'Do you realise that I know that word which incidentally you do not know?'

The effect is not lost upon the subordinate who, supposing the word to be of high philosophical content, scratches his head. And he finally ambles out of the office and so on to his motor cycle towards Abeokuta Street.

The night's blackness enveloped him; the sound of his motor cycle was the only noise that came to Okeke's ears. Fantastic flights of the imagination. The bushes became squadrons of soldiers intent on grabbing Okeke and throwing him into a bottomless pit; the long grasses took the shape of huge snakes which shot out their tongues to harm him. Once, he heard them say distinctly, 'Yah, you bribe-taker, we've got you at last.' And Okeke went off: 'No, it wasn't myself alone. Go and ask Sergeant Ikeme. He asked me to do it. I swear by the name of Almighty God and the spirit of my ancestors. Don't hold me, please; if you look into the pot at my bedhead, you will get my own share.' Gallops on the road; Okeke winces; the street lights shine brighter.

'I ought to make a sign of the cross. I am sure that will help



me. No, no I am not the only bribe taker in this country; look at the Ministers of State and of religion, the chiefs and all. Before I came into the service, didn't I pay fifty pounds to increase my height by an inch? Ya-oh, leave me. Yes, I ought to apply the brakes here – so – yah, that's much better. What a pot-hole! And now it is beginning to drizzle. Damn it. And Sergeant Ikeme is busy sleeping in the office right now. When I become a Sergeant, won't I kick the Privates as I am being kicked now! . . . How could Ikeme sleep in that smelly office where they piss and shit? The man is a born pig. Those prisoners, how they suffer! I hope I will never become a prisoner myself. Everybody in this country is corrupt. Number 3 Abeokuta street. What cold. I hope this caller provides me with some brandy otherwise I'll die. My insides are almost falling out. Now I'd better apply the brakes and no nonsense once I get there – so.'

A small crowd had gathered in front of No 3 Abeokuta. They were all speaking at once in excited whispers. Okeke walked into the group, demanded absolute silence and took perfect control of the situation.

'Where is the owner of the house?' he asked.

Baduru, a short, squat, square-shouldered, bald-headed, pot-bellied man carrying a double-barrelled gun shot his belly forward and dragged the rest of himself in its wake. Popularly known as 'the Pot' for very obvious reasons, he was wrapped in a pinkish, tattered dressing-gown so that as he stood there, he looked like a cartoonist's rendition of a juju-priest. A veritable heap of flesh, ferocity glared from his eyes.

'Yes, whasmatter here?' asked Okeke.

Baduru gathered his clothes about him so as to be able to demonstrate the story without hindrance for the benefit of the arm of the law. Then he began:

'I was sleeping at about half past twelve when I heard some noises at my window. I woke up immediately.'

Private Okeke yawned and glared at those who had gathered round him, their eyes shining, to hear the story all over again for the umpteenth time.

'Get out all of you,' bawled the harsh voice of the law.

The crowd moved back one pace, and the Pot recommenced:

'I was sleeping at about half-past one when I heard some noises at my front door.'

'Yes, yes, we've heard that already,' said the law, ignoring the very obvious discrepancy in the statement. 'What happened next?'

'Wait, I'm coming,' replied the Pot who wanted to tell the story in his own way, and in his own time.

'Yes, wait. Wetin?' in a chorus from the crowd who wanted to hear the story from the beginning once again with as many embellishments and additions as the narrator's imagination could conjure.

'What kain policeman be dis sef?'

'And 'e no hold common notebook for take down de statement sef.' Stark, naked truth peered Okeke in the face and he winced; but he was not going to be intimidated.

'Odah, odah,' he called like the Speaker in Parliament. 'Yes, ogah, continue your story.'

The Pot resumed: 'When I opened my doors, I found four men dressed in rags loitering dangerously around my corridor, some heavy objects in their possession. I challenged them. They did not answer. On the contrary, they began to retreat steadily.'

Okeke shut his eyes and struck a posture to intimate that the minutest details of the story were sinking into him.

'At this point, I became suspicious. They broke into a run and I shot into the air,' the Pot said, excitement in his voice.

'You shot into the air, did you say?' asked Okeke.

'Yes, I shot into the air.'

'Good. Continue.'

'As soon as I had fired, one of them fired back. Fired at me, in my house, on crown land . . . on crown land . . .' Repetition to demonstrate the full extent of the perfidy of the miscreants.

The Private shook his head. Obviously, the officer of the law was only too aware of the manner of proceeding of such roguish thieves. As a matter of fact, he was regretting the fact that the Pot's beer did not flow as freely as his words. And the night was cold, very cold. The representative of the law of the land drew a long deep sigh. The pot-bellied owner of No 3 Abeokuta Street had resumed his narrative, and the crowd,

moved as when first they heard the story, drew nearer him, their mouths wide open so as to receive its full impact. Inspired by so willing an audience, the Pot proceeded to exaggerate, magnify and glorify his deeds.

'Yes, they fired at me, in my own house, on crown land; of course they did not know that I am an old soldier; I ducked, (suited the action to the word), and their bullet whistled over my head. (Here, the crowd ducked too to save their heads from being severed from their necks.) Then I held my gun, aimed at one of them, right at his brains, yes, that's where I aimed, my intention was to blow him to smithereens on the spot, to render him food for worms this very night. (Loud groans, moans, grunts from individual members of the crowd at the prospect.) Yes, then after the aim, I pressed the trigger (shudders and shivers among the crowd). But can you imagine what happened next?'

The crowd could not and said so. Private Okeke could not possibly be expected to imagine anything whatsoever with his teeth clattering and all his energies devoted to dreaming of pots of brandy which he would be quaffing after the spell of story-telling. He smacked his lips gratefully in advance. The Pot, supposing that this smack of the lips was indicative of the complete approval of the officer of the law, and consequently of the law, pursued his narrative with increased ardour. He was obviously enjoying every minute of it.

'The bullets refused to leave the magazine. That is what happened.'

The crowd sighed with deep relief.

Then the Pot continued: 'On closer examination, I discovered that the rifle had not been fully loaded before I went to bed. That is what saved them (the crowd moaned). God saved them. Oh yes, God is very kind, otherwise my rifle would have been loaded.'

The crowd shook their heads in vigorous affirmation. The protector of the law, of justice, peace, order and tranquillity joined in the affirmation partly to cover the fact that he had not been listening and partly out of fear lest he be thought foolish for not agreeing with the majority. He hoped secretly that the story was ended. In this he was mistaken.

Baduru now turned to the crowd and said in his most powerful voice: 'And can you believe that all the time I was firing, not one of these men (motioning towards them), not one of these cowards who call themselves men came to find out what was happening? (Here, the crowd bent their heads in shame.) And they do not know that this battle I fought was fought on their behalf. These thieves will come again! (The crowd looked round to ensure that there were no robbers around the corner.) Yes, they will come again (this authoritatively), but they will not come to my house because they know I have a gun; they will go to No 5 or No 6 or No 7.'

Having seen the effect of his words on the crowd, Baduru hastened to reassure them and reassert his own position as the saviour of the street.

'Well, let them come any time,' he concluded with a menacing toss of the head accompanied by an emphatic shake of the forefinger.

'Let them come any time.'

The officer of the law heaved a sigh of relief. The crowd began to disperse, assured that the next time the thieves came, they would be able to sleep in peace and leave the shooting to Baduru who suddenly remembering that he had not had his share of sleep for the night, turned to Okeke and extended a hand of friendship:

'Goodnight, P.C.,' he said.

Okeke gulped.

'Thank you very much, P.C. Let them come next time. But do your best for us now. Our lives are in jeopardy. Goodnight.' And he rolled indoors.

Okeke glared at him, disappointment boldly stamped on his face. No brandy was forthcoming and the night was cold. He was being exhorted to perform his duty without encouragement, without hope of reward. It went against his constitution, his habits. Anyway, he remembered nothing of the facts of the case; he had taken no notes, inspected nothing, done nothing. He congratulated himself on his foresight. As the pot-bellied man turned off his lights, Okeke mounted his motor bicycle and loudly acclaiming to all and sundry in the emptiness that he was taking his leave, did so.

The office was as dark and dank as he had left it. Ikeme had spread a mat on the writing desk and was snoring eloquently, a bottle of gin lying empty by his side. The subordinate had been in the office for more than two minutes before Ikeme suddenly jumped up and barked: 'Who goes there?'

'Na me oga,' replied Okeke.

'Ah-ah, Okeke, you don return? You take plenty time oh; suppose sleep been catch me all dat time, wetin for happen for office?'

There being no worthwhile answer to the question, Okeke kept mute. Ikeme yawned.

'Wetin happen for Abeokuta Street?' he asked.

'Attempted burglary.'

'You catch the burglar?' demanded Ikeme with immense interest.

'No sah.'

'Okeke, you will never be promoted,' said Ikeme, suddenly remembering that he was the superior officer. 'You will never be promoted.'

'They had gone before I came sah.'

'I see. You will never be promoted.'

'Yesah.'

'P.C. wey no fit bring anything to superior officer, is such P.C. useful?'

Then realising that he might well be wrong, he asked hopefully:

'Anything?'

'Nothing, sah.'

Obviously, Okeke understood his superior.

'And the master of the house was there?'

'Yesah. Big man with double-barrelled gun.'

'And not even one bottle of beer?'

'At all sah.'

'Or shot of brandy? Or perhaps you drink everything before you reach here?'

Okeke shook his head in deep despair and despondency.

'On cold night like dis? And you say na big man?'

'Yesah.'

'Big man for mouth.'

Okeke was on the point of protesting that in fact the man in question was big all over and not only in the mouth. Fat and all that. But the man's inhumanity was beyond Okeke's comprehension and he left Ikeme to carry the wrong impression of the man's girth. Ikeme for his own part felt bitter against these professed 'big men' who did not know how to make people comfortable and willing to do their duties; otherwise, why should he have spat so terrifically into the night, cleared his throat so voluminously and spat more spitefully than he had ever done since he became a Sergeant by promotion?

'I wan shit,' shouted the inmate of cell 5.

'You can shit dere,' bellowed the Sergeant from the recesses of a large cupboard where he had gone to retrieve a huge note-book.

Tremendous activity in cell 5.

Okeke held his nose.

Ikeme re-installed himself on his stool, the dusty book open before him. Then he seized a pen and drew the candle nearer.

The notebook was eloquent testimony of the great efficiency of Ikeme and others of his calling. Many cases were reported and all were properly documented and signed by a functionary of the law. Sergeant Ikeme turned its pages over delicately, like an illiterate reading a newspaper. As he turned the pages, and read silently, a malicious smile played around the corners of his lips.

'Case No 25: Housebreaking, 50 Aba Road: Investigation instituted.

'Case No. 50: Murder on the road; dead body found; no traces of blood. Investigation continues.'

He turned the pages faster and came to case No 98.

It read: 'Bicycle theft, offices of Forex Company Incorporated. Investigation instituted.' He smiled when he saw that; he remembered the case only too well. The student who had lost his bicycle had rushed into the office swearing that if only he had a policeman to aid him, he would recover his possession. He had had to be taught that things do not move that fast with the police. It took the officer on duty thirty minutes to take the particulars of the case while the student paced the corridors of the office impatiently, whining, and

groaning by turns. When eventually the policeman on duty was done with him, he had been sent to Sergeant Ikeme himself. Since the student did not understand the language of the law, he had been asked to wait while Ikeme went to the toilet. Ikeme had spent more than thirty minutes in the said activity and the student had got tired, disappointed, disillusioned and had gone away. 'Stupid Nigerians,' Ikeme mused, 'always expecting something for nothing.'

Case No 99 had to do with an expatriate engineering executive who had lost the windscreen of his car six times within two months. Each theft had been reported to the police who had carefully documented the report. Ikeme chuckled as he recalled the countenance of the Frenchman when he reported the last theft and appealed to him in his shaky English to ensure that no further thefts of his windscreen occurred. Ikeme had listened to him very patiently and had taken notes. But the matter had ended there. Now turning over the pages of the book, Ikeme chuckled mischievously: 'Nonsense white man. 'E tink dis na England. Awright, make 'e go look for him windscreen by himself.'

In this condition of mind, he wrote down carefully, apropos the case before him, 'Case No 100: Attempted burglary, 3 Abeokuta Street. Investigation continues.' Then he shut the book with a sense of achievement and put it back into the dusty cupboard. Private Okeke had already gone to sleep.

The next morning the local papers splashed the news across the front pages. It was reported how the police arrived on the scene as soon as was possible and just missed the miscreants. However, investigations would continue. The editor wished the police more grease to their elbows in their effort to eradicate crime from the community, as was absolutely necessary for the peace, prosperity and property of all honest citizens.

At nine o'clock that morning, Sergeant Ikeme and Private Okeke, decked in their 'agbada', were sitting together at the 'African Upwine Bar', quaffing calabashes of palm-wine, the chores and cares of their responsibility totally forgotten and that barrier which exists between a sergeant and a private on duty, melted for the occasion.

They sat there, each brandishing a leg of chicken, the peace of men who have successfully accomplished their various life-missions beaming on their faces. The song on their lips was a simple one:

'Anywhere tombo dey,  
I am serious.  
Anywhere tombo dey  
I am serious.'

We drove slowly through the quagmire of Ikeja where rusty, squeaking cars blared noisy, dissonant horns; broken down vehicles stood defiantly in the middle of the road; banana peels, leaves that had been wrapping for human food, human waste and other debris made up the concentrated filth which lay in a turgid stream in the open sewers. A harsh sun beat mercilessly down. I kept the windows of the car wound up to the full and turned the air-conditioning to the maximum. Yet the foul smell of the street seeped into our car. As we crawled along, the rickety houses of the neighbourhood stood in their enormous squalor. Rags lay out on the railings to dry in the sun. A three-storey building in the modern style would occasionally rise beyond the rusty corrugated iron sheets of a house built forty to fifty years ago, the home of ten to twelve families. We were in search of Alhaji.

Alhaji was, in the estimation of my aunt, quite a phenomenon. He had started out as a draughtsman in an office and had graduated to being a middleman for land owners anxious to sell land to anxious, land-hungry developers. It was the intention of all land owners to sell a single piece of land to as many as three or four buyers. It was the job of the likes of Alhaji to find the three or four unsuspecting developers. And more. The likes of Alhaji also ensured that each buyer had his piece of land properly registered at the Government Lands Registry. And the likes of Alhaji made sure that when the buyers all went to court to sort out the tangle, the case was so complicated and went on so long that either all four

contestants despaired or died, or the judge who sat on the bench got transferred to a different corner of the earth.

The main beneficiary of the entire procedure was, of course, Alhaji. Because he worked on a commission basis. A commission from each buyer of the land. Ten per cent. A commission from the land-owner for each payment by each buyer. Ten per cent. A commission from each buyer to represent his true interest when the case went to court. Ten per cent. A commission from the landlord to prevent his being sent to jail. Negotiable bulk sums. And a commission from the judge to ensure that one of the buyers proved willing to buy the judgement whenever it was to be handed down. Negotiable.

Alhaji was, as might well be imagined, a happy, smiling man who talked fast and well, well. To help the smile on his face, he had duly asked during his first pilgrimage to Mecca that his canines be capped with gold. So he had gold teeth and his golden smile could not be missed in a crowd.

Alhaji was also a man of business, my aunt said. He had given up the job of a salaried draughtsman years earlier – as soon as he had identified enough sources of commission to free himself from the burden of earning a meagre monthly salary. And with his early wins, he had established a brick-moulding factory. When Alhaji speaks in terms of a brick factory, you must understand that bricks fall off the assembly line as fast and as richly as Toyotas from the assembly line of a Japanese motor company. The only difference which Alhaji would tolerate, and it was a difference entirely original to and delightful to himself, is that he, Alhaji, was Managing Director, Accountant, Secretary and salesman of his company. This ensured that profits stayed in the family. And if he was not in business for all of the profits, what was he there for? Now, as soon as Alhaji had made sufficient money from the sale of bricks, as befitted so proficient a Managing Director, he had had to look for a new line of business. For, what sort of Managing Director would he be if he could not print a card that shouted out loud that Alhaji was Managing Director of a Group of Companies and that within the Group were activities as diverse as 'Sale of Land', 'Brick-Moulding Factory' and 'Motels and Moteliers?' That indeed was one of the most

important reasons for the existence of the Acapulco Motel. Alhaji was a proud man.

My aunt had bought land through Alhaji and now feared that Alhaji had duped her of her land and money. She did not hold out much hope of our getting useful assistance from him. But there was no harm in our trying to do so. Fruitless enquiries at his residence had led us to his many offices on previous occasions.

It was to the Acapulco Motel that we went, as a final resort, that sunny morning. We had been to the Brick Moulding Factory. Not much appeared to be going on. A few bricks lay on the ground. There appeared to be no raw materials and the machinery was so rusty, we conjectured it had not been in use for some time. If there were any factory hands at all, they were not there when we called. Maybe they had gone on strike. The solitary man who was there in a skull cap and a grimy dansiki informed us that the Emdee (M. D. stands for Managing Director, you see) was at the Acapulco Motel where he had one of his many offices.

Ah, the Acapulco Motel. Who has not heard of Acapulco in Mexico? Who has not heard of sunshine and beauty and beautiful film stars relaxing in an opulent paradise? A paradise on the beach washed by the mighty ocean with the music of the spheres lulling the idle rich to peaceful sleep. Alhaji was a man of the world, a man of ideas. And as for a Motel, was it not a manifest improvement on a Hotel? It was unusual and might be suspected to belong to an unusual man. A man who, for instance, had gold in his teeth.

The signpost which announced the presence of the Acapulco Motel was hidden that morning by a rag which had been spread to dry in the sun. My aunt was the first to see it. When we got there, I drew to a stop, switched off the engine, and opened the car door. Hot air slapped us in the face. To the right of the Acapulco Motel, an open fire burned noisily. A huge pot of boiling oil let out an acrid smell. Directly in front of the Motel was a brand new Mercedes-Benz car. Underneath the plate number was a title. The owner of the car wanted it known that he was some sort of Chief. Everyone in the country was either a chief or about to be one. So that was no surprise. Nor was it a

surprise that the inside of the Mercedes was completely covered by some white fluffy material. A cow's tail dangled prominently from the roof of the car. My aunt whispered that it would have to be Alhaji's car. We walked past this glorious show of wealth and power into the Acapulco.

The famed Motel must have been designed by Alhaji himself. To the left, there was a small room. This was the bar. Flies flew around in welcome at the sight of us. The room to the right was equally small. The front door held strings of multi-coloured beads running vertically in several strands. This was supposed to be a handsome curtain. Peeping through it, I saw a mound of dirty white bedsheet. Emerging from the bedsheet was an enormous black torso which fell about generously. Alhaji was seated in his restaurant at one of four small dining tables. Each table was dutifully surrounded by four small chairs. Alhaji was alone and at work. In front of him were a number of invoice books, receipt books and other paraphernalia which should rightly belong to the Emdee of the Acapulco Motel and affiliated companies in the Group of Companies.

Alhaji sat in utter puzzlement. I could see that something was wrong. For he offered us a rather absent-minded, if not grudging, welcome and when I complimented him on his hard work, he let forth his tale of woe. He had to check his books every day otherwise the thieves who surrounded him and claimed to be his staff would reduce him to penury and disaster. Did we know that even though he had told all the stewards they could have one meal on the Motel each day, they actually had three? And all three on the Motel? That was the problem with the African worker. You could never trust him. He had learnt that lesson the hard way. For instance, did we know that behind the bar, the restaurant and the kitchen, he had a number of rooms which were used for 'short time'? Brief secret encounters of a sexual kind, I presumed. Of the ten rooms reserved for that salacious activity, one special room was lavishly provisioned. Unlike the others, it had a toilet, toilet paper and a towel so that any client could relax there absolutely with his 'partner'. My aunt squirmed uncomfortably. For these numerous and excellent privileges, the client was expected to pay ten naira the hour or part thereof. Now, did we

know that a bosom friend of his had used the deluxe facility the previous day and when he offered to pay, was told there were no receipt books and so did not get a receipt? The rental of the 'short time' facility and the proceeds from it never got reported to him, the Emdee and Chairman. He learnt the story later from his bosom friend. So he had then confronted the bouncer-cashier-steward-cleaner with the fact. And only then had he retrieved his losses. Did we see what the problem of running the Acapulco Motel was? It was enough to kill anyone. But he had resolved not to die. He would rather kill his workers first. The wretches. He was, that very day going to dismiss three quarters of them because as sure as night followed day, they were hellbent on bankrupting him.

I agreed with Alhaji on that score. Whereupon, Alhaji shook hands with me and offered us seats around his dining/executive table.

Then he proceeded to lay bare his battle plan for engaging more honest and capable hands. All Yorubas were out. No Yoruba man respected another Yoruba man. Every Yoruba man regards another Yoruba man's wealth as his own. He knew, as a Yoruba man, what he was talking about. I agreed with him. Alhaji smiled broadly at me. All Nigerians were out. Ever since oil money poured into the national coffers, every Nigerian was determined to procure as much of this unearned income as possible. Nigerians were all thieves. They did not care to work hard. Their main activity lay in scheming daring acts of brigandage. And they made no distinction between the national treasury and the assets of a Group of Companies belonging to a private man. Certainly, Nigerians were out. Lazybones.

I agreed with Alhaji in every material particular. Alhaji was impressed with me. I could see his eyes dilate with pleasure at my perspicacity and his smile widen from one end of his face to the other.

Then furrowing his forehead in deep thought, he said he was going to hire Ghanaians. He called them 'Ghananians'. The 'Ghananians' were well trained and hungry. They would be content with one meal a day. They would accept just about any salary he offered. They would work hard because they knew

that if he sacked them, they would have nowhere else to go. Yes, the 'Ghananians' were the answer to his problem. I agreed with him.

Whereupon, Alhaji extended a warm hand of friendship and shook my hand vigorously, slapped me on the back, called me a sage and said he was sure I had studied 'Business Administration.' I confessed I had. Then with self-satisfaction he shut his books, and wrapping the bedsheet round himself more snugly, turned his warm attention to my aunt whose presence he had hardly acknowledged up until that moment.

'Ah, Madam,' says he, 'good morning. Sorry oh, these business problems. They don't even allow you to greet your friends properly. But I am sure the Ghananians will help me solve my problems. How are things, Madam?'

'Things are bad,' said my aunt gloomily.

Alhaji went on his guard. 'How bad?'

'Very bad.'

My aunt was determined, I could see, to be unsparing.

'God will provide,' Alhaji said. And for emphasis, he repeated:

'God will provide.'

'Alhaji,' said my aunt after an appropriate pause to give God time to consider Alhaji's prophecy and prayer, 'I came to see you over that plot of land I bought from your man at Ilasamaja.'

'The land at Ilasamaja. The land at Ilasamaja. Ha!'

Alhaji spoke in hushed tones. From the way he said the words, I could see that he considered the land at Ilasamaja bewitched and bedevilled. Talking about it was like going through a jungle inhabited by wild animals and boa-constrictors.

'Someone has built on a part of my land,' my aunt said. 'And another man has fenced off another third. What is happening?'

Alhaji winced in pain. There was a long pause during which Alhaji peered through his curtain of beads at his Mercedes car outside. When he spoke, he did not address my aunt directly. He looked pointedly at me. It was obvious that he relied on my good sense so amply displayed earlier that morning to rescue him from the beasts that had begun to populate the streets. 'You know,' says Alhaji through his gold teeth, 'I was in

Calabar last month. I am a member of the Board of Directors of the Cement Company there. It is a Government Company.'

I now understood why the Company had gone out of production. With Alhaji as Director, it could not be otherwise. If he applied the principles he used in running the Acapulco Motel to the Cement Company the way to ruin was definitely well-paved and signposted. Yet it was still difficult for me to see the connection between the land at Ilasamaja and the bankrupt Cement Company of Calabar.

'And only last three months, my people made me a chief.' He pronounced the last word as 'sheef'. 'You can see my "sheef-taincy" title on my Mercedes. I think you saw it on the number plate?'

I said I did. My aunt remained silent, suspiciously looking at Alhaji with eyes of steel.

I still could not see the connection between the land at Ilasamaja, the Directorship, the chieftaincy and the number plate. From the way Alhaji continued to look at me, I guessed he expected me to have made the connection. I began to feel guilty. The heat in the room grew oppressive and I shifted uncomfortably in my seat.

Alhaji moved to save me from embarrassment. Still looking at me pointedly, and avoiding my aunt's eyes, he said in a matter-of-fact tone, 'You see, when you are the Emdee of your own Group of Companies, Director of a Government Company, and a chief in your hometown, you are an important person, a very important person.' This declaration left me in a state of utter stupefaction. Alhaji could see the devastating effect his words had had on me. And from the glint in his teeth, I knew he was well satisfied with himself.

Now he turned to my aunt, 'Madam I feel ashamed (he pronounced it 'achamed') over that land at Ilasamaja. That land at Ilasamaja has caused more trouble to all of us than all the land in Nigeria!'

Heigh ho!

'I feel "achamed." I feel "achamed" because the land has disgraced me before you and your husband. I feel "achamed" because that land has made me look like a fool.'

He waited to gauge the effect of his speech on my aunt. If she

was moved, there was nothing on her face to show it. Alhaji pounced on me. 'You see, that land is in trouble right now. Two families are quarreling over it. They have taken the matter to court. It is sub-judice.'

He rolled the word 'sub-judice' over on his tongue and finding it to his taste, repeated it for his personal satisfaction.

'Sub-judice . . . But that is not all. The last time we went to court, one of the plaintiffs, a man of sixty with four wives and twenty children was giving evidence in the witness box (he called it "weakness box") when suddenly he became ill. Before anyone could get to him, he was already dead . . . You know, he was a man of sixty. There was nothing wrong with him that morning. Or even when he entered the "weakness" box. Yet he died. Just like that! I fear the people of this town. They will do anything for money. Anything.'

Alhaji paused, a certain thought fleeting through his brain. There was fear in his eyes. The he added, 'So now all those involved in the case including the Magistrate, always have to wear their charms (he called them "sharms") to the court everyday. Everyday. For me, I wear my "sharms" whenever I am going to court because you never can tell.'

'You are very wise, Alhaji,' I said.

'Thank you very much, my brother,' replied he, his teeth gleaming. 'Thank you very much. You see, you never can tell. These people will do anything for money . . . Yes, I have to wear my "sharms" to court everyday.'

'I have to wear my charms all the time, no matter where I am. They protect me from all insolence, and help me win friends,' I said, lightly fingering the signet ring on my middle finger.

'Is that so?' Alhaji replied, wide-eyed.

'It is so,' I said.

I could see that Alhaji was very impressed with me. He stared, mouth-agape at the huge ring on my third finger and I could see his right hand unconsciously clasp the index finger of his left hand. Then I believe a wild thought ran through his mind. Because there was consternation in his eyes when he turned to my aunt.

'Madam, that land is in trouble,' he said. 'But it is not my fault. Believe me yours sincerely, it is not my fault. I did not



make them take the case to court; I do not know the judge. And for the parties involved in the matter, I swear to you as a "sheef", as a Managing Director of my own Group of Companies and as Company Director of Calabar Cement Company, I am doing everything to help you. I am on your side.'

Then turning to me, his eyes fixed on my third finger, he pleaded 'Beg Madam for me, my dear friend. I am doing my best. I will do my best. I am on her side. You know as an Alhaji, I have to be on her side. Allah.'

Alhaji's white bedspread had fallen from his shoulders to his waist. His black torso fell generously atop the bedspread. He breathed hard; the hard breathing of a habitual liar. He began to sweat. He got up clumsily to switch on the air-conditioner, knocking a chair over in the process.

Since the matter of charms became a part of the conversation, my aunt had gone into stitches. I saw her control herself with great difficulty, but when Alhaji swore in the name of Allah, she could hold herself no longer and burst into wild laughter. At first, Alhaji was at a loss as to the cause of her great merriment. But her long laughter served to relax him, and soon, we were all laughing humorously. When we had had our fill of belly laughs, my aunt returned to the business in hand. She warned Alhaji to ensure that her land was returned to her. Or alternatively, her money with full interest. Alhaji promised to do both and more.

'Do it soon, and let me hear from you before long.'

'Yes, Madam. Thank you. I will visit you, I will ring you. I promise you.'

We were already on our feet. The flies buzzed round the Acapulco, noisily.

'Can I have your telephone number, sir,' Alhaji asked of my aunt.

'It remains the same,' she replied.

'Oh, I see. I will telephone you, sir. I will call on you, I will come to see you as soon as I have arranged everything successfully. Allah. I am sure we will win the case and get all your land back. Allah. I will certainly telephone you. Even if the phone is not working, I will come to see you.'

Alhaji made more promises. We had stopped listening. The

Acapulco was still empty. The curtain of beads rattled in the blast of air from the air-conditioner. The flies buzzed more loudly.

As we walked through the door, I saw Alhaji eye my third finger suspiciously. He saw us to the car, opened the door for my aunt, and waved us goodbye. As we drove off, I saw him through the mirror ambling back to the Acapulco. My aunt was still in stitches.

'Are you hopeful now of getting back your land?' I asked.

'Not without the help of your sharms,' she replied, as giggle-born tears welled in her eyes.

We did not hear from Alhaji ever again. He did not telephone, he did not call on us, and whenever we telephoned the Acapulco, he was said to be either 'not on seat', or 'not around.' Then there was no longer an answer from his telephone.

When after a year we returned to the Acapulco, we found the Motel had closed down. It had been converted into living apartments. A solitary goat stared at us hard and long as though he had known us for ages. And among us, the goat is a symbol of foolishness.

As we drove away, I did wonder if some charm had translated Alhaji into a goat. And given the disposition of matters in our time, the possibility did not seem remote.

Ezi arrived at the offices of the External Affairs Ministry forty-five minutes late that morning. He was one of the first to arrive. The lift in the building was not working, one of the interminable power cuts – the hallmark of the nation – had seen to that. He had to climb the dark, dirty stairs to the eighth floor where his office was situated. He climbed slowly, doing his best to ignore the filth of the staircase which had remained unswept for months. The walls were unpainted, graffiti-marked, and pools of phlegm dotted each landing. He felt relief when he finally got to the eighth floor. A frown creased his sweaty brow as he stepped into the outer room which led to his office. Ade, his personal assistant, was reading a newspaper. Hurried, furtive attempts to hide it under the table only made him more conspicuous. He looked up at Ezi, a silly smile on his spotty face and shouted 'Good morning, sah' to him. Ezi ignored him. Abel the messenger was absent. Eliza, the secretary-typist, was eating noisily out of an enamel dish. The odour of hot peppers, red palm oil and onions swirled through the room. He held his breath for a second.

'Eliza?'

'Sah,' she answered.

'You'd better use some air-freshener as soon as you've ended your breakfast. I'd be happier if you had your meals either at home or in the staff canteen.'

'Yes sah,' she replied and put away her unfinished breakfast. And he strode off into the adjoining room which was his office.

As he sat down, he heard Eliza's soft voice mumbling words

he could not discern. And subdued laughter from Ade. He frowned. He knew they thought he was fussy, perhaps silly. Eliza had often told him that she had to leave home so early in the morning, she could not have breakfast before setting out. And she felt so hungry after the long wait at the bus stop, the scramble for a place on the bumpy, hot ride to the office, she had to nibble something immediately on arrival if she was to do meaningful work. Ezi understood that but it did not excuse the acrid smell of red-hot peppers. She could have something a bit more neutral, like biscuits, couldn't she? He felt irritated because he knew he had no power to discipline her. He could give her a bad report at the end of the year. But that would not influence her promotion, or her annual increment. Eliza and Ade knew that too. It made Ezi feel impotent.

He put his briefcase on his table and looked around the office. It was neat and well-kept. He had always insisted on its being kept immaculately clean. He had shown Abel how to dust the room. Abel had not liked the idea, it was too much work. Besides, nobody else in the entire building bothered much, if at all, about how clean their offices were. Ezi was making a show of being different, Abel thought and said so to his colleagues. Ezi had been told that his being a stickler for neatness was considered a pain. He did not mind. His room was a refuge, a refuge from the filth of the staircase, the stench of the lift, the corruption of the establishment. He drew a chair and sat down.

For thirty minutes, he did nothing but stare at the wall opposite him while different strands of thought ran through his mind, each of them worrying and confusing. He made every effort to compose himself, pull himself together, collect his thoughts and settle down to his duties for the day. But it was not easy. After what seemed like ages, he made one final effort and got ready to work. Faced with the same pile of files from which he had run away the previous day, his courage again failed him. The same files, the same crap, the same people, these seven years, he thought.

Absentmindedly, he opened one of the files and saw a minute from the Permanent Secretary. It had been written in a hurry, was grammatically incorrect, its thoughts incoherent. It had to

do with the situation in Namibia. That was obviously not important to the boss, and could be passed to subordinate officials. What was important was the award of contracts for the construction of houses for officials, the purchase of furniture for various embassies throughout the world. And vistas of theft, of incompetence, of lies, of dishonest endeavour came flooding into Ezi's mind. He felt blank despair in his heart. How different things had looked when he was freshly out of college! But no, he was not going to think of that. He'd leave it for the afternoon, or better still, for the evening when it was not so very hot and one could think clearly. He shut the files; then it occurred to him that the room was stuffy; all the windows were shut and he was almost suffocating. He got up, strolled to the window, flung it open and looked out into the distance.

It was not quite mid-morning, but the sun was already high in the sky and the humidity quite enervating. Lagos, disorganized as ever in the sweltering heat, was already breaking into its accustomed fever. Harsh sunlight fell dully on rusty rooftops. Houses, thrown together in clashing confusion, reminded him of a garbage heap. From his vantage position on the eighth floor, Ezi saw people, dwarf-like, move along the squalid streets; people in lazy, big, flowing gowns moved slowly, drifting past like the slow waters of the surrounding lagoon. The usual traffic jam had struck the main streets and was spreading like the waters of a flood into the smaller side streets. Big, luxurious cars belching forth thick suffocating smoke sat satirically beside dirty, ill-looking houses where people swarmed like maggots. The open market which spread monstrously below him was a confused mix of dirt, noise and bright colours. The babble of voices emanating from there was like the gulping rabble of frogs squatting in a mucky swamp. Ezi did not want to belong to all this. He wished he could fly away from it, from the market which reminded him of weavers in their bunched nests, twittering crazily. He felt sad. But as his gaze passed to the wide sea which stretched endlessly beyond the bay, he found some peace. And he turned away from the window. He switched on the light and was delighted to find there was now power. He shut the window, turned on the air-conditioning and settled down to work.

For the rest of the day, he buried himself in his files. Work was the only palliative to the sad thoughts which often rushed in upon him. He kept his secretary busy churning out memoranda and comments which he was sure no one read or understood. He knew that he had become a joke to his superiors and colleagues who thought he tried too hard to put depth into his work. They called him 'the essayist' mockingly. He was for ever consulting the Oxford English Dictionary, Roget's Thesaurus, Hartrampf's Vocabulary Builder. Yet he knew that no one read what he wrote. No one had ever challenged his memoranda, disputed his ideas, or for that matter congratulated him on his efforts. He was quite clearly on the periphery of the circle of authority in the Ministry: he was a man who could be dispensed with, his qualities of ability and hard work were not considered important. Preferment was by region of birth, by sycophancy or by belonging to the prevailing ethos of deceit and corruption. Ezi did not, could not belong and he knew it. He would not rise far in the service, he feared. Yet he stuck to his beliefs and the pain they brought.

The pain came to him often, inexplicable and powerful, breeding a melancholia which always descended without warning. It had come to him that morning as he drove out of his residence, when he saw a large bird which fluttered among the branches of a huge flame tree, uttering a loud screech as it flapped blindly for a perch. He had felt sad for the bird. And now it came again, just at that moment when he closed his last file with a sense of achievement. It was past noon; the sun blasted everywhere. He cleared the pile of files. And walked out of his office, clutching his briefcase.

It was not yet closing time, but already most staff were trooping out of their offices. The lift was working now and he squeezed himself into it, breathing with difficulty the body odour emitted by one of the passengers. He sighed with relief when they got to the ground floor and tumbled out of the lift. He walked across the main thoroughfare to the car park where he had left his car in the morning. The stench of urine slapped him in the face and he had to hold his nose while he hurriedly opened the car door and jumped into the driver's seat. Then he kicked the car into action and drove off.

He drove carefully through the usual jumble of ageing buses with peeling faces and bodies, the belch of smoke from coughing cars, of orange rinds, of the spittings of chewed sugar cane, of limp banana peels, of beggars stretching forth emaciated fingers, of food hawkers swatting flies from open basins of food wrapped in green leaves or old newspapers, through roads filled with pot-holes and garbage and arrived home tired, irritated and bad-tempered.

Back in his house that afternoon, Ezi had a lot to ruminate over. He recalled his time at University when, for him and most of his classmates, the dream was graduation and the pleasures that would follow: a good job with the accompanying perquisites of a house, a car, money and women. And so it had been for most of them. He had done well for himself, winning a place in the coveted administrative service with a house in the prestigious Ikoyi suburb. Here he was sheltered from the steaming sewers of the growing metropolis and the endless sounds of its loud inhabitants. He indulged himself to the full. For a time, it sufficed. But it could not last for ever. The glamour soon wore off and he began to question many of the things he had taken for granted. The inheritance of the colonial set-up with high salaries and perquisites, for instance. The idea that the few, himself among them, had access to what was best in the country while the huge majority wallowed in want. The social and ethnic divisions in the country. He asked questions of his colleagues, his friends, his superiors. And soon earned their disapproval. And then began the inevitable withdrawal from society. He avoided such haunts as the club where the cream of the city met in the evening to quaff beer by the bottle and trade obscenities. He began to feel lost. Entrapped in his Ikoyi house, he felt like a bird flapping fruitlessly in a cage.

All that afternoon, it was this feeling of helplessness in an inescapable situation which dominated his thoughts. He did not even bother to ask his househelp for lunch. When Dupe, his fiancée, called at the approach of dusk, his melancholy had not abated. She suggested they go out to the Bagatelle where they could drink and dance. Dinner there was out; it was normally too expensive for them.

The Bagatelle was run by a Lebanese and its clientele

consisted largely of Europeans and Asians who were in Lagos to reap the rich profits of the oil boom. There were hardly any locals there. The steep prices took care of that. It was a well-appointed nightclub, with a view of the Marina and the port of Apapa with its string of twinkling lights from waiting ships. There was a bar, a dance floor and a restaurant, all appropriately softly lit. They often went there, and nursed their drink while enjoying cool, soft music in the rock tradition and doing a turn or two on the dance floor. That evening, he was not much in the mood for dancing. Dupe sensed it, and sensibly chattered away gaily in the hope that she might take his mind away from his worries. She did not succeed. They returned at midnight and went off to bed. He slept almost immediately, to Dupe's surprise.

His eyes opened slowly to the darkness of the room. In that uncertain state between sleep and wakefulness, he groped for the bedlamp. He eventually laid his finger upon it, pressed the switch button and the room was immediately bathed in clear, soft, blue light.

He blinked, pulled out his watch from the bedside table and read the time. It was half-past four. Stretching forth his hands, he pulled the thick window-blinds and peered through the iron bars. There was moon-light; the moon shone with a mellow light, shedding such peace that his heart glowed for a second. He recalled those lines he had heard or read somewhere – 'God's in his seat, all's well with the world.' No, he had misquoted it or hadn't he? Well, it didn't matter. The beautiful soft moonlight seemed to look down reassuringly on chaotic mankind. 'All's well with the world . . .' the words came to him again. He rejected the idea. Could it be that some people, somewhere had made sense of the world? He had found it impossible to make sense of his world. All around him he had found misery and want. And although he could establish a proper place, a comfortable place for himself, he had found it impossible to rationalise what his proper role should be in extending that comfort to others. There was need for action, but what form of action? What did the individual have to do? What did he himself have to do? For a time, he had thought that by establishing certain standards and adhering strictly to

them he might succeed in creating a new order. That had not happened. He drew a deep sigh.

That sigh woke Dupe from sleep. She turned to him and asked what the matter was. He did not answer. She asked again, and still he was silent. Alarmed, she sat up and rebuked him mildly for worrying himself to the point where he was unable to sleep. He remained silent. Realising that it was no use talking to him, she passed her arms round him, and embraced him tenderly, softly caressing him. And now he felt warm towards her. He looked at her. She was beautiful. Her skin was smooth, her palms soft and cool. He switched off the light, drew the window-blinds to keep out the moonlight and went back to bed. He drew Dupe to himself.

When it was over, he regretted it. He got out of bed, threw his pyjamas aside and put on a singlet and a pair of trousers. He walked into the lounge and put on the light. For a long time, he sat there thinking, all alone, to the accompaniment of the regular tic-toc from the wall clock. Tic-toc, tic-toc, tic-toc. The minutes ticked by, ticking off the country with its mounting imperfections. The elders were steeped in the old ways of venality and inefficiency. Youth having no confidence in itself, in its abilities, had turned to a blind trust in materialism; cars, houses, women, pleasure. And time was leaving them behind. Tic-toc, tic-toc, tic-toc. Time was not on the side of the country, nor on Ezi's side, for that matter. Tic-toc, tic-toc. Ever so loud in the stillness of the night. It grew to a crescendo, deafening him, frightening him by its sheer volume and knell-like regularity. He put his fingers to both ears, and still he heard the loud noise, as of the waves breaking upon the shores in a strange, distant land. With an abrupt movement he walked across to where the clock hung, suddenly grabbed it from the wall, and smashed it on the floor. The splinter, shatter and tinkle of glass sent a chill down his spine and he hurriedly opened the door and walked out of the house.

When he got past the hedge of cherries which cordoned off his premises from the road, he felt much more at ease. He breathed more easily. He walked rapidly with short brisk steps.

The moon shone brightly and the stars in the sky blinked from their heights. There was not a sound anywhere. Not a leaf

stirred. Everywhere, there was a calm, a stillness which spoke of peace, a peace which contrasted with the turmoil inside him. Ezi walked on, barefooted, past the silent dark houses, past the green hedges, in the direction of the lagoon. Soon he arrived at the waterfront. On the other side of the lagoon, in the fishing village of Maroko, he could see the mud huts lumped together, with coconut palms waving tall, stately arms in a rhythmic dance of nature. Behind him lay Ikoyi, neat and regular with manicured gardens green with heavy blossoms. That same feeling which had made him smash his wall-clock stuck to him like a smell of onions, and he felt a lump sitting sourly in his throat. The sea breeze which wafted gently across his face was like so many pin-pricks.

The sea had always had an unaccountable attraction for him. He loved it particularly when it was peaceful, calm and placid. It was thus that night. As Ezi stood at the waterfront, a strange love gradually seized him. Looking into the waters, he beheld the reflection of the sky with the moon and the stars. They held a powerful influence over him. Paradoxically, it was not the stars which shone brilliant in the sky, but their dancing reflection at the bottom of the waters which arrested his mind. And he recalled a tale he had heard in his youth, of a time when the sky paid the earth a friendly visit. Surely, it was a moment such as this, he thought to himself. And he stared adoringly and long at the moon and stars at the bottom of the waters and saw pass before him in an excited dance the great sprawling city with its deep purulent drains and gargantuan garbage heaps, the squalid markets bustling with noise and activity, the grimy, unpainted offices crawling with confusion, the beautiful gardens of Ikoyi and the shanty towns of Badia, Ikate, Shomolu and Eko; and from them, from the crumbling mud-walled houses in Maroko, the tall brick buildings, from the narrow pot-holed streets and the wide motorways, from that great city, there pressed forward a great crowd surging and dancing towards him. Old and young, men and women, children, some dressed, some naked, pressing forward energetically, beating their drums rhythmically, heading for where he stood. And soon he felt himself in their very midst, engulfed by their radiating energy, swept off his feet and floating with them

to that point where earth, water and sky met, where the great canopy of stars danced and beckoned. And he knew then that he was only one of the crowd pressing forward with one aim, and that it was necessary to ensure that they all – the beggars, the lame, the deaf, the dumb, the weak and the strong alike arrived there safely. And his effort alone would not do it, but it would help and it was not to be denied that crowd, otherwise he might not get there when all others did. And the crowd pressed on, dancing, drumming and singing but the point of union, of earth, water and sky, the great dancing stars receded further as they approached. And he knew then, too, that time was of the essence and that patience and determination were essential to the achievement of their ultimate goal. And as he floated in that great mass of people, he began to feel a great uplifting of the spirit.

In the distance, the big waves broke noisily on Bar Beach, and Ezi's vision faded as abruptly as it had begun. The waters of the lagoon flowed swiftly now and a gentle breeze caressed his face. He lifted his gaze from the reflection at the bottom of the sea, turned on his heels and walked slowly away, the moonlight shedding a gentle translucence on him.

The shadows of the night were disappearing. And a new dawn was already breaking.

## 13 Robert and the Dog

Robert's new employer was a young medical doctor just returned from abroad. He was cheerful, exuberant and polite. It was obvious to Robert that he had not been in the country for a long time. Because he did not once lose his temper, he did not shout at Robert, he called him by his first name, and always asked him about his wife, children and other members of his family. Robert, accustomed to moving from household to household, thought he had at last found fulfilment. The more so as the young doctor appeared to be a bachelor.

Stewards, including Robert, prefer to serve a bachelor. Because every bachelor is as wax in the hands of his steward. The latter determines what is to be spent on grocery, how much food is to be served at meal times, what is to be done with the remnants of food. In short, he holds the bachelor's life in his hands. And that is tremendous power.

Robert quickly settled into his new situation and took full control of the house. Experience had taught him never to occupy the servants quarters which were attached to the main house. It made dismissals or the abandonment of a situation rather messy. So it was that Robert's family lived in the filth and quagmire of Ajegunle which the wags termed The Jungle. In his one bedroom apartment in The Jungle, Robert was king. And he always repaired there nightly to exercise his authority over his wife and six children. The experience he had gained in running his household helped him a great deal in organising the life of every new employer. Robert was particularly happy in

his new situation because the young man was carefree and happy. There was, as has been said, no wife breathing down Robert's neck and limiting his abundant authority. There were no children whose nappies and numerous clothes had to be washed. He did not have to cook several meals a day. The young man ate but once a day, except for the cup of coffee and toast early in the morning.

Trouble began when the young man announced after six months that his wife was about to join him. Robert's face fell visibly at the announcement. But he did not worry very much at the expected curtailment of his wide powers. Who knew, the lady might not be an ogre after all.

Which is precisely what happened in the event. The lady was as young and cheerful as her husband. She too, took an interest in Robert. She was European and excited about her first visit to Africa. She appeared pleased to have Robert's assistance. She spent the day asking Robert about African food, watching Robert at work in the kitchen and lending a helping hand where possible. She made sure Robert stopped work early so that he could get home to his family and did not make a fuss if Robert turned up late some odd mornings. And she got Robert paid every fortnight. She even offered to go and visit his wife and family in The Jungle. Robert carefully and politely turned down her offer. He could not imagine her picking her neat way through the filth and squalor of The Jungle to the hovel which was his home. Maybe, he thought, if she once knew where he lived and sampled the mess that was his home, her regard for him would diminish and he might lose his job. Yet the young lady extended every consideration to him. Robert began to feel like a human being, and he felt extremely grateful to his new employers.

The only source of worry in the new situation was the dog. For the young lady had arrived with a dog, called Bingo. And Robert watched with absolute amazement and great incredulity as the lady spoke tenderly to the dog. As she ensured that he was well fed with tinned food and milk and meat and bones. And she held the dog lovingly in her arms, brushed his hair and tended him carefully. The dog appeared as important to the lady as her husband and, indeed, Robert thought, in the order

of things, the dog was more important than himself. Try as hard as he could, he could not dismiss from his mind the fact that the dog was doing better than himself. And he detested this state of affairs. He could understand a dog being invited to eat up an infant's faeces. He could understand a stray, mangy dog with flies around its ears being beaten and chased away from the dwellings of men. He could understand a dog wandering around rubbish heaps in search of sustenance. But a dog who slept on the settee, a dog who was fed tinned food on a plate, a dog who was brushed and cleaned, a dog who drank good tinned milk, was entirely beyond his comprehension. On one occasion, the lady took the dog to a doctor. And that was the straw that broke the camel's back.

All that day, Robert felt his stomach turn. And when he got home in the evening and saw his children with distended stomachs gambolling in the filth which simmered in a swollen stream at his door, and watched them hungrily swallow small balls of 'eba', he asked himself, 'Who born dog?' And all of a sudden he developed a pathological hatred for Bingo the dog, his master's dog. All night long, he saw in the eye of his mind, the dog cuddled in the warmth of the settee which he would have to clean and brush in the morning. And he asked himself again and again 'Who born dog?'

The object of Robert's hatred was totally oblivious of the feelings which he bred in the cook-steward. He revelled in the love of his master and mistress. He ate his food with relish and wagged his tail in contented gratitude. He loved and served the lady, doing as he was bid. And he wagged his tail contentedly at Robert. He slept in the day and kept watch over his owners at night. But each wag of his tail was like so many pin-pricks in the heart of Robert who secretly vowed to 'show' the dog some day.

That day duly arrived and much sooner than Robert had expected. The young doctor announced to him that they would be going away on holiday for six weeks. He wanted Robert to take care of the house. As they would not be travelling with the dog, he would be most delighted if Robert would be kind enough to take care of Bingo. They were going to leave enough tinned food and milk for Bingo and some money so Robert

could purchase bones to supplement his food. He hoped Robert did not mind.

Not in the least, Robert replied. But in his innermost heart, he knew he had found the opportunity he wanted.

After the departure of the couple, Robert, true to his training, obeyed his master's orders to the letter. On the first and second days. On the third day, watching the dog lap his milk from a plate, a voice spoke to Robert. 'Who born dog?' And to this ponderous question, Robert could find no other answer than 'Dog'. And the anger in him welled. He looked at the dog, and the dog looked at him, wagging his tail. Well may you wag your tail, Robert thought, but I can tell you, I'm not going to waste my life taking care of you.

He gathered up all the tins of dog food, all the tins of milk, tethered the dog to the settee and walked off, out of the house and the job he had loved to do. He gave the milk and dog food to his children when he got home.

And the dog died.

The car sped on, its engine roaring into the all-pervading silence of dusk. A light rain had fallen earlier. Puddles of water lay on the dirt road which led through bushes, over a little dilapidated wooden bridge, newly-planted farmlands and past several mud villages towards town.

The man and the woman sat at the back of the car. Her son sat beside the driver, asleep. The man held the fingers of her left hand. She, unthinking, let him stroke her fingers gently.

Now and again, a woman or two returning from market with little baskets on their heads flipped past like memories from bye-gone days. Once they passed a little group carrying a man on a bed. The man was covered entirely in a mat. He was dead.

'It's the cholera,' said she, and shivered.

Her husband had also died during the war. After a long trek in drenching rain, he had arrived home (an open mud classroom somewhere in the bush) that sombre evening, coughing, his legs bloated. A look at his handsome face and she knew something was wrong. They would have to go to hospital. But she knew it was futile. There were no drugs in the hospital. The night planes mostly brought ammunition. The few drugs which came through disappeared on the black market. The trickle which got into hospital was meant mostly for officers and officials – the ones who sat behind the stone-deaf desks. He lay in hospital for three days. Then the world ended. Her child would have to be born posthumously. There was not even time to bury him. The planes arrived on a bombing mission and smashed the mortuary. She had to move on to the next village.



He too had been in the war. But on the opposite side. His role had been to bring education, food, drugs, and succour to the war-weary, battered communities living on the flat scrubby plains where oil wells gushed night and day; the wells which were the main argument of, and fuel for the war. He also had several anecdotes from his terrible experience among the soldiers, among the despairing and the deprived for whom he had toiled untiringly for many agonising months. And now the war was over, it was still his task to rehabilitate all those who had fled at the first unaccustomed sound of either mortar fire or bombs. He was busy urging the adults to return to their farms and their occupations and to send the children back to school. It was a hard, frustrating task.

The newly-planted farms flitted past them into the darkness behind.

These farms will be the death of you, my brothers and sisters, he thought. Only that morning he had stood in the village square in Dukana asking them to send the girls to school. But who will help us tend the farm, the women had asked? Who will baby-sit for us while we plant the yams? He was in despair. Each planting season you buy seed yams. You toil from January through December, then you eat the yield. Come next season and you have to buy seed yams again. You don't have a bank account, perhaps a new piece of cloth from the market at Egwanga, and your thatch roof is leaking disastrously. From year to year. And then you have to give your five-year old daughter away in marriage – so you might buy seed yams to plant. Is that life? Was that why God created you? No, my sisters. These farms will be the death of us. They yield us nothing. Not until we can get more education. So send the kids to school. Send the girls to school. But who will baby-sit for us? Who will help us fetch water? Despair. An old woman had hobbled up to him. My son, they arrived this morning and dug up my entire farm, my only farm. They mowed down the toil of my brows, the pride of the waiting months. They say they will pay me compensation. Can they compensate me for my labours? The joy I receive when I see the vegetables sprouting? God's revelation to me in my old age? Oh my son, what can I do? What answer now could he give her? I'll look into it later,

he had replied tamely.

Look into it later. He could almost hate himself for telling that lie. He cursed the earth for spouting oil, black gold, they called it. And he cursed the gods for not drying the oil wells. What did it matter that millions of barrels of oil were mined and exported daily, so long as this poor woman wept those tears of despair? What could he look into later? Could he make alternate land available? And would the lawmakers revise the laws just to bring a bit more happiness to these unhappy wretches whom the search for oil had reduced to an animal existence? They ought to send the oil royalties to the men whose farms and land were despoiled and ruined. But the lawyers were in the pay of the oil companies and the government people in the pay of the lawyers and the companies. So how could he look into it later? He should have told the woman to despair. To die. Not live in death. That would have been more honest and respectable. He tapped his foot on the floor, agitated.

You could always tell when the car was drawing close to Bori. The water tank stood against the skyline, and then the corrugated iron sheets in the police station and barracks, the brick walls of the government quarters, the poles bearing the telegraph wires and when it had not broken down, the generator in the hospital. The main road split the town into two. Night was almost falling. He ordered the driver to stop.

'I'll buy some aspirin here, while the driver goes further down the road to buy petrol. Won't you get down? We might have a soft drink or two.'

She only heard his last words. She opened her door mechanically, a far away look in her eyes, and got out. They stepped into the shop. It was virtually empty. A bottle of aspirin cost five shillings, double its price before the war. He paid for it, mumbling words about inflation and profiteering. There was no soft drink. The shopboy shuffled to the beat of music from a transistor radio placed on one of the empty shelves.

The car returned.

He let her move out of the shop first, and took a long critical look at her. The total picture of her did not please him. She was

no longer beautiful. Plain, he would say. The war had wrought a great change in her. She was still in her twenties. Maybe if she had a man . . .

The driver moved into gear and switched on the headlamps. As the car picked up speed, the headlamps scoured the countryside, picking out the yam stakes rising from little mounds of earth. Far to the left and right, in the distance, gas flares from oil-fields illumined the sky. A frown crossed his brows.

'You are very silent,' she said, trying to start a conversation. He sighed.

'Why do you sigh?'

'It's the gas flares.'

'They bother you?'

'Yes.'

'I can't possibly see how.'

'Politics, politics,' he said impatiently, and tapped his foot on the floor.

Then added: 'Let's forget it.'

'Oh, you know I won't forget it.'

'But you must. Look behind you there. See the young moon? Remember a night like this when we stood by the hedge that ran between our houses in Bori, holding hands?'

She smiled sadly in the darkness; she was relieved that he could not see her face.

'That was a long time ago. I got married soon after.'

'Tell me why,' he replied harshly.

'That is no story to tell,' she answered, smiling sadly in the darkness. 'You need not torment me. It was not a happy marriage.'

'You let me down,' he said harshly.

'You do not mean to hurt me, I hope. I am a young defenceless widow.'

'And I a bachelor.'

'So you will find happiness some day.'

'Someday, I will find happiness. Yes.'

The sarcasm in the tone of his voice was unmistakeable. She peered into his face and thought she detected a deep hardening of his features. He seemed to have grown old of a sudden.

'You're angry with me? Perhaps I should not have asked for the ride in your car?'

'Don't be childish,' he rebuked her mildly.

'I'm not a child,' she said, chuckling. 'Tell me why you turned sarcastic when I spoke of happiness a moment ago.'

'I admit I find that idea rather strange.'

'Strange? And you are a young man. Still in your twenties. You live in a decent flat, earn a good salary, own a chauffeur-driven car. You have the rest of your life before you. You could go over your life once again, if you so desired. What else could you want?'

He laughed a hollow, cynical laugh that sent shivers down her spine. She recalled now how they had grown up together; the joys they shared, the vows they had made to each other. And how, one Christmas holiday, she had, in her innocence, fallen prey to a young man who worked in the tax office and who took advantage of her innocence and put her in the family way. How she had cried when she knew what had happened! How angry her parents had been. And her childhood friend, he who now sat in the car with her, how hurt, distressed and distraught he had been! He had taken it out on her, laughing at her, mocking her to disguise his hurt. He still remembered the mocking laugh with which he had greeted her after she moved out of her parents' house to live with the man who had defiled her.

The headlamps of the car picked out a mangy dog eating excrement by the roadside. And he recalled that dreary, rainy night during the war when he had found a solitary dog in the deserted village of Ogale, coolly picking over the skull of a dead man. He had cursed the futility of the war, then.

'What else could I want?' he repeated, slowly emphasizing each word. 'What else could I want?' And he grunted.

'You sound strange tonight.'

'Do I?'

'You should get married so you'll know happiness.'

'Did you know happiness when you were married?'

'Mine was different. You will marry the girl of your choice.'

'And then I'll find happiness?'

'I believe it.' There followed a long silence.

'You're a cynic,' she said.

They passed a group of men carrying a little bundle wrapped in a mat.

Cholera, she thought, and shivered.

Behind the crowd walked a disconsolate woman, her hands thrown up in despair.

Cholera, he thought, and shrugged.

'Not exactly a cynic,' said he. 'Only I cannot find joy in those little bundles. There is not even a hospital to which they can go. And not enough vaccines to go round either. Vaccines sent from headquarters are sold to these miserable wretches. Someone's converted into private use money meant for the purchase of drugs. But there's no one to dismiss.'

'Well?'

'So there's absolutely nothing to be happy about.'

'You're not going to carry the world on your shoulders. You're not Atlas.'

'No. Nor was I meant to be.'

A heavy lorry flashed past them at terrific speed. The scent of stockfish.

'That driver's in a hurry,' she remarked.

'And should be. Someone's about to profiteer from the sufferings of the poor. These are gifts from Norway carried in second-hand vehicles, reconditioned and donated by the people of Great Britain. For Africans dying of hunger and malnutrition. What will you have?'

'You are cynical about the gifts and the donors?'

'I fear the Greeks and the gifts they bring. Perhaps it's as well they will all end up in private pockets.'

Then it occurred to him that he was not being fair in making the statement. It would have been more than difficult for them had not these gifts arrived. He fell silent.

Now they came to a gas flare. A village basked beneath the flare. Some of the houses had no roofs. They had been removed by heavy shells during the war. The village, ugly, squat and untidy, had gone to sleep.

'Lucky villagers. They have light all night. No need for electricity,' she said.

'None.' And he laughed a hard, merciless laugh.

A short distance beyond the village, some men flagged them down excitedly. He ordered the driver to stop. She thought they might be armed robbers and said so. He said no. They stopped when they were sufficiently close to the men. One of the men held a little, emaciated woman up to him.

'She's got the plague,' he said.

'Right. Put her in the back seat. I'll take her to hospital. Someone come along with her.'

They all drew back in terror.

'Where's her husband?'

'He died this morning.'

'Any grown-up child?'

'Her only daughter died yesterday.'

'Who will go with her.'

The crowd shrank back. He heard someone mutter, 'They're a cursed family.'

'Right, I'll take her along. And look to yourselves. Boil your water properly before you drink. Don't put any 'izal' into it. And don't call the juju priest either. Just keep the surroundings clean. Good night.'

They drove off, and continued the journey in silence. The sick woman, clad in rags, sat between them. Twice she vomited and twice they both rallied to make her a bit more comfortable. He used his handkerchiefs to dry up the mess. She had to use her headtie for a mop. And she saw resurface that elemental goodness in him, which she had always admired and loved. He was not a cynic; perhaps too much of an idealist. In a country where there was no room whatever for idealism. She had heard him speak in Dukana that morning; she had listened to the few words he had spoken in the car, wondered at the mocking laugh which she found so detestable. If he were left alone, he might destroy himself. A thought flashed through her mind, but she killed it as soon as it was born. She continued to mop vomit with her headtie.

He, too, was struck by the devoted way in which she mopped the old woman's vomit with her headtie. He felt she was doing it for him. And a thought flashed through his mind. He quickly stifled the thought and let his mind wander to the problems of society. How could you stop people stealing food and medicines

meant for the public? How could you stop them from taking bribes? . . . A man was going from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell among a band of robbers. And they beat him . . . If he did not hold himself, he would keel over. And no one would mourn him. Absolutely no one. He wound down the glass and threw his soaked handkerchief through the window.

The sick woman began to whimper, whispering inaudible words.

And he thought, I cannot get this out of my system. It's absolutely impossible . . . Her words came to him. You're not Atlas! No, nor was meant to be. The world had always got on with its imperfections. So what? . . . She's a good girl. I ought to have married her. Now she's a widow. But has a son from her first husband. I cannot take him . . . She's no longer as beautiful as when she was younger. He sighed.

She looked in his direction. There was only the darkness between them, but she could see shafts of light breaking in from the homes in the distance, illumining the car somewhat.

Now the town loomed into sight.

'Drive to the hospital,' he ordered the driver.

The sick woman died before they arrived at the hospital. He sent her corpse into the mortuary. It was already full. But he left her there all the same. There was no one to make an entry of the event. The nurse on duty was overburdened with work and had been rude.

He banged the door of his car, and lit himself a cigarette. She sat by his side, weeping.

'You will see me home, won't you,' she asked.

'Oh yes, I will.'

They drove to her house in silence. The neighbours had already gone to sleep when they arrived. She roused her child who had slept soundly through the ride. He alighted from the car and ran indoors quickly.

She opened the car door, walked over to that side of the car where he stood waiting for her and extended her hand. She had regained composure. He ignored her hand and took her in his arms.

'You will have to teach me to live with death,' he pleaded.

She disengaged herself from his arms and walked briskly away.

Garga stood outside his main hut. From somewhere in his walled courtyard he heard the voices of his wives. A momentary thrill passed through him as he thought of them. As the voices of his children at play in the courtyard floated to him, he felt happy. Seven children. Ah, Allah had been kind. If only they would live and grow to be big men and women and not die as the other five had done. Seven children from four different wives – and they were all playing happily. Their mothers hardly ever exchanged harsh words. 'All over my household, there is peace and concord,' thought Garga. He felt grateful to Allah. 'If only Allah will give us long life,' he mused.

The evening was soft and cool. The sun dipping into the horizon threw long streaks of blood-like red into the sky. Such beauty added to the inward peace and joy Garga felt. As the call to prayers sounded, he threw his long robe over his shoulders, received the kettle of water which his first daughter had brought him, and fell to his prayers.

Garga was a simple man and his prayer was simple. All he wanted was that there be peace in his house-hold and in Kano; that his family have enough to eat from day to day. Allah in his infinite wisdom would provide. When he concluded, the sun had disappeared completely but the sky in the west retained its deep tinge of blood-red. Darkness crept in from the Sabongari, the part of town where strangers lived.

Garga suddenly remembered that he had wanted to buy some peppermints from the Sabongari. There you got everything you wanted from the strangers who were traders and

owned large shops and the big hotels. He had many friends among these strangers; some he had known ever since he was a child running barefoot through the streets of Kano. Garuba Okeke who owned three large shops and two hotels was one of them. At first sight, you would not have thought that Garuba was rich. And many people did not know either. But Garuba himself had confided in him over some bottles of beer in one of his hotels. And Garga had been filled with a sense of admiration for the young man whom Allah had so blessed. Garga liked a beer, but Garuba had given him not one, not two but three bottles of beer that evening. 'Kai,' he thought, 'Allah in his infinite goodness has blessed Garuba.' He had felt no strain of envy for the young man who had done so well. His mind had flipped back momentarily to his courtyard, and he had seen his seven children and pictured himself in their midst. He had felt happy. 'To some people, Allah gives money; to others, children; Allah is good,' he had mused as he drank again from the bottle.

Looking at his taciturn friend very closely as he told him of the progress of his business, Garuba Okeke had found no trace of envy. Not a line had creased Garga's forehead. Rather it had seemed to him that Garga was glad about it all. And Garuba had remarked to himself; 'That is the difference between them and us. I could not tell Okoye, my own townsman, my own brother, about my affairs without his being at least slightly envious. But Garga is glad on my behalf.' And he felt a secret joy at Garga's good nature. One other thought (potentially destructive like a streak of lightning) flashed through his mind; 'Why doesn't he feel slightly envious? And to think he has no money left anywhere for a rainy day! Stupid! Stupid!' But he quickly suppressed the thought. And the first thought predominated and made him feel at one with Garga. His heart opened to his friend, warmly. He had changed his name from Sylvanus Okeke to Garuba, when he had adopted the Muslim faith. It mattered to him that he was Muslim and his first name was Hausa. He had thought it would make him feel different but the change of name had done nothing to him basically. He still remained Sylvanus Okeke essentially, with his roots back home in the south. But his business moved more briskly. It was

compensation enough, he often thought.

Garga always walked the entire distance to Garuba's house in quiet contemplation. He was not one to hurry in an undignified manner about anything. He looked forward to the moments of quiet conversation which he would have with the friend of his youth. He had done it over the years. And it was in that same spirit that he now set out for the Sabongari.

There was something strange about the Sabongari which Garga had never understood. Everything about it was more brisk than in the walled city. Here, the men were a deal smarter, laughed with you, laughed at you to your face when you made the slightest error and were quite apt to consider you stupid. But they were enterprising. And Garga loved the way they made life more endurable with their noise and chatter. It was a joy to leave the quietness of the walled city once a day to savour the speed, the modernity, the brash crudity that was the Sabongari. As the tortoise once in a while shoots its neck out of the quiet and safety of its shell, casts its wise eyes over the world and withdraws again into its shell and becomes utterly unassailable.

Garuba had once told him that the people who lived in the Sabongari came from different 'countries', just as some people came from Kano and others from Yola. But Garga had never really understood that. All those who lived in the Sabongari were 'strangers'. He knew that. Just as he knew that Garuba was his friend. And that Okoye was Garuba's brother although they seemed suspicious of each other. Again Garga could never understand that. Garuba had once told him in confidence that Okoye envied him his wealth. 'But he's your brother,' Garga had said. And Garuba had remained silent, sunk in thought. Garga, taciturn by nature, had said no more, although he did think it strange that men who had travelled as far from home to make a living should be envious of each other. But perhaps that was the way of all strangers.

Maybe that was why the elders had erected a wall between the Sabongari and the old city. The wall was a physical barrier, separating both. But it took on a more sinister aspect as a wall erected in the hearts of men by language, religion and custom. Behind both sides of the wall was something more permanent,

an almost ineradicable suspicion, a refusal to come to terms with each other, a refusal to understand, to communicate. The wall gave the peace and tranquillity of the city in its entirety, so obvious to the newcomer, a fragile quality. Beneath the wall lurked tensions which simmered in the blinding noonday heat and refused to sleep with the dying sun. Terrible tensions which grew roots and took on a grotesque aspect because they were never discussed by the men on both sides of the wall. Garga had often wished that the wall was not there. It would make his forays to visit his friend less of an occasion. But the wall remained real, forbidding and powerful.

When Garga arrived at the Sabongari, night had already fallen. The electric lights shone brilliantly, casting large black dancing shadows on the ground. A soft wind was blowing, and Garga passed people returning from the markets. They were all in bright spirits, singing, whistling, some even danced. The loudspeakers in the various shops blared forth a wild cacophony. And in the hotels, people were already taking draughts of cold beer. The women who peopled the hotels stood outside, their faces shiny and haggard, soliciting Garga and other passers-by.

The women of the hotels offered variety. One paid them for their services and one often had full value from these expensive and adventurous women, audacious and proficient in their trade. Once in a while Garga accepted the invitation of these ladies from the South. It was always then, the acme of joy for him. There was such a difference between these outlandish, modern, sometimes young women who ogled you as you passed by them, smoked, drank and danced happily, and the women one kept at home in purdah.

But that evening, Garga was in no mood for such titillations. He had little money in his pocket; besides, the voices of his children playing in his courtyard, still rang in his ears. And he saw the mothers of his children in his mind's eye. He felt happy. 'Allah keep them alive and strong for me.'

He walked more briskly and arrived at Garuba's house in Abeokuta Street soon afterwards. The shop was shut. He knocked at the door. No answer came. He knocked again, this time more loudly. And again there was no answer. It was the

first time within memory he had ever found the shop shut at night. He sat on the steps leading to the shop and waited. For a long time, nothing happened. Garuba was nowhere to be seen. Garga began to feel restive.

Garuba's only child, Titi, ran from the back of the house, clapping happily, dancing. When she saw Garga, she stopped abruptly, and ran back into the house. Garga did not understand it. He had always been friends with her. Many a time, he had carried her in his arms singing a Hausa song to her. And he had always been impressed by her vivacity, by the way she nestled closely to him, listening attentively. But this evening, the girl had run away from him, as though he were leprous.

And, for the first time, Garuba's shop was shut. Outside, a cold wind blew lightly. Except for the occasional hooting of a taxi, and the faint noises that came from the hotel that was some distance away, it was all peace and quiet around Garuba's shop. Titi had run away from him. And Garuba's shop was shut. Little actions, perhaps harmless. But Garga could not understand why he took them so seriously. No effort of will, however strong, could drive away the ominous thoughts that clawed at his heart. And he got ready to go away. Premonitions. He thought of his seven children. They should have had their evening meal by now, and should be fast asleep in their mothers' huts. And he prayed 'Allah, take care of them for me . . .'

He decided to return to the city. As he walked away, he saw Okoye slouching towards Garuba's house.

'Greetings,' said Garga.

Okoye grunted.

'Have you seen Garuba today?'

No answer. Okoye had always been queer, anyway.

'Do you know where Garuba has gone to?'

'No.' Very vehemently, and a muttered curse.

And he passed him by, his eyes on the ground, his right hand clutching something which Garga could not identify.

Garga's heart sank within him. He increased his pace. The cold winds blew more strongly, throwing the loose ends of his flowing robe about him. The road to the city was almost completely deserted.

In the Sabongari, the loudspeakers had become silent and people were gathered in small groups in front of the houses. Fear gripped Garga. His first impulse was to run, but good sense counselled him to refrain from doing so. He increased his pace. Then, he found more people walking towards the city at a leisurely pace, and he felt comforted, relaxed.

The city wall at long last. And he heaved a sigh of relief. The wall stood there, inscrutable, protective. That night, it cast a black mournful shadow on the surrounding area. It separated the city from the Sabongari; a man-made barrier, it had now taken on a godlike aspect, stern, dividing, inward-looking, eager to protect those who had built it. Once within those walls, Garga felt safe. Outside it, he was like a shadow, as much a stranger as the men who lived in the Sabongari. He always found his way home by the dome of the mosque. But tonight, in the darkness, he could not find the dome. However, he picked his way carefully, slowly and soon reached home. His children were all safe and in bed. False fears had knocked at the door of his heart, and he had yielded. He felt ashamed.

He lay in bed, but could not sleep. A halo of deep red danced incessantly before his eyes in the darkness. He could hear his heart beating, . . . beating . . . a rhythm of fear. Baseless fear. The evil smell of excrement spiralled from the pits dug somewhere near his hut. He held his nose, and spat into one corner of the room. And as though this foul scent was soporific in effect, he slept.

When he woke up, the city was astir. It was a low moan as of a woman in travail that had awakened him.

There was no means of telling the time. The hut was in pitch darkness. He stepped out of the hut and the low moan increased to a grumble, and the grumble by degrees to a rumble. Several men whose faces he could not see walked briskly, silently, past him. They refused to answer his greeting. More people passed him, their footsteps bent towards the city gate. What did it all mean? Once long ago – he had been a young man of twenty then – the same thing had happened – in broad daylight. There had been the same movement to the city gate, and horror later followed. Now in middle age, he still shrugged when he remembered that period of horror, when

blood stood in men's eyes, working pride into men's souls, blocking their ears to the message of Allah. He had prayed then that nothing of the sort should happen again. And Allah had answered his prayers – for almost two decades.

The city fell silent. Now no one passed him again. But from far away, from the Sabongari, a tumultuous sound as of violent waves breaking on the shore, as of a lion moaning in agonising pain, broke on his ears. He keyed up his senses and heard the din of iron and the shouts of battle. He ran to the city gates. They were barricaded. The one, the second, the third. His mind went to the one least used. There he met grave silent guards who let him through. He broke into a run; in the cold of the morning, a sweat broke on his brows.

He increased his pace as he approached the Sabongari. Now he met men in flowing robes, their faces set hard and wicked, running armed with clubs and spears, broken bottles and stones, bows and arrows, eyes set on the Sabongari.

'The fight has begun, . . . the fight has begun,' their lips muttered ceaselessly. And a loud cry went up. 'Death to the heathens. Death to the heathens.'

What had happened to the people of Kano? Where was Allah? Would Allah not save them from the wrath that was sure to descend on them? 'Allah, Allah, Allah,' he called in his heart as he sped towards the Sabongari. 'Death to the heathens!' The cry went up into the night air and reverberated. The same cry he had heard in his youth!

Death to the heathens? Who were the heathens? The men in Sabongari prayed to Allah in their own way every Sunday. Garuba went to the mosque every Friday . . . Garuba? And his mind flew back to the previous evening; he had found Garuba's shop shut. Garuba himself had been absent, and Titi had refused to come to him. The same devilish cry soared into the night air. 'Death to the heathens.' Garga felt his blood chilling. The fight had already begun.

Men armed with sticks, bows and arrows, some naked to the waist, others dressed flimsily, were at work, swinging their arms recklessly, aiming at the head, the brain, the chest of other men, who themselves returned the blows. Boulders of rock flew through the air. They were directed at no one in particular, but

at people randomly. Their harvest, a shriek, a piercing cry and human blood. Garga could not understand it. His one desire was to get to the forefront, to face the combatants, and appeal to them.

Men lay on the ground, their heads broken and gashed; blood, human blood stained the sandy ground. Everywhere were men who were bleeding but who fought with a superhuman effort to hurt and to murder. And as he pressed his way through them, the sweat beaded on his nose and under his eyes and formed streams in the wrinkles of his neck. Clubs, boulders of rock, and bottles flew incessantly through the air, and with each flight, a frightened shriek burst on his ears, and the cold blood ran down his spine. The more he pressed forward, the more the futility of his endeavour dawned on him. This mob would not heed his words, and he might even be killed by one of them; he would have done no good in the midst of so much evil.

Once again, his mind flashed back to Garuba and his daughter Titi. On the instant, he realised where his duty lay. He would have to save his life-long friend. All of a sudden, he felt as if Titi were one of his own daughters, and her life meant more to him at that moment than ever before.

The matchete and missile-carrying mob dissolved before his eyes, and he ceased to hear their blood-curdling chants and to see their lurid, weird, bedevilled faces. In their place, Titi stood in a simple dress, helpless, uncomprehending. And he moved towards her, disdainful of all danger. The mob fell aside, clearing a path for him. A flying stone hit him on the back of the head, but he did not as much as wince. He pressed forward steadily. The combatants in this carnage, this unaccountable folly fell apart when they saw him, bare-armed, striding past them bravely. And he saw Titi in his mind's eye, innocent and undefended. His mind flashed back to his seven children, sleeping peacefully in their mother's huts. 'Allah preserve them,' he prayed. Now as he neared Abeokuta Street the crowd thickened. Garga, the swarthy giant, grown entirely out of normal proportion, propelled by the love for a friend he had known for long, pushed through the fighting crowd, and soon arrived at his destination.

Garuba's shop was still closed. But Titi was in the passage

way, the partition between the shop and the rooms which were Garuba's living quarters. She lay there, face downwards, her clothes lying about her untidily. Garga rushed towards her anxiously, relieved to find there was no blood on her. She was probably alive and safe. He would take her in his arms and carry her away to the safety of the city walls. Then he would return to search for Garuba.

As he bent down to raise her, the door to Garuba's house flew open. Garga lifted his eyes, and came face to face with Okoye. Okoye with a terrible aspect, bare-bodied, his face bespattered with human blood, Okoye spectral and sinister, a long knife in his hand. Garga recoiled for a moment in horror. In another moment, he stooped swiftly and took Titi up in his powerful arms. In the self-same breadth, Okoye's long knife flashed brightly, and the masterful stroke severed Garga's head from his body.

Garga fell backwards, still clutching Titi's lifeless, exhausted frame. And Kano lay silent and dead, the harvest of an angry God.



I have waited here all evening for him to return so we can dine together. But there is no sign of him. I'd have phoned the office, but should I do so and he's there, he'll fly into a rage. And should he not be there, my fears will have been confirmed. Or will they?

The late nights he keeps these days cannot be because of his work. I'm sure he is busy in another woman's arms. I have seen lipstick on his shirt several times. I definitely found face-powder all over his shirt-front. I knew he was up to something. But I couldn't confront him. And I kept on hoping I was wrong. But I'm sure I'm not wrong. Or am I?

He was always a deeply caring man. I was proud of him and have lived for him, determined to live up to his high standards. Ten years together and not one day have I looked at another man with desire. I thought he'd be equally faithful to me. Or has he been?

I cannot be said to have grown any worse. Time has not taken much from me. Indeed I should think I was even more desirable now, in my maturity. A little more flesh here and there, some fat on the upper arms, but surely that was to be expected? After three children. Two boys, one girl. And he always told me he didn't want any more children. I could have more children if he wanted them. And I'm sure we'd be able to care for them. I'd make any sacrifice that was needed. I'm willing to do so. God, I'm willing. Whatever he says. Whatever he wants. If that will only stop him from dancing. Or have I been too accommodating? Too nice to him? Would it have

driven the lesson home to him if I'd nagged him some, challenged him some, called him to his senses? Would that have helped? What does he want? What do men want? You are a pretty, elegant, faithful, hard-working mother and wife; you have read all the books about how to keep a family happy and your husband contented; you know what he wants and you give it all to him; he does not ever show any signs of dissatisfaction with you, and yet? What does he want? Fun? You're willing to go to parties and nightclubs with him and you can dance as well as any other woman young or old. What does he want?

I think I hear the sound of a car outside. Yes. No, it's not him. And his food's grown cold. How I wish I could have my dinner all alone. But habit has made me want to have him opposite me at table. I've grown accustomed to him guzzling his drink; I love to hear him commend my cooking. My cooking . . . Is that what he hates? Does it bore him to have good food all the time? But he's never complained? If he as much as raised a whimper of a protest, I'd go and purchase all the cookery books in the world and give him exactly what he wanted . . . Did I hear the telephone ring? No. My senses begin to deceive me. Why won't he call, just to let me know exactly where he is? Frankly, I wouldn't mind if he were at a cocktail party, or at the club or even in another woman's house . . . Another woman's house? Really, it's the suspense that bites. Kills. Suppose he's had an accident on his way home? What then? Maybe I should call the hospital or the police? I should make a fool of myself in public, you say. Probably. But at least it would ease the burden on my mind. Or would it?

You know what I dread most? That one day, I'll hear he's had a baby by some wretched young girl in some crummy part of town. Oh, I should commit suicide. No, wait . . . That will please some people, honour them. And who'll take care of my children? No, not suicide. Rather, I should get into my very best clothes, call up his dearest friend or his assistant in the office and offer to make love to them. Make love to them. That should serve him right. Cut his ego to size. The son-of-a-bitch. Let him but bring a bastard to this house. I'll set the children on him! Could I?

But suppose he were actually to inform me some day that he's acquired a new wife? After all, his friends are doing it, so why shouldn't he? Ugh, that would really mortify me. To share his love on a regulated basis . . . It's better to have him doing it quietly on the side rather than have it institutionalized, programmed, time-tabled. Monday, Wednesday, Friday, my turn. Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday, hers. And Sundays? God defend us against these terrible monsters! Come to think of it, the Europeans do it better. When you are fed up with each other, you cut the links, share the responsibilities and go and start all over again with someone else. But the male beasts here just want it all their way. The pigs! Harems, harems. Lord, why did you make women in so cruel a world? Why will two, three or four of them want to share one man? Can you see a man agreeing to share a woman with another man? Yet most women do not think twice before doing it. I thank God I'm not like other women. If he dares, I'll show him a thing or two. Surely.

But wait. What's that I hear in his room? Sounds like snoring. Oh, he might have come in while I was having a shower and making myself desirable to him . . . Goodness, and his dinner is all cold! He must have been mad at not seeing his dinner on the table when he arrived home. How often he's told me about that! . . . Oh Lord, it's him indeed, snoring away his hunger and anger! Oh dear, oh dear . . . And to think I've been worrying myself stiff . . .

'Honey! Darling! Wake up! It's dinner time. Honey! Please!'

I knew he was having affairs on the side. But I hardly thought he would prove so very degenerate, humiliating me into the bargain.

You know how it is. You are holding down a full-time job just to make ends meet in these hard, difficult times. So you cannot do the household chores alone. And when you have two little girls into the bargain, housekeeping and mothering become quite a nightmare. So naturally you need help. And your help had better be a girl because then she becomes a friend to your little ones. Dani never did take an interest in these domestic details. He always thought and said it was entirely my responsibility. And I agreed with him. That was how Ayo came to live with us.

Ayo was a skinny, spindly-legged girl just approaching puberty when she came to us. I took one look at her and decided there and then that before she could say one word to me, I'd have to give her a thorough bath. Which I did. And after I gave her some of my old clothes, she looked more presentable. She was not useful to me at first. But I believed I could train her. She did respond to training. And before very long she became indispensable to me and to the household.

Dani and I were getting on. At fifty, there were strands of grey in my hair as in his. At that age, a woman is perhaps not so attractive to most men. But a husband, well, you would suppose there are things to think back on, memories of twenty-six years of marriage and companionship. I never did worry about the affairs he had on the side. I did not consider myself

cheated. I set it down to the warmth of the African male about which no amount of nagging and tears will ever be able to do much. Besides if he was going to be like his father who married eight wives and had well over three dozen children . . . I had only myself to blame for marrying him. So he had his fun and I had my marriage. And that was that.

Problems actually began when I heard that he had had a baby by some woman. I took it badly; any wife would. But I'd have gotten over it by adopting the child, rearing him with my natural children as a part of one happy or not-so-happy family. My friend Toun did so. And it worked. But Dani's mother didn't give me a chance. She was happy as a bee at my discomfiture and went out of her way to rub salt into the wound her son had inflicted on me. I never did get on well with my mother-in-law, you see. She was secure in the love of her son. I was not. And I've always hated any hint of rivalry. Now with his new baby and her obvious delight, we were perpetually at daggers drawn. And my anger at Dani was duly compounded.

I was not about to leave him – I'm not one for a divorce – and I had to take the children into account. But he had to know that I was not exactly ecstatic, to put it mildly.

It helped a lot that I was often away at work some nights in the month. It meant that I did not have to see him very often. And I could work out my unhappiness alone. He did a lot to make up to me – he was always a caring man – but I did not encourage him.

I'm afraid Ayo and the children saw a lot of our rows. Because they were noisy, robust affairs, full of blows, scratches, broken chairs, broken crockery, flying cutlery and fulsome tears. I gave Dani no quarter. I wanted him to feel remorse and to be on his best behaviour at least for some of the time.

He was. As I was soon to find out. One rare Sunday morning after breakfast, Dani and I sat in the lounge listening to classical music as was our habit when a knock came at the door.

'Who is that?' I asked.

'Mama Ayo,' a voice answered.

To my surprise, Dani fled upstairs. He was well dressed and I

did not understand why he should make so undignified an exit at the sound of Mama Ayo's voice.

'Come in,' I said.

Mama Ayo and her husband came in. We exchanged pleasantries and I offered them seats. They didn't want a drink or anything. I heard the key click in the lock upstairs. Mama Ayo spoke next. She was direct and to the point.

'Is Oga in?' she asked.

'No,' I lied. 'He's gone to church.'

'We wanted to see him. Because now that he has started sleeping with Ayo, we won't be pleased if Ayo gets pregnant.'

Bland. Crude. Direct. Shattering.

I didn't know what to do. I wished I could hide myself twenty feet underground. That the earth under my feet would open and swallow me up. That thunder would strike me dead. I felt ashamed, embarrassed and humiliated all at once. I tried to, but could not speak. It was with difficulty that I said the next words to Mama Ayo and her husband:

'I understand how you feel . . . we will make arrangements to send Ayo back to you. That will stop Oga from . . .'

Already tears were dribbling down my cheeks. Mama Ayo and her husband quietly withdrew, leaving me to my sorrows.

I grew weak and tired, as though a heavy load had been placed on my shoulders. Stuck in my seat, I felt dizzy and dazed. There was no holding back the hot tears. I do not know for how long I stayed like that but finally, I picked myself up and dragged my unwilling feet up the staircase. The door to our bedroom was still locked. I knocked loud.

'Open the door, you miserable wretch,' I yelled at the top of my voice.

There was no sound from the bedroom. I knocked louder still.

'Open the door, or I'll break it myself, you good-for-nothing adulterer. Do you hear me? You shameless, empty gas bag, let me just get my hands on you.'

The key turned in the lock and I pushed the door open and rushed into the room. Dani was sitting on the bed. I do not remember the look on his face. Because although I looked at him, I did not see him, so blinding was the hate I felt for him at that moment.

'Why did you run upstairs and lock yourself in?' I asked.  
 'I didn't run upstairs. I didn't lock myself in,' he lied.  
 'Liar. You didn't want to stand face to face with your crime.'  
 'Crime? What crime?'  
 'You knew what Mama Ayo and her husband came to tell you, didn't you?'  
 'How was I to know? How could I know?'  
 'Then why didn't you wait to hear them out?'  
 'I didn't even know they were the ones at the door. So what did they say?'  
 'That you've been sleeping with Ayo. That if she gets pregnant, they won't be pleased.'  
 'And did you believe them?' Dani asked, a hollowness in his voice.

'Have you been sleeping with Ayo?'  
 'No.'  
 'So, Mama Ayo and her husband are lying?'  
 'Do you believe them?'  
 'Of course. They could not invent such a story.'  
 'You believe them and disbelieve me?'  
 'Naturally. You are a born liar. How dare you stand before me to deny what's so obvious? Why did you flee so guiltily upstairs . . . you good-for-nothing scab. You call yourself a man and you cannot face your own misdeeds. Now I imagine you will tell me the truth with Ayo standing before you. Because I'm going to get Ayo here right now.'

And getting out of the room onto the landing I yelled 'Ayo, Ayo, Ayo.' There was no answer. I went to the helpers' quarters where Ayo normally stayed. She was gone. I returned upstairs to look for Dani. He too had slipped out. I heard the car drive out of the garage. I lay back in bed and cried myself to sleep.

I do not know for how long I slept. But I must have slept for a long time. Because when I woke up it was already night. I found a note from Dani saying he was off to London for a week on a business trip.

He stayed away a whole month. During all that time, he telephoned once asking 'Is everything all right?' I banged the telephone on him.

At the end of the fourth week, he returned, his hair in jerry coils. At fifty-five, he was wearing jerry coils, like a miserable, cocaine-sniffing West Indian on the crumbly streets of Brixton. I took one look at him and the image that came to my mind was of a vulture wearing glass beads. I refused to talk to him, of course. I locked him out of our room and he had to make do with the other bedroom. I made sure his sheets were unwashed for weeks. I did not serve him any of his meals. No punishment I could devise looked bad enough for him. And oh, how I hated to see him in those jerry coils! They made me more vicious.

Then one day I heard a car drive up to our house. I looked out of the window and saw a brand new Mercedes Coupé, in a lovely wine colour. Dani was at the wheel. He got out and walked up to me and dropped the car keys into my palm.

'Yours,' he said simply, nodding towards the car.

Well, jerry coils are one thing, but a Mercedes Coupé in wine colour is something else. The milk of human forgiveness welled up in my breast. Dani was always a caring man, you know.

## The Shopkeeper and the Beggar

He walked briskly to The Store every morning, looking straight ahead of him or hard into the ground as though there were something on his mind. The Store was on his mind. His wife knew it, and his close friends knew it. For he never stopped telling them tales of The Store. She knew from him that The Store was going to be the goose that lays the golden eggs. That is why he had named it Midas Stores in the first place. The Store would send all their children to school – all three of them; build them their first house, clothe the family, buy them a car. The Store was gold, and he knew it. He meant to nurture it with devotion, singlemindedness and hard work.

He worked hard at The Store. From sunrise till sunset. And at night studied how to run a store, from a book titled *How To Run a Shop* which he had bought from a nearby bookshop. The book was shop-soiled because no one had ever needed to learn how to run a store, a mere grocery store. From the book he learnt that the owners of the biggest chainstores in the world had started from one store at a street-corner or from a market stall. The lower the starting point the better. There was only one trick to it all. Save the pennies! And re-invest!

Save the pennies and re-invest. He repeated the words to himself as he sat by the cashier, as he arranged the goods on the shelves – ‘merchandised’ so the book called it – as he took stock at the end of the month. And soon the one-room store, a bare five hundred square feet, became too small. There was another room at the back of The Store, separated from the latter by a

brick wall. He tore down the brick wall and expanded The Store. He now had eight hundred square feet.

As it grew in size, so in reputation. At first only the men and women who lived on the street patronized The Store. But as the news of the new store which was run from a book grew, the richer men from far-flung parts of the town began to arrive. They drove up in their cars, parked, bought their grocery and departed. Day after day, and night after night.

Upon the heels of the car-owning patrons of Midas Stores arrived the beggar. He was crippled in both legs and he would arrive as The Store opened and take a place right in front of it begging the patrons for the small change in their pockets from the cashier's till. This event filled the shopkeeper with joy. It meant but one thing. Business was good. For every store in town had its share of beggars. The bigger the store the more numerous the number of mendicants who crowded its front doors begging shoppers for cash, wishing God's blessings on each shopper. Soon a second beggar joined the cripple. He was half-blind and felt his way with a long pole. He too took a place in front of The Store and muttered a long prayer each time a shopper passed in or out of The Store. And then a third beggar. Now together the three beggars virtually blocked the doorway to The Store. All the customers had to pick their way carefully through the rags, the bodies and the prayers of the beggars.

Lost in the business of running the shop, he did not pay attention to the beggars. Because he arrived before them, and left after them, he had not the pleasure of being importuned by them. One day, when he arrived to open the shop early in the morning, the beggars were there before him. Only with difficulty could he find his way to the shop door. He did not look at them as he picked his way through the many padlocks that assured the safety of his goods. Whatever it was they said, he did not hear. For at the back of his mind were the only words he ever did hear: ‘Save the pennies and re-invest.’ ‘Save the pennies and re-invest.’ Soon he was safely ensconced amid the grocery he loved so much. When he closed his shop later that night, the beggars were still there. He heard them say in unison ‘Give am penny for chop. Allah bless Master!’ He shook the

store keys in his pocket noisily and walked away. It had been a good day at The Store.

From that day onward, the beggars arrived before him and he left before them. Entering or leaving the shop, he heard them say with one voice, 'Give am penny for chop. Allah bless Master.' Always, he jangled the keys in his hand or in his pocket noisily. And at the back of his mind, he heard the words 'Save the pennies and re-invest!' One morning matters deteriorated when the half-blind beggar, the one with the long pole stood in his way. The tone of his greeting was faintly hostile. A frown creased the shopkeeper's forehead, as he let himself into The Store without as much as a look in the direction of the beggar. All day, as he immersed himself among tins of Fray Bentos, Mango chutney, Bournvita, Heinz Baked Beans and all manner of frozen and packaged food, he did not think about the incident of the morning.

Only at closing time did he remember the beggars. When he closed the shop, they were still there. 'Give am penny for chop, oga. Allah bless master.' And he jangled his keys and said to himself 'Save the pennies and re-invest!'

Saturday was a great day for sales. Working wives and employed bachelors shopped on that day. The last Saturday of the month when salaries had been paid always yielded bumper sales. The shopkeeper always turned up very early to prepare for his customers. The beggars did the same. On that particular Saturday, the shopkeeper arrived to find his way blocked by the beggar with the pole, and appealed to him to step to one side away from the front entrance. A small group of early shoppers had already gathered to await the opening. The beggar took grave exception to the shopkeeper's interference with his work and said so in very many words, emphatically and menacingly. The shopkeeper's subsequent embarrassment sent ripples of laughter through the small crowd of shoppers. And an impotent resentment shot through the shopkeeper's entrails. How did you deal with this sort of impertinence?

As he worked among the display shelves and unopened cartons of grocery, he thought long and hard about the beggar. The beggar was legitimately trying to earn his living was he not? Did he therefore have the right to stop him (the

shopkeeper) from earning his? And shopkeeping was certainly not a very rewarding occupation after all. You had to work hard, very long hours. And then you had to save your penny profits and re-invest them. Save the pennies and re-invest. He was sure the beggars were not doing very well outside the front door of Midas Stores. Had they been better businessmen, or beggar-businessmen, they would have realised that they would be better off in front of Kingsway Stores which attracted richer people, was twenty times the size of Midas Stores and had car parking facilities. Surely, they would do better there. But maybe competition among the beggars at Kingsway Stores had driven some of them away to Midas Stores. Possibly. In which case, he had attracted the less competitive beggars. The ne'er-do-well of the begging community. And he knew that he would have to get rid of them. Some way. Somehow. Sooner than later. Immediately. He was recalled from the maze of his thoughts by the sound of coins going into the till. Save the pennies and re-invest. And he smiled.

Just as he was bracing himself for his fight with the beggars, they disappeared as unannounced as they had come. When he came in the morning, they were not there. And when he closed the shop at night, they were nowhere to be found. For seven days running, and for weeks thereafter. He began to miss their by now familiar prayer 'Allah bless Master'. And then he panicked. Maybe the prayers of the three beggars had been responsible for his success, the success of Midas Stores? Had they been sent like the Fates to superintend his progress? And had his failure to give them even a penny throughout their sojourn at his shop front incurred the anger of the gods? Panic. He recalled the biblical story of Lazarus and the rich man. The comparison was too close for comfort. He quickly banished the Bible from his mind and sought refuge in *How to Run a Shop*, his unfailing companion. There was nothing there to suggest that the fates in any guise whatsoever, could influence the success or failure of a shop. But there was the ominous warning that all business success was seventy per cent hard work and thirty per cent good luck. Ha!

He analysed the sales figures of the shops over the period of the beggars' presence and since their departure. There was no

alarming difference. Sales had dipped a bit lately, but the heavy rains could have caused that, as well as the frequent cuts in power supply. Possibly. The absence of the beggars did not cause him sleepless nights, but he was slightly concerned.

So he decided to do a tour of all the stores in town just to see if among their beggar population, he would be able to identify his group of beggars. He looked for lame beggars, blind beggars with poles, beggars with one hand, blind beggars without poles. But all the beggars looked the same. Then it struck him that even if his beggars had been among the crowd, he would not have recognised them. Because he had never even looked them in the face. He had not known them.

They knew him well, though. He of the jangling keys, saving his pennies for re-investment. One day he was at Kingsway Stores. He had looked through the shelves, counted the number of customers at the store, checked on the prices of alcoholic beverages sold by the bottle and had walked empty handed past the cashiers' desks and the swinging doors, past the security men who nonchalantly and with glazed eyes looked uncomprehendingly at shoppers' bags, and out into the morning sun. There he suddenly felt a sharp blow on his thigh. He jumped back smartly, conscious of danger and ready to meet it.

Down at his feet was a lame beggar. He it was who had dealt him the blow. 'You na bad man!' the beggar yelled. And started a diatribe.

The shopkeeper did not wait to listen. He picked his way through the throng of beggars and shoppers and quickly disappeared among the cars waiting at the car park. He wended his way back to his shop and sat miserably among the counters, his humiliating defeat at the hands of the beggars sitting sourly in his throat. For he regarded himself as defeated. Now the superstition which had led him in the first place to put a premium on the pennies going into his till led him to presume that the worst was about to happen to Midas Stores and blight his great hopes for the future.

Every day was a misery worse than the previous one as he anxiously counted the number of customers who shopped at Midas. And each fall in daily takings struck him like an

avalanche. He lost his temper, shouted at his employees and suspected every customer of pinching goods from the shelves. He wanted the beggars to return, but did not know exactly how to get them back or which one of the numerous beggars to invite.

Gradually the number of shoppers decreased and daily takings fell disastrously. He neglected to stock the shelves and spent days praying for the beggars to return. Midas Stores emptied. And now he did not need so big a store anymore. He replaced the brick wall he had broken down earlier. As he looked at his greatly reduced store, his heart broke. And now he returned to his constant companion *How to Run a Shop*. He did not want to read it as such, he wanted to consult it in the way oracles are consulted, for he had stopped thinking. He held the book in front of him, shut his eyes, opened the book on a random page and placed his index finger somewhere. Then he opened his eyes and read 'All business is seventy per cent hard work and thirty per cent luck'. He snapped the book shut, threw it away, and still dissatisfied, lit a match and burnt it to ashes. He returned home that day in a temper and at the slightest provocation, took his frustration out on his wife. He accused her of undermining his efforts at earning money because she was jealous.

The unfortunate woman looked askance at her husband, wondering what might have come over him. Where was his usual cheerfulness? Where his humorous asides? Why had the tales from *The Store* disappeared? An innocent question as to how the day had gone at Midas brought down on her a severe scolding and curses. The shopkeeper went to bed mentally and physically fatigued. He prayed for the return of the beggars.

When he returned to *The Store* the next day, there was more trouble for him. Next door, a new store had opened. He was not aware that anyone had planned to open a store there. He regarded this as a betrayal and spent his time spying on the new store. His heart thumped furiously at the sight of anyone going into the new store. The new store was smaller than his, and he was amazed to see its shelves so full of goods. He did not know who the owner of the store was, and did not have the courage to go in there to find out for himself. He believed that if he stepped

into that store, he would drop dead. He decided to close his shop.

He bought a bell and stood in front of his shop, ringing out the goods and ringing in customers anxious to purchase cheap goods. For a few days, the shopkeeper savoured the elation of the early days of Midas Stores as money went into the tills and The Store filled with chattering, excited men and women looking for bargains. What he could not sell, he gave away. Finally, he sold off the counters and shelves.

His bankers were interested, as might be expected, in the goings-on at Midas. When he went to pay his final takings into the bank, he was advised to please have a word with the Manager. That elegant gentleman, dressed in an ugly checked lounge suit with an unmatching broad tie, sat behind a large desk. The air-conditioner rendered the room distinctly cold. When the shopkeeper opened the door and moved into the room, he immediately thought he had entered a dark, wild, primeval forest. Huge trees with gigantic trunks stood immovably in front, beside and behind him and waved giant, leafy branches above him. The man who motioned him to a seat was the vicious king of the forest, dressed in a spotted coat ready to pounce on him and mangle him. The shopkeeper was frightened and trembled uncontrollably.

Then the king of the forest, smiling icily and showing his horrible fangs, pulled out a wicked-looking white sheet of paper whose edges looked like so many sharp blades welded together and on which were written figures in hieroglyphics. The king howled loudly of overdrafts, balances, compound interest and other predatory animals. And the shopkeeper turned pale at the mention of each monster. He distinctly saw them emerging from the trunks of the giant trees where they were in hiding, moving towards him, ready to paw him to death. And he wanted to scream, but the words stuck in his throat. Then the king of the forest asked how he meant to settle his debts. At the mention of this most dreaded word, the shopkeeper broke into a wild stammer as he saw the monsters of the jungle jump at his throat. Disappearing visions of geese, golden eggs, his first house, cars and the children's schooling brought tears to his eyes. The monster king of the forest smiled

again, and all of a sudden, in that icy-cold forest, a sheen of sweat glistened on his forehead. The monsters howled and barked, wagged their tails, danced around him in a circle until the king bade them hold their peace. The shopkeeper wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand and when the king asked him to go away and he stood up, he felt his legs collapse almost spastically under him. He staggered out of the forest, hitting his head against the tree trunks. The Manager shrugged his shoulders involuntarily.

As the shopkeeper stepped into the blinding sunlight outside, he was met by a beggar on crutches, holding out the stump of his left hand.

'Give am penny for chop Allah bless master,' said the beggar.

The shopkeeper stared at him in utter stupefaction.



I did not know he lived on our street until long after I had established my shop there. Then one day he came up to me, his old hat perched rakishly on the side of his head. At the hawking of phlegm, I raised my head from the till and saw standing before me a man of medium height, in a shirt, trouser and old jacket. The jacket had no buttons. He had a dingy, drooping moustache, but he looked well and stood erect and proud. From both pockets of his jacket bulged two bottles of Schiedam Schnapps. If I thought he was a shoplifter, my doubts were cleared when he drew the bottles out, placed them on the counter and offered me his money. I machined him a receipt and offered to put the bottles in a carrier-bag.

'No,' says he, 'I will put them in my pockets.' And he proceeded to suit the action to the word. Then he stood there waiting, to my surprise.

'Can I help you?' I asked.

'I'm waiting for my change,' he said. And the other shoppers broke into giggles. Yes, I owed him a kobo. I searched frantically through the till, but could not find a kobo. Consternation.

'You owe me one kobo,' said he. 'I shall return for it plus the interest.'

And so saying, he walked out of the shop.

'Papa! Papa!' shouted the shoppers. They pronounced it 'Par-pah', the plosives going off like dynamite.

'Don't you know him?' someone asked me.

'No.'

'But he's a regular shopper here.'

'Really?'

'Yes.'

'Who is he?'

'We all call him Papa. He's a very old man.'

'Old man? He doesn't look it,' I said. 'How old is he?'

'No one knows exactly. He himself does not know either. But we all think he is eighty at the very least.'

'Eighty? It's impossible,' I said.

'He is much more than eighty,' someone chipped in.

'He is a great-great-grandfather.'

Great-great-grandfather. It took me some time to absorb that. I had to count on my fingers to see how many generations made up Papa's family. I nodded my amazement.

'Papa's youngest daughter is younger than his great-great-grandchild,' someone chipped in from another part of the shop.

I thought they were laying on these tales to distract me while they shoplifted. I glanced at the security mirror hanging in the corner of the shop wall. The shop was safe.

'Now, say that again,' I requested.

'Papa's youngest daughter is younger than his great-great-grandchild.'

'I don't believe you,' I said.

'It's true. Where've you been living? Papa's a legend on our street. Everyone knows him and he knows everyone.'

'How old is his youngest daughter?'

'Three months.'

'And you say he's eighty years old?'

'Certainly. Probably older.'

I thought about the man who had just walked out of my shop, proud of bearing, erect and with all his faculties seemingly complete and whistled my incredulity. It was near closing time at the shop and I quickly disposed of the customers. Two of them remained behind to regale me with stories of the old man.

Papa was said to have been the first man from his village to have gone to school in the year 1910. He was then over twelve years old. As there was no school within twelve miles of the village, he had had to cross the river to attend school. And after

that, he had become a trader, then he had worked in government in a variety of positions, had retired and re-established himself as a trader once again. He owned a wholesale store on the street.

I put all this together quickly. Papa was born in colonialism, saw the Great Depression, could have fought in the Second World War, fought colonialism, welcomed the nation's independence, went along the way of neo-colonialism, became a republican and was now busy watching us make a mess of independence and gravitate back to colonialism. Papa bestrode our history. He was history himself. The facts thrust themselves upon me and left me quite astounded.

'Papa owns quite a clan,' the second shopper said. 'His children and grandchildren are flung in all parts of the country and abroad. He travels from time to time to see them. And returns with lots of stories to tell us. You know, once he went to London to see his son. He returned to tell us how the plane stood still in mid-air. How he stood before Buckingham Palace, took photographs there before the very gates, rode in a train which travelled under the ground, and even saw the Queen. He said he was very impressed with the way the English used burnt bricks to construct their houses.'

There was no surprise in my mind thereafter that he was an exceptional man. I was to find out more in the days to come.

Papa was at the shop as soon as I opened the next morning.

'My change please,' says he.

I had made sure that I had the kobo coin ready. I handed it to him with a smile and a 'Good morning, sir.'

Papa pocketed his money quickly and then he said to me, 'Do you keep an abstract in your shop?'

I didn't hear him well, so I asked him to repeat what he had said.

'Do you keep an abstract in your shop?'

An abstract. I had never heard of anything so called. I racked my brain. An abstract . . . an abstract. Was it some type of liquor, some item of food, some medicine desired by and useful to octogenarians? An abstract.

'No, Papa, there is no abstract in my shop.'

Papa shook his head mournfully. 'Every shop must have an

abstract' he said and made to go away.

'But what is an abstract?' I asked him anxiously.

A good shopkeeper always wants to have whatever the customers want. And anything desired by Papa would have to be important. Five generations would be looking for it. It was likely to be a most profitable item.

'I will tell you what is an abstract when I come back for the interest on the debt you paid me this morning,' Papa said, and he laughed heartily. His tobacco-stained teeth showed prominently in his mouth. He did not appear to have lost any of them. His laugh reminded me of the rusted corrugated iron sheets on the houses of our street.

I watched with keen interest as Papa walked away, his frame erect, his steps sure. My curiosity about him had been aroused and I sought to satisfy it.

Thus began my friendship with the old man, the only legend we had on our street. I checked him out carefully. Everything that was said about him was true. Indeed, he was a great-great grandfather. And yes, his youngest child was younger than his great-great grandchild. He was in extremely good health. He had extremely good eyes and read without spectacles. And he was very fond of 'The Tide' our local newspaper which was more blots and scratches than a properly-printed page. Papa read it avidly and discussed the news with me regularly. He listened to the radio too, and often criticised what he heard there. I was impressed.

You may wonder that I should enthuse so about a man of eighty. Papa was certainly not the oldest man on earth, nor the oldest man I had read about or seen. No. But he was the oldest man I came to know intimately. And knowing him, I came to admire a lot of things about him. Not for him were Shakespeare's Seven Ages of Man. He was not a monster, 'sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.' No. Papa had everything. Teeth, eyes, taste and all. He was ageless. He dominated our street as a monument. And bestrode time.

In our parts, an eighty-year old man has to be a legend, because life expectancy is generally about forty years. And anyone who has attained more than forty-five is usually thought of as doing 'overtime'.

Casting my mind back over Papa's lifespan, I could not but be amazed at all that he had survived. His very birth must have been quite a feat. As a baby, he would have had to survive the usual attacks of measles or smallpox as well as yaws, which were so common in the early decades of the century they were known locally as 'God's sores'. The Almighty inflicted them upon mankind, mighty yawning sores, ugly and purulent and only the deity himself could deliver man from them. He delivered Papa from them. And then there would have been the hard life spent on the farms. And internecine wars. Then would have followed mosquitoes, snakes and other wild animals, intent on dealing fatal blows. Those monsters had not succeeded in reducing Papa to dust. The germs would have tried hard too. Germs in the water which he drew from the lone stream of the village to drink. Germs unseen, unknown and malicious. And having withstood them, he would have had to deal with the jealousy and envy of his friends. And soon, the jealousies and quarrels of his harem of wives and subsequently the harassment of the horde of children and grandchildren he had had to rear. Papa had withstood all that and survived so well he had to be the envy of us all.

Papa was indeed a man of many surprises. One day, he stopped at my shop and asked if I would like to buy some crates of coke.

'I have no coke,' said I, misunderstanding him.

'Yes, I know,' says he. 'So would you like to buy some coke?'

'It's scarce these days. No one will sell it to me.'

'I will sell it to you,' says he, 'if you will pay the right price.'

I paid the right price, and bought the coke off him. Papa was a dealer to the Coca-Cola company and to some breweries. He also sold iron rods and cement, screws and nails and whatever else he could lay his hands on. I had to remember that he was a merchant and owned a wholesale store up the street. Not for him the messing around with retail items. No. Because he did not trust anyone. The world was full of thieves. So, when he was around, his wholesale outlet was open. If he had to go away, he locked the doors and pocketed the keys. And all the time, he carried the abstract of his stock, he told me.

Thus did I solve the mystery of 'the abstract.' The stock

abstract. Papa had learnt about it all from the firm of McIver and Sons where he had worked for a time as shop interpreter. That was in 1924. Fifty years later, he still remembered the lesson. And carried it with him wherever he went. He sold me the idea. I adopted it, and my shop prospered. I went to thank Papa for selling me the idea of the abstract.

He was seated in front of his house playing draughts with some young men. He wore a round-necked singlet on top of his loin-cloth whose tuck was as big as a duck's egg. He smiled me a welcome, but had no time for me as he concentrated on the draughts board and the goods in his store which adjoined his living room. He found time from the game to attend to his customers. Papa was said to be addicted to draughts and was something of a champion of the game. He sometimes lost, but when that happened, he attributed it to the fact that his opponent must have tampered with the game while he attended to his customers. 'Young men of nowadays cannot be trusted with anything,' he told me. I found that Papa did not trust young women either. They were a shade better than the men, only to the extent that if you employed them as shop assistants, you could convert them later to wives. This was how he had married his youngest wife who had now given him his youngest child. A very wise investment policy, Papa said. If your wife stole from you, it remained in the family. But you had to ensure she had children, otherwise your wealth would be siphoned off to her lovers.

Which brought Papa to the matter of his family. He was very proud of his entire clan, and took care of all of them. He confessed to me how he had once been foolish. He had done what all his friends did: he had refused to train his daughters. Daughters were only good for marriage he had thought. They were birds, they would always fly, taking away your hard earned investment on them. On the contrary, boys were the pillars of the house. They were solid, important, constant. All the same, though much against his better judgement, he had educated a number of his daughters. One of them was a lawyer in the north. Papa had paid her a two-week visit and had enjoyed himself immensely. His daughter, he confided proudly in me, was the cleverest lawyer in the country. Did I know that?

I said no. Had I heard of his daughter? I said no. Papa dismissed me from his mind and changed the topic. And well he might. After all, I thought, I am only a son, a miserable, wretched pillar of a collapsing house. My father's house. Not Papa's. His house was thriving on the wings of migratory birds – his daughters.

The one thing which surprised the street was the way Papa moved from place to place – on his feet. He disdained cars, buses, taxis. Once, at break time, I saw him walk past my shop. I drove up to Papa and offered him a lift. He declined it, saying he was close to his destination. I went on to see my bankers. An hour later, papa arrived at the same bank where I had my appointment. He had walked all the way. I did not say a word to him. He winked knowingly at me and laughed heartily.

All was well with our street. I ran my shop. Papa dropped by to buy his accustomed bottle of Schiedam Schnapps every fortnight. I inquired what he used the schnapps for but Papa would not say. Papa ran his wholesale store, keeping his abstract and his keys close to his chest. He walked his way to all his business calls and we were all quite thrilled to see him broad-chested, supple in the joints, robust in health and laughing his tobacco-stained laughter while he played at draughts or wise-cracked his way through the days. Papa's presence offered us security and showed that we too could live on the street long enough to become monuments and repositories of wisdom bestriding the years. If only we knew his secret. And we were all very happy.

Then one day Papa fell ill. The news spread through the street like wildfire in the harmattan. And everyone was dumbstruck. Then we fell to discussing it in little groups. In muted tones. It is not that he was ill for a long time. But the thought that Papa could be ill had never passed through our minds. His solidity seemed beyond even the common cold. So that when Papa did succumb to disease, we were all thunderstruck.

I went to see Papa as soon as he confirmed his willingness to see me through one of his children. He was lying in bed in a poorly ventilated, ill-lit room. He had lost weight and was the very shadow of himself.

'Papa, what's wrong,' I asked.

'High fever and high cough,' said he in a tiny, wheezing voice. I stifled a smile.

'Have you seen a doctor?'

'A doctor?'

'Yes. A doctor.'

'What does a doctor do?'

'He cures high fevers and high coughs.'

'Are you sure?'

'Hundred per cent.'

'He cannot cure my high cough,' Papa said.

'You can't be sure, Papa,' I said.

'I'm sure.'

And that was that.

Papa's condition deteriorated. Everyday, on the street, an official news bulletin was run on the state of his health. And as each day passed into night with the setting sun, we lived in dread of the news of the passing of an epoch. I did not believe, though, that Papa would die so soon. And I went to see him from time to time to urge him to see a doctor.

'Let's go and see a doctor. I know a good one who lives nearby. I'm sure he will assist you,' I urged.

I could see that Papa was sceptical but he finally allowed himself to be carried out of bed, into my car, and soon we were on our way to the Universal Clinic.

The young doctor who was in charge of the Clinic knew his onions. He examined Papa carefully and thoroughly; took his blood pressure, his temperature, looked at his tongue, took specimens of his blood, urine and sputum for closer examination, turned Papa over, fawned on him, asked him to breathe in and out while he listened through his stethoscope. Papa took it all heroically. But we ran against a squall head-on when the doctor named his fee. One hundred and twenty naira. Papa pretended not to have heard him.

'One hundred and twenty naira,' the doctor repeated.

'For what?' Papa asked. And he demanded to be taken back home.

'I will pay, Papa,' I said.

'If you pay, I will die,' Papa threatened. 'Take me back to my house.'

I had no alternative but to take Papa away. I drove him home in silence.

When we arrived home, Papa invited me to his room. As we laid him down in bed, he asked me to fetch him the bottle near the foot of the bed. I found it soon enough. It was a bottle of Schiedam Schnapps. On top of it was a tumbler. Papa bade me pour him some of it. I held the bottle up to the light. It was full of roots and the bark of a tree cut into small pieces. I poured out the concoction. The normally colourless liquor had taken on an indescribable hue. I offered Papa the tumbler and he took it with a trembling hand. I stood by his side like a murderer as he emptied the glass, shut his eyes and smacked his lips. I returned the bottle to its accustomed place and made to go. Papa motioned me to wait. I waited. He asked me to get another bottle of Schiedam Schnapps on the window opposite. I did so. As I poured out the liquid, I noticed that it contained the leaves of a plant. Papa took the liquid while I watched helplessly, feeling like a double murderer. Papa thanked me. I replaced the bottle on the window and took my leave.

Papa did not show up on the street for another fortnight. Nor did we have any news as to his condition worsening. News actually began to fly around that Papa was improving. In the third week, he walked up to my shop to buy his usual two bottles of Schiedam Schnapps. I watched him incredulously as he strode to the shelf and served himself. When he offered to pay, I did not accept his money. I chose to make a contribution to the legend. As he walked past me out of the shop, he said with a smile, 'One hundred and twenty naira.'

'For what?' I replied with a hearty laugh.

Papa still lives on our street, a legend if there was one.

Also by Ken Saro-Wiwa

### SOZABOY

'I just think that that Manmuswak is proper cunny man. Na him come confuse all of us. Na him come spoil the war. And now all my friends don die or sometimes Manmuswak don take some of them make prisoner of war. And I come say to myself that oh my God, war is very bad thing. War is to drink urine, to die and all that uniform that they are giving us to wear is just to deceive us. And anybody who think that uniform is fine thing is stupid man who does not know what is good or bad or not good at all or very bad at all. All those things that they have been telling us before is just stupid lie . . .'

*'Ken Saro-Wiwa's first novel describes the fortunes of a young, naive recruit, Sozaboy, in a civil war . . .'*

*... The most significant point about the novel is the language of its narration, a language which is an artistic realization of the eponymous hero's dislocated consciousness and his new vision of himself.'*

— Theo Vincent.

### SONGS IN A TIME OF WAR

'Although this is a very slim anthology, the depth of feeling with which the poems are invested, and the range of socio-political concerns which the poet addresses, give the volume a philosophical weight far in excess of its physical reality . . .'

*... In 'Dis Nigeria Sef' the final long poem (276 lines) in pidgin English, the sense of social outrage which informs the war laments is turned into a medium for humorous, satirical or even farcical commentary, with none of the tragic despair of the earlier material. This time the theme is not the direct destruction of social harmony but the subtle and probably more dangerous encroachment of lethargy and uncertainty of spirit and identity that can result from the lack of a sense of direction in national policy.'* — Lindsay Barrett in *West Africa*.

"This collection of short stories makes very good reading. The point of view and the use of idiom in some of the stories are handled effectively and the portrait of a peasant community in a rural setting is done with perception and telling observation. . . . The high point of the narration is the objective, involved presentation of experience, somewhat like the method of Joyce in *Dubliners*." - D. S. Izevbaye

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"There is immense satisfaction in the adroitness and variety of the presentation. . . . the parts where the narrator speaks in his own person have a straightforward elegance that is extremely attractive." - Graham Hough in *London Review of Books*

"The themes . . . are as varied as Nigeria itself. . . . The contradictions of this huge, unsettled and diverse country . . . are caught in a series of understated scenes from the lives of ordinary people." - Adewale Maja-Pearce in *The New Statesman*

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#### *The Author*

Ken Saro-Wiwa was born in Bori, Rivers State of Nigeria on 10th October, 1941. He took a scholarship to the prestigious Government College, Umuahia, and studied at the University of Ibadan. He has taught in Nigeria's universities, served in government at cabinet level and is an established businessman. He has travelled extensively world-wide.

His published works include a collection of poetry, a novel, plays, children's novella and the hit television comedy series 'Bast & Company'.

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