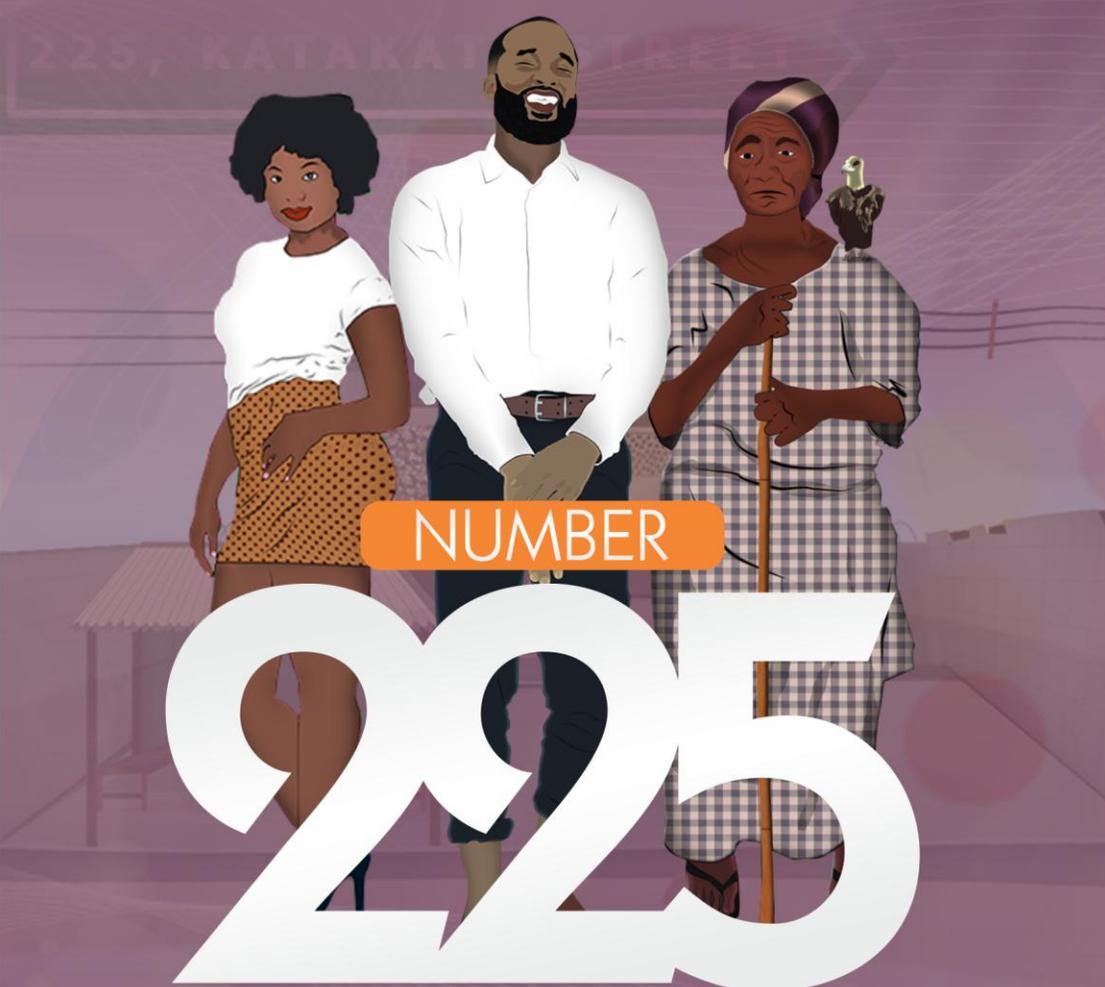


BOOK 1



NUMBER

225

Katakata Street

Centino

**Number 225,
Katakata Street**

BY

CENTINO

NUMBER 225, KATAKATA STREET

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PART 1

NDIFREKE

CHAPTER ONE

MEET MY NEIGHBOURS

They managed to squeeze the twenty four room storey building and two self contained and four shops of number 225 Katakata Street into a plot of land that was formerly a swamp. No one knows the exact number of occupants of this building. People stream in and out at all hours like it was a shopping mall, except that here you will see men in only boxers with stiff erections bellowing greetings at neighbors in the morning from the top floor balcony while still rubbing their eyes, women clad in only wrappers around their breasts washing heavy lather from the heads of their children close to the gutter, the privileged shop owners spraying holy water with incantations round their business premises, and many other people being supremely busy within the compound while people continued to stream in and out of the building.

I had since given up hope of knowing all my neighbors. Even with the endless throng of occupants and all the in and out movements all year long, there were still rooms that were secured with large shiny padlocks that were never opened for months. The owners were said to either be out chasing goods or visiting the village for the planting season or ensconced in some bush for religious reasons or even running from the police. There are however many with steady lives with whom I interact everyday and whom I will be telling you about.

My name is Ndifreke. I am a university graduate just arrived Lagos to hustle. I share a room with my thirty year old cousin named Mkpoikanna-Abasi, the pronunciation of which has set up many wrestling bouts down the years, due to his insistence that it be said to perfection, something people of other tribes cannot just wrap their tongues around. Someone had suggested that they simply called him

Mkpo. That also drove him mad. So they just call him Calabar boy. He is a wharf rat and proudly so. His only passion in life is Manchester United.

You'll hear him say "This season we will win the league. Mourinho wins the league in his second season wherever he goes."

For actual neighbors, I'll start with my favourites. There is Irikefe, nineteen and timid looking but every mother's nightmare as he is said to be the biggest threat to virginity this side of the equator. He is the son of the caretaker and an apprentice carpenter who everyone knows cannot handle a saw. You will always hear Irikefe say things like "Bros, I will be rich. Whether the devil likes it or not, my time will come." Recently he has been saying "When I grow up, I want to be like Evans. I supported the free Evans hashtag on twitter. Why would they touch him when bigger criminals are roaming free in the Senate? Free Evans joor!" Then there is Mr Zubi, middle aged, impossibly dark with a knife scar one side of his face. He occupies one of the two self contained in the compound with his large family and we respect him because he does not have to share a bathroom with anyone. One day, his precocious ten year old son Willy-Willy came up to him and said "Daddy, is it true what bro Irikefe said that some of the Chibok girls refused to be rescued because of the rod of Moses they were receiving in the bush?"

"Gerraway from here! Ewu Gambia!" he retorted with blazing eyes. The boy was lucky to duck in time as three menacing knuckles flew past his forehead". The six sons of Mr Zubi always gave him cause to bellow "*Ewu Gambia*" about one hundred times a day.

His wife is Mama Willy-Willy. You will hear her say things like "You see what I always say about those actors?! They are all promiscuous! I hear those two from The Wedding Party are getting married! How can they convince me it did not start on the set of the movie? Someone will now

tell me all that kissing and touching and holding mean nothing. That it is just acting. Is a kiss no longer a kiss irrespective of the circumstance of administration? They started enjoying themselves from the movie set *o jare!* Today, they are husband and wife and nobody is talking about the poor boyfriend and girlfriend who were at home supporting their dreams while they were away fornicating on a ready-made excuse. Now those ones are brokenhearted and getting no sympathy." She threw her right arm around her head in a wide circle and swore that thunder will fire any woman who would near her man in the guise of acting.

Mr Zubi shifted uncomfortably in his seat. He was regularly bedecked as a monkey in NTA's *Tales by Moonlight* in the 80's and once landed a 20 seconds cameo as a cripple in a 90's drama series. He swears that it was he who should have been casted in the lead role with Omotola Jalade in *Mortal Inheritance* in '96 and not Fred Amata.

"He got there through nepotism! The Amatas controlled the industry back then." He secretly dreams of a lead romantic role with Mercy Johnson. "Thunder will fire you before it happens" his wife had said when he mistakenly said it in his sleep one night. If you like, don't get up and go to your civil service work."

There is also the neighbor Akunna. You will hear him say things like "this is a calamity of a democracy. Wastefulness, imbalance in every facet, and a mechanism for corruption humanity will see no greater. I don't blame President Buhari. If I were him, I will not return from that London. Even the messiah cannot fix this nation. Light skinned and freckled in the face and in his forties, his only other problem is his wife. Recently he said to her: "Serena Williams won a grand slam with eight months pregnancy! But two weeks after you have conceived another bastard I will not be able to enter my own house because of your nonsense squirming."

His four children were all dreadlocked and bore more than a passing semblance to Talabi the tailor who was dreadlocked since birth. Akunna did not hide the fact that he had been saving up for DNA tests sometime in the future. He also likes Arsenal. Perhaps losing was in his DNA.

And then there is Talabi. He is regarded as a hero in the neighborhood. When Alhaji Sirika would not give any of his resident tenants occupancy of the shops as he did not trust them with rent payment, Talabi led the cry of injustice for many years. When the Alhaji would not budge, he planted faeces in front of the four shops every night for one month until all the occupants of the shops fled. He took the best one for his tailoring business. The other three were occupied by Lukman the one eyed barber, Josiah the carpenter and the *oni rice* they called Mama Cowbell, all of whom were also resident at number 225. Other than Akunna's wife, Talabi loved Chelsea FC, and being reigning champions, his feet barely touched the ground since the close season.

The last neighbor I must mention at this point is Mr Cosmas. He occupies the second self contained and also does not share a bathroom and would naturally have our respect. But he is weird and says very uncomfortable things. Whenever a discussion veered towards religion, he always had something different to say. He famously said that Jesus did not die for our sins but was murdered for the truth he preached. He said we would all pay for everything we do as God cannot carry the sins of one child and put on the head of another. The less I say about Mr Cosmas the better. It's just that he is not one to ignore.

CHAPTER TWO

MEET MY NEIGHBOURS (2)

There is also Achike who refused to pay his rent because the budget had not been signed.

"Achike, "What has the okrika you are selling at the bus stop got to do with the budget? Alhaji Sirika said, eyes blazing. What has that got to do with my money?"

Stout with a prominent distension in the middle, Achike said "My business is tied to government spending. It is intricate Alhaji, you will not understand."

When reminded that the vice president in his capacity as acting president had signed the budget, he said, "It is a ruse. We have no acting president. The man was told to coordinate activities of government till Baba returns. He himself has said that he speaks with the president every day. What that implies is that he still takes instructions from the president. It means we have two presidents which is wrong constitutionally and in that light the budget he signed is null and void! When the budget excuse did not work Achike said "My brothers in the north have been given quit notice. Nobody knows what will happen in two months time."

I used to think Mr Cosmas was weird until three months after I moved in I began to notice activity in one of the hitherto locked rooms on the ground floor. The returnee occupant is Mr Kingsley. He does not talk to anyone, he never says or responds to greetings, he never flushes the toilet after use and he prefers to take his bath in the bathroom reserved for peeing. He is a heavily bearded towering man with dark piercing eyes and bushy eyebrows with some strands curling out

towards the sky. His torso is matted with hair and when he moves he seems to do so on tiptoe. The children call him The Undertaker. He converses only in parables or in quotes and always acknowledges the quoted, often leaving listeners confused. During compound meetings he will be seen stroking his beard and looking disinterested while neighbors raged about one problem or the other. Then someone will say to him "Mr Kingsley, so what do you say? How can we be expected to contribute money to repair the transformer when we pay NEPA bills every month?"

He will pretend not to hear and will keep everyone waiting for about a minute then he will say "When injustice becomes law, resistance becomes duty. Thomas Jefferson."

Then someone will say "Mr Kingsley you have come again. We are asking what we should do and you are quoting a dead oyinbo man for us."

He will again stroke his beard for another minute then say "Whatever we do will seem insignificant but it is important that we do it. Mahatma Ghandi."

It is when he is angry that he produces his best quotes. Usually he quotes an African statesman. One Sunday afternoon, Mr Zubi's boys were playing police and thief and barged on his door constantly while he was having a siesta. When he could not bear it any longer, he went and knocked on their door and said to Mr Zubi "Mister, warn your children. If they continue to hit my door like that, 'the come, will turn to become - Mbadiwe."

Living directly opposite Mr Kingsley's is the born again Spinster Sister Esther. In her late thirties and once beautiful, Sister Esther, always thoroughly covered in maxi skirts and long-sleeve blouses and scarves competed for airtime with the muezzin every morning with her loud hailer admonishing all the souls on the street to "repent, or spend eternity in hell fire". Before hitting the street she would first put her

mouth through Mr Cosmas' window and say "Brother! The Lord has given you another chance by sparing your life till this morning. Turn away from blasphemy and heresy and call upon the one true God. Repent!" Then she would gather her skirt and jump the gutter and make sure that the first words that rent the air before the muezzin's speakers cracked would be "repent!"

"She's in love with The Undertaker" Irikefe once told me. He is the one that shines her congo". "Don't be silly Irikefe" I said. "Don't worry bros Freke. You will see for yourself."

Now to Lukman the one eyed barber. You would think that after five years of blindness in one eye that he would be used to his lot by now. But he continued to take offence when looked at any longer than he considered necessary. "I am like this because I was fighting for your rights!" He always said. The story is that he was gorged by a policeman who was fighting off a mob that isolated and beat him up during a "peaceful" protest against the APC government for the ill treatment received in the area. "Because we support the PDP and our councilor is an Igbo man we don't have light and our street is not tarred." One day, Willy-Willy went to his shop and after staring at him for five minutes said "Bro Lukman, does your missing eye give you a headache?" Lukman planted his knuckles firmly on his head and he ran to tell his elder brother Castro.

Castro is eighteen and always spoiling for a fight since he finished secondary school and could not pass his matriculation exams. He stormed into Lukman's shop and started bouncing his willowy frame about and rolling his fists. Lukman, twenty-five, with a lifetime on the streets easily overpowered Castro. When they got separated, Castro grabbed a clipper with which he smashed a mirror and then ran out into the afternoon. Afterwards I convinced Lukman to buy an eye patch and turn his disability into a style. The first time he wore it and regarded

himself in the mirror, his face opened into a broad smile and he said "as the American's would say, this is badass!"

He quickly grew a wicked moustache and bought a montera hat and pointed out to everyone how much he now resembled Jack Sparrow in the Pirates of the Caribbean. Kids now compare every bad guy in movies with Lukman.

It does not seem like the introduction of my neighbors will ever end if I continued. There are too many of them and each of them brings something different. You will have to meet them as my story moves along. But I must tell you about one more person.

The first thing my father said to me as I was leaving for Lagos was to stay away from girls if I wanted to make it in life. But each time I looked at Maya I knew I was going to disobey my father. I wonder why old people continue to spew out this trite wisdom, as if congress between a man and a woman was created in 2017. She is the second of three sisters and the dearest to her mother, Mama Tobi, whom I will tell you about another time. She is seventeen, only four years my junior, graceful as a peacock, with a voice as soft as melting honey. One day her mother said to her "Maya, I saw you looking at that new calabar boy and your eyes were dimming like somebody that drank ogogoro for the first time. Those people are dogs! Be warned!" When she told me, all I said to her was that "it's a myth." And her reply was "I know".

CHAPTER THREE

EVIL RAIN

"This is an evil rain!" Sister Esther said. "What sort of city is this? Every year it will rain for seven days nonstop. This year, it has been twenty-one days! It is the handwork of principalities and powers."

"Principalities and powers do not cause rain sister Esther," Mr Cosmas said. Rain is as a result of heating from the sun. When the ground warms up, moisture in the ground evaporates and rises as water vapour, it then cools and condenses into clouds and ultimately rain. If it is raining more, it is because of global warming and other such phenomena environmentalists have been crying about for decades now. Principalities and powers exist only in your mind."

"They exist in this compound as well and you are one of them. Harvard professor."

We were bailing water from the corridor as the deluge coursed through the streets and into the compounds. Every family with at least two occupants in a room shared responsibilities. While some bailed the water from the rooms, the others worked in the corridor to send it back onto the street. Those upstairs do not any fare any better. The corrugated roofing sheets were rusted and looked like they were sprayed with bullets from above. So on rainy days, upstairs occupants at the first sound of the rumbling skies will place buckets and bowls on tables, suitcases and television sets to collect their own share of suffering. For us on the ground floor, our advantage is that the rain has to be heavy and sustained before we go to work to prevent ourselves from drowning in our beds.

"At least we are better than Lekki residents for once. We can bail out our own water but they can't. Have you seen the pictures? Some of their houses are completely submerged and they have crocodile in the water."

"You can be sure that the government will intervene in some way and help them. Just wait and see the billions that will move in that direction when this is over. Remember when bar beach overflowed? But for us, nobody cares!"

"Has anyone noticed that this house is sinking?" Akunna said as he scraped the floor with his bailer.

"What?" Josiah said.

"Can't you see we are now below ground level? This place was a swamp and with all this rain the filling they did cannot hold anymore. Can't you see that to step out we now have to literally climb onto the street?"

"Oga Akunna. That means we are living in an underground apartment" Josiah said with a grin and wiped sweat from his brow.

"You are stupid. I am telling you that this defective structure is going under. We may wake up one day to find that we have vanished into the ground like Atlantis."

"Then they will put our pictures on CNN like the victims of that high rise building in London. We will become famous."

"You will be dead you fool."

"But at least, we will be on CNN."

"Look at you" Lukman said. Those that died in T.B Joshua's church, ordinary Linda Ikeji blog we did not see their passport photographs. You will be lucky if PM News mentions Katakata Street, not to talk of one useless carpenter that lived there."

"I don't think any child has ever been conceived during the raining season in this compound" Talabi said. He may have been thinking aloud because he was startled when everyone stopped and looked in his direction.

"Eh what have I said that is wrong now? When it is raining and the weather is like this, normal people will get close to their men or women. But in this compound, if we are not bailing water, we are dodging from it landing on our heads. It is only when the sun is hot that it gets to happen here. I'm sure that is why all your children are hot headed." Everyone turned to look at Akunna when Talabi finished. This was uncomfortable for him so he dropped his bowl and went into his room.

"Thank God the rain has stopped for now" Josiah said. At least we can go and rest."

One by one neighbors retreated into their rooms or the common kitchen.

"My only consolation this week is that Man U have signed Lukaku" my cousin Mkpokanna said. "We are surely winning the league". His waist was sore from the pummeling he got in the hands of task force officials that raided the wharf yesterday. Having to bend to bail water when he should be nursing his wounds was taking its toll on him I could see. "Ndifreke" he said to me. "Get a real job my brother."

"I will try". I said.

Talabi started to say something about how Chelsea fans did not care if Man U signed Lukaku. But I lost interest the moment I saw Maya with a basin of clothes for washing balanced on her head and moving towards the backyard.

"I'm coming" I said, I need to check something at the backyard.

CHAPTER FOUR

SATURDAY MORNING

I know you are eager to know what happened when I followed Maya to the backyard. I have to say that I am taking things easy with her. Maya has had a harrowing life. Raped and deflowered by her own father at a tender age, maniacally protected by her mother as a result, she is not the kind of girl you follow to the backyard and begin to lift up her skirt. It seems to me now that she may be ready for some fooling around, because one evening when they suddenly took light, she found me where I sat on the soakaway slab and searched out my eyes in the darkness and said "why have you not tried to touch me?" So far I have refrained from describing Maya's bodily features in full because you may think I am exaggerating or carried away. But anyone who shows up at number 225 Katakata Street for the first time and sees Maya will believe Mr Cosmas' cosmic assertions about circumstances of birth, because it would only take something fantastic for a being like Maya to turn up in this dump. Perverts for whom face-me-I-face-you was designed will happily fill out hell's register and check in without thinking twice because of her. But I have earned her trust, and respect I hope. And it is equally important to prove to her mother that 'Calabar' people are not dogs. So I will leave Maya and the backyard thing for the time being.

I like Saturday mornings at number 225. The day starts at 5am with Sister Esther disturbing our early morning sleep with her amplified admonition to the whole street to repent, after which she would sneak

back into her bed till about 8 o'clock when she would join the rest of us in front of Talabi's shop.

Mr Zubi is always the first one out. He has recently taken up yoga, and takes immense satisfaction in remaining unshaken in his lotus position even when cars and motorcycles splash mud over him in front of Talabi's shop where he spreads a mat for his new hobby. "It is the discipline and serenity of soul yoga gives to you" he will say when quizzed about all the distractions, some of which were pure mischief. He of course does not utter a word while he practices. Everything requiring his attention waits until he is done. His wife has promised to one day come and pour hot water on his head while he sat in that "hausa position" any day he stepped out without leaving money on the table for their Saturday eggs. "He will soon get tired of it" She will say to everyone. "If he reads on the internet tomorrow that the Chinese have started eating naked on top of trees for enlightenment, he will get up from there and go and start that one."

It is Suleiman, our newspaper vendor's horn that brings the yoga practice or whatever the fad of the moment is to an end. Mr Zubi will straighten up, place his hands together at his heart, bow his head and utter 'Namaste'. Then he will turn and look at one of his sons who will inevitably be waiting with a message from his wife and bellow "what do you want? Ewu Gambia!" Then he will grab a chair he had kept and collect the bunch of papers Suleiman would hand to him. One by one we will all gather around and explore the issues of the moment.

"The senate has summoned Fashola to come and explain his comments that 'the lawmakers displayed stark and worrisome gaps in knowledge about the budget.'" Mr Zubi said when he looked up from the first paper.

"What kind of Senate is this eh? You don't wear uniform, they summon you. You say something they don't like, they summon you. If you fart at Eagle square sef, they will summon you." Akunna said.

"We should send Alhaji Sirika to them. After all, he built this death trap and still wants rent for it." Achike said.

"If you like don't go and pay your rent" Akunna sneered.

"What else is hot Mr Zubi?" Achike will say quickly. He did not like the subject of his rent.

"The Acting President visited the President in London."

"You see? Did I not tell you nobody is acting anything? The man is still giving instructions from his deathbed!"

"Shut up Achike. You do not speak of a sick person in that manner, not to talk of the President. Show some respect! The least you can do is to pray for him." Akunna said.

"See this one! When you are sick where do you go to? Philemon's chemist or God Dey hospital! But despite all our wealth our elite fly abroad even when their anus is itching them. Did you ever hear that Mandela was flown abroad? All the times he was sick he was treated at home. He died in a South African hospital."

"Nnamdi Kanu addresses crowd" Mr Zubi announced next.

"You see what I was telling Alhaj?" Achike continued. "This man has committed treason and they won't touch him. He is flouting court orders left right and centre and they are turning a blind eye. The Government is unsure of this whole Biafra thing. If not they would have grabbed the man again and locked him up and thrown away the keys. Me I don't want war. I have a small land in Sango."

Mrs Zubi had joined the gathering unnoticed. She spoke up when her husband said "Another Nollywood death?"

"Why won't they die when they keep playing with fire? Today they are inside coffin, tomorrow they are tying red cloth around their waist and painting their eyes with chalk and chanting names of demons. They say

it is acting but they don't know that the devil does not know the spelling of Nollywood. Rather than go to look for one correct prophet that will wash their heads after playing such roles, they will be going from place to place mimicking Hollywood red carpet. Next day they fall down and die. When Funke Akindele did not miss one minute of the hallelujah challenge last month, the others thought she did not know what she was doing."

"Sports please!" Josiah said.

"Chelsea sign Bakayoko from Monaco" Mr Zubi said, and held up the colourful centre spread.

"Another African player. The guy is too black."

"He is not an African player. He is from France" Talabi said.

"He is from France just like I am from Japan" Josiah sneered.

"He is French-born and carries a French passport. What is your problem with African players?"

"They do juju. Very soon you will see that those that are competing with him for position in the team will start breaking their legs and in training they will be kicking the air instead of the ball until they find themselves permanently on the bench."

"Then whose fault is it when they themselves get injured? This guy just had a knee surgery and may be missing the start of the season."

Irikefe snuck up to me from behind and whispered in my ear "Bros Freke. Sister Esther is cooking for The Undertaker."

"Shut up Irikefe. Sister Esther is here." I looked around and did not find Sister Esther.

"Come" Irikefe said, and grabbed my hand.

CHAPTER FIVE

SATURDAY MORNING (2)

I never saw the relationship between Sister Esther and Mr Kingsley in the light Irikefe constantly alluded to. Sister Esther who was interested in the destiny of our souls and payed so little attention to her appearance, it was sinful to even begin to imagine her in that way. The first time I saw both of them interact, it was a fierce quarrel they were having. Well, fierce from Sister Esther's point of view. Mr Kingsley was cool as a cucumber, only punctuating Sister Esther's rants with one quote or another. Irikefe said the quarrel was just lovers' spat. "A girl slept in The Undertaker's room the other night. Sister Esther knows because she is always watching his door." On that occasion she had accused him of stepping on her clean clothes that fell from her hands as she was returning from the backyard airer. I heard her screaming "you wicked man! Idiot! Nebuchadnezzar!"

Mr Kingsley, seated on his room embankment said "If I am not out of my mind, it is alright with me. Saul Barrow 1915."

"Mad man. Open your mouth and talk. Defend yourself let everybody hear you."

"Silence alone is grand. All else is feebleness. Alfred de Vigny 1797."

"Hypocrite. You stopped talking because you used your mother for money rituals but you have remained poor."

Irikefe turned to me and said "If he does not start talking normally now, he will quote an African next."

Mr Kingsley's eyes suddenly reddened and became drawn. There was spittle bubbling from the corner of his mouth and his chest puffed out.

"Whenever things begin to go well in this world, the devil comes and puts a woman in your way, Robert Mugabe."

And so it went on. Irikefe insisted Sister Esther was only in a fit of jealousy.

"But she is born again" I said.

"Leave that thing bro's Freke. They are the worst. Give them a few days and she will be back cooking his meals."

That is why when Sister Esther disappeared from the gathering this morning and Irikefe worked out her whereabouts, I could not help but tag along.

Each of the two floors of the compound has a common kitchen situated beside the toilets and bathrooms at the end of the corridor close to the backyard. It is one bare room tenants are given space to place cookers on top of individual cupboards to do their cooking. Walking down the corridor you are assaulted by the smell of stew and urine and soap in a giddy blend. Those who cannot digest food from this arrangement place their stoves on the corridor close to their doors to do their cooking. Mr. Kingsley and Sister Esther found a better way yet to make their food in a level of decency the rest of the compound envied. Since his room was the closest to the staircase, Mr. Kingsley one day cleared the rubbish from the space under and put his cupboard and stove there for his cooking. He protected this space for himself alone for a long time until one day we saw that sister Esther had squeezed her cupboard in there too and there were no borrowed words of resistance from Mr. Kingsley.

"So what now?" I said to Irikefe when he led me through the backyard to the side of the building from where we could peer under the

from morning till night and they will be entering planes and landing in Katakata Street. He has bought the house they are living in now and has constructed a flat out of the rooms upstairs. Big boy."

"You will get caught Irikefe."

"Why haven't they caught all the others? I may look stupid but I'm not. I will get by."

"I think we should go back and join the rest. The papers are interesting today."

"Tomorrow I will get my laptop. Someone is getting me a second hand one from Westminster. I will pay when I make my first hit."

"When you pick your Dad's pocket you mean?"

"Haba bros. I've stopped that one since na."

"Good for you."

"I will try and make a video of Sister Esther and The Undertaker tonight."

"I hope they catch you and change the position of your nose with a frying pan."

"No they won't. They will be having too much fun to notice the recorder I will place inside their room before they go to bed."

CHAPTER SIX

DIEZANI

I strode back out to meet the newspaper gang where I left them. The compound was now fully alive as you would expect on a Saturday morning. Children were running around with toothbrushes and tiny towels around their waists, parents were stretching their lungs to get them back in line, and there were others carrying pots and pans and dirty laundry and dishes to and from the backyard. I saw Willy-willy brandishing a transparent nylon with six eggs and bouncing to their self-contained like the prince of Persia showing off his gold. Saturday morning fried eggs was a constant in their home, and the six boys always made sure the rest of the compound never forgot how well they lived. There were a few new faces about, but that was not unexpected. This is number 225 Katakata Street.

"Diezani stole ninety billion dollars". Mr Zubi said and shook his head.

"That is even more money than Bill Gates has" Akunna said.

"And she get cancer abi?" Josiah said.

"Last I heard, yes" Mr Zubi said.

"Lucky woman" Josiah said.

"And how is that lucky?"

"She is among the privileged few who know when they will die. So she will enjoy what she can of her stolen money, settle her family to the 20th generation while checking with her doctor how much time she has,

then in the final moments, she go just give her life to Christ then go heaven straight."

"Ehn? Lai lai!"

"What is lai lai? I dey lie? Is that not what the bible says? That if we repent we will be forgiven everything? The woman lucky abeg."

"I don't like the sound of that at all. It is unfair. The likes of her should rot in hell. Did you see Aremu Afolayan's rant on instagram? I stand by him. God will punish her, her mother and all those that are eating the money with her."

"That is your opinion. If she repents, it will all be washed away and she will be as white as snow."

"So why won't I go and steal and get away from this hole and then repent and go to heaven?"

"You will never get close to that kind of money, and you are too stupid to be an armed robber. At best you can go to the councilor's house and steal his shoes," Mr Zubi said.

"Something is not right about that doctrine. I can feel it in my soul," Akunna mused. "She was feeding fat from oil swap deals as the papers say. Because of that, our refineries were never going to work. My cousin that worked at the Port Harcourt refinery is now a pauper because people like Diezani ensured they were sent back home for redundancy. That kind of money would not only keep our refineries alive, it would build a new one in every local government in this country. Not to talk of roads, hospitals, and so many jobs!"

"Can I say something?" It was Mr Cosmas that spoke. We all fell silent. We did not know what was coming, but we were sure he was going to throw our faith in our faces once again.

"Josiah," he began, "Think about Akunna's cousin in Port-Harcourt who has been made hungry by this woman. Imagine that one day out of desperation he goes to the market and steals some garri to feed his family, then the following day he dies without remembering to repent, will it be fair for him to be sent to hell and Diezani to heaven because she repented?"

"One is stealing, the other is corruption. Goodluck Jonathan said they are not the same thing." Josiah said.

Mr Cosmas ignored the remark and said "Akunna, you say your soul tells you the doctrine is wrong. Guess what, your soul is right. How can we say God is just if people steal billions and impoverish millions and in the end utter a few words of repentance and go to heaven? And the people they impoverish are sent to hell for becoming desperate to survive?"

"What nonsense soul is telling him what? Do you question God? Do you question His word? His ways are not our ways. You cannot understand spiritual things thinking in the flesh."

"Hmmm, so what are you saying Mr Cosmas?" Akunna said.

"God cannot be mocked. Whatsoever a man soweth, so shall he reap. She will pay for it. If not in this life, in another one."

"I said it! I knew this was where this was leading. You don't come again Cosmas. It is appointed unto man to die once!"

"If it were so, then the Almighty will not be just. Akunna, if your intuition tells you what you believed is not right, you are on track. Seek and ye shall find."

"I am not sitting down here and listening to this rubbish. I did not say that what Diezani did was right, but we cannot judge her. I believe that if she repents she will be saved. All this one you are saying now I know you read from those demonic books wey you dey carry. Be careful

Cosmas. Repent before it is too late. I dey go. Make una stay there make dem pollute una mind."

"The problem with closed-minded people is that their mouth is always open."

We all turned and saw that Mr Kingsley had joined us. He never took part in our gathering unless he was invited. Even then it was only for the compound meetings.

"Who said that, Mr. Kingsley?" I said before I could stop myself.

"Zig Ziglar."

"Don't be surprised bros Freke. There is nothing a woman's food cannot do." It was Irikefe. He must have been following Mr Kingsley. "Tonight, bros" he said with a wink and jumped the gutter and went down the street.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE SEX TAPE

The following morning Irikefe walked up to me where I stood by the gutter brushing my teeth and said "Bros, I have the tape."

"What tape again?"

"Sister Esther and The Undertaker last night."

"You are joking right? I said and spat a dollop of toothpaste foam with phlegm into the gutter and it landed with a splatter. I rinsed my mouth with the water I held in a plastic cup and spat again and then faced Irikefe.

"Bros since you came to this compound, have I ever said I will do something and not do it? Or have I ever given you information that is not authentic? I am the Prince here. Conceived, born, bred, buttered, riced and beansed in number 225. Nothing escapes my attention."

"No be only riced and beansed. What of amala and ewedued in number 225?"

Irikefe laughed out loud and threw his head back without a care in the world while displaying a set of perfect dentition. He then pulled out his phone from his pocket and caressed it in his palm. He looked around like a thief about to remove a chicken from its roost and said "tell me you are not eager to watch."

He smiled as I tried to conceal my excitement and said "Let's go to your room. This place is not safe."

I led him back through the corridor and we entered the room I shared with my cousin. We both sat on the bed - a six by four feet mattress on cold linoleum dressed with the wrapper my mother gave me as I packed for Lagos.

Irikefe dipped his hand in his pocket but hesitated.

"Show me nau?" I said. He then held up the phone and fiddled with it and then said "oya, see."

I looked at the still black screen with indecipherable humming sound as irikefe watched me.

"What is this?"

"That is the show na. Can't you hear Sister Esther speaking in tongues? The Undertaker is even quoting Songs of Solomon."

"I can't see or hear a thing."

"That is because there was no light."

"But that is the point Irikefe. How can you make a video in the dark? And even if you had made an actual video, what would you do with it? What is the point?"

"I will use it to make money from them."

"Blackmail?"

"Yes ke."

"How can you even think of that?"

"I am now a yahoo boy. I don't care."

"So you want to start your criminal life with blackmailing your neighbors?"

"Charity begins at home bros."

"Well, sorry you have started woefully. There is nothing on this so called tape of yours."

"They will not know that. My night vigil will not go in vain. I was by the window till they took light by twelve thirty. I then came round and entered the corridor and waited to make sure I saw The Undertaker sneak into her room. As long as they slept together, they will believe I have a tape."

"It was dark irikefe."

"I will tell them I recorded it using anti-darkness infrared technology."

"What the hell is that?"

"I don't know bros. It just entered my head. Sister Esther only knows what the Bible says. I will tell her that I can put it on a special device and the world will see her holy behind being polished by a heathen."

"Mr Kingsley will not buy this."

"I am not going to him. He will even be glad there is wahala. That will be a good excuse to dump her. He is tired of the whole thing."

"And how do you know that?"

"I know everything bros."

"So you want Sister Esther to give you money?"

Something like that. I know she is poor like the rest of us. But I can be getting something to be buying data for my business. Either that or I go to her pastor with the tape."

"Do you know her pastor?"

"She once took me to him for deliverance."

"Obviously it did not work."

Irikefe chuckled and I could see he was enjoying my discomfort.

"Bros, one needs to be wise in this Lagos. With time, I will keep a big bowl with her. When she finishes cooking, after serving The Undertaker she will serve me too."

"You will eat rat poison."

"Hehehe it's a chance I'm willing to take."

CHAPTER EIGHT

BAD NEWS RETURNS

There was pandemonium in the corridor so I rushed out to see. The first room on the ground floor which has been locked since I arrived at number 225 was now brimming with life.

People were going in and out of the room, some holding small bottles of alomo bitters and similar volatile spirits. Boys in all sorts of degenerate wears - sagging jeans, baggy shorts, just singlet and boxers, fez caps worn backwards and the like. I could identify all the trouble makers in the neighborhood. I saw Lukman, the one eyed barber entering the room too.

"He is back" I heard someone say.

"Who is back?"

"King Wasiu!"

I remember the story. Wasiu who sold drugs and regularly did time at Kirikiri. No one was expecting him to be back so soon. He had blown his last chance at freedom as I heard.

"Lukman started smoking because of him" Irikefe told me. "He even gave igbo to Castro."

Castro is Mr Zubi's eldest son. "I can imagine how that turned out."

"Castro came home and asked his mother to marry him."

"Jesu!"

"He slept under the staircase that night. No one could move him. He said it was Sheraton. Mr Zubi got Wasiu arrested the following day. He said that Wasiu would never see day light again. Bros, we are in trouble."

"How so?"

"Wasiu is bad news. Now all our slippers and shoes will start going missing again. Not to talk of the heads of all the young boys and girls."

The characters swarming the compound this morning attested to that. I went closer and peeped. He is a small man. Late twenties, light complexioned, slim with soft eyes and a kind smile. Irikefe later said to me "don't be fooled. He is a snake. It is that innocent looks that law enforcement see and have pity on him. If not that they know him now, the first time they came to arrest him they doubted it was he after a few words with him. They left only to discover they had made a mistake and he fled by the time they returned. He charms them with that smile and sweet mouth, that day he told them the drug dealer they came to arrest was tall and hairy and wicked looking. They then found The Undertaker where he was washing at the backyard and took him away."

I did not know there were not many people left in the room when I peeped so my eyes locked with his and he asked me inside with a sweet smile. He stood and hugged me like he always knew me and asked me to be seated next to him on the bed that had no mattress. He was telling Lukman and an avuncular gentleman in buba a story.

"I shared a cell with Rev. King. I used to wash for Bode George. We are expecting Diezani. My brother, that is not a place to be o! Only the rich and powerful can survive there. I thank God I am back."

"We hope you have turned a new leaf." The other man said to him.

"Yes, yes uncle. For sure. I no dey do am again. I met Christ in prison. The Reverend helped me."

"Lies." Irikefe later told me. "Give him two weeks."

"Is it true that they beat up and gassed Area Fada where he went to Abuja to protest that Buhari should return or resign?"

"So I heard. He said our mumu don do. But Asari Dokubo says he is even a bigger mumu."

"Is Buhari hearing all these things that are going on?"

"How can he hear when his ear is rotten? Is it not the ear he first went to remove when he traveled in January?"

"Haba Lukman!"

"It is what I heard."

"I want to go and join Area Fada. He is my hero," Wasiu said.

"It seems you are already missing Kirikiri. Charley boy is a bored rich man. He wants his name back in the news. I won't be surprised that he is planning a concert later in the year and is now trying to gain attention so that people will remember he is still alive and attend his shows. These celebrities always know what they are doing. Is it not how that one that sang olowogbogboro got everybody praying in the middle of the night and talking about him for one month then immediately after, he released his song? I don't trust them o". I prefer to be hungry but free."

"It is true bros. Nothing like freedom. Abeg which match dey today? I heard they hammered Chelsea yesterday."

"Relax guy. I will bounce back. I am buying four players before the transfer window shuts. I have a budget of two hundred and fifty million pounds."

"Ehen, Ok lend me only five thousand naira there." Wasiu's uncle teased.

"Ha egbon! But you know what I mean na" Lukman said and grinned."

"You fools, Wasiu's uncle said and rose. Turning to Wasiu he said "For your own good, be a good boy. This is the last time I will lift a finger to get you out of jail."

"Thank you sir" Wasiu said and prostrated.

The man strode out without looking back.

Outside there was commotion. Akunna was supine on the floor in only boxers and they were pouring water on him.

"He just received a phone call that his mother is on her way to visit him and he fainted."

"But why?"

"It is his mother that first noticed that all his children look like Talabi the tailor."

CHAPTER NINE

BAD NEWS RETURNS (2)

They continued to pour water on Akunna and I watched as he first opened one eye and then the second. As he heard a collective roar of jubilation at his revival he seemed disappointed and then cocked his head to one side and shut his eyes again, exactly the way they died in Nollywood.

"You people should just leave him alone. When he is tired he will get up. Akunna, you better get up. Who your mama go come kill as you wan die now?" Josiah said.

If we thought bad news had returned when Wasiu showed up, then the coming of Akunna's mother was Armageddon.

"De woman no dey mind her business and she get very bad mouth. She dey even open other people soup pot. Wasiu, Akunna mama, Buhari, all returning in one day!"

"I don't care if Buhari returns or not." Josiah fumed. "Before he left we did not have light. While he was away we still did not have. Now that he has returned we will still not have light. All the people that are owing me since last year have still not paid and they have not phoned to say they will bring my money now that Buhari has returned."

"Make sure you go and greet her when she arrives." Irikefe said of Akunna's mother. "It is what we all do. Don't let her run into you in the corridor or backyard before you pay homage."

I nodded at Irikefe's counsel. Then at about 6:30 in the evening, a yellow keke pulled up and a light skinned grizzled woman wearing a sweater and head warmer over a print wrapper and rubber slippers alighted. She stood straight just shy of six feet and slowly looked around, taking in her surroundings like a local government tax official snooping for hidden sign boards. Her first words were "this place never change o! all the winch for this street no wan make better tin reach hia." Her voice was sharp and piercing and when she turned to face the compound everyone made sure their eyes did not meet hers. Then as if on cue the children began chanting "mama oyoyo! mama oyoyo!" The keke driver handed her belongings, which were a bundle of clothes tied in one wrapper and a nylon bag containing some unripe plantains and okazi leaves to Akunna who had scaled the gutter in double time to welcome his mother.

"Nwam!" She said and rubbed his head like a little boy as he clutched her belongings and advised her to be careful while jumping the gutter.

"No worry I no go fall. E no pass de potopoto wey I dey jump everyday wen I dey go farm."

She stood in front of the compound and looked around again and shook her head and said "Tifiakwa! So una still be like this?"

Akunna made sure his teeth remained as visible as a roasted goat's as his mother threw one vitriol or the other as she gingerly made her way to his room through the corridor.

"Akunna's wife has fled" Irikefe whispered in my ears. She would have gone into labour tonight if she stayed. From outside we could hear her asking her son "wey all your basitad and that ashawo you keep hia?"

"She stopped calling his children by their given names as soon as she suspected they were not his. She started calling them basitad one, basitad two, basitad three and basitad four according to their order of birth," Irikefe explained.

"Mama my wife go visit her mama. Em the children...dem go church. Dem go soon come back."

We queued along the corridor to take turns to go in and greet her. I stayed at the back of the queue since I was new in the compound and had never met the woman.

It was Wasiu, perhaps exuberant from his new status as a free man that went in first to greet her.

"Welcome mama" he said and prostrated.

"You! Dem never kill you?"

"No mama. I no dey do bad thing again." She sneered and Wasiu stood and came out and Castro went in next and also prostrated.

"You. See as you don grow finish. Eh hen! As you come reach man you come carry your papa wowo face!"

"No mama. Na my mama I resemble" he said and was out in a heartbeat.

Castro's mother was next. "Welcome mama. How home people?"

"You! You still dey rub cream? See as your hand be. You no know say you don old? If dem see us now dem go think say na you born me."

"No talk so mama. Welcome!" She said and was out and headed for the backyard.

I watched as Irikefe stepped in and said "Welcome mama."

"You! You go don begin tiff well well now abi? You still dey tear small pikin dem yansh for this compound?"

"No mama. I dey learn carpenter work now ma."

"Wey your papa dey?"

"Hin go village ma. Hin go tey for dia small."

Irikefe came out and I was surprised to see that he was smiling.

"She was easy with me today" he said.

I listened as she continued to batter person after person. She was kind only to Mr Cosmas so far.

"Better pikin" she said when he entered. "How body? You don marry? No worry I go bring better gal come give you when I come back. Na d pikin wey I keep for my son before hin go hotel go carry dat tin wey oda people dey use as dem like for dis compound."

"She is very interested in the things Mr Cosmas says. She calls him a true prophet. You will see them together a lot. It is as if it is Cosmas that is her son and not Akunna."

"Even a mad person has friends, as we say in my place."

"True" irikefe said. "Bros Freke, it is your turn now.

I went in and found her seated on a stool in front of the television set. Her eyes seemed to bounce in their sockets as she looked me over and said "Wetin be your name?"

"My name na Ndifreke mama. Welcome. I hear plenty things about you" I said.

"Who you dey follow stay?"

"Na Mkpoikanna-Abasi broda I be."

"You be Calabar?"

"No, na Akwa Ibom we be ma. But dem dey call us Calabar. No problem."

A gleam entered her eyes and she smuttily said "no give person belle o!"

Irikefe was waiting for me when I came back out.

"I think she likes you" he said.

"Why do you think so?"

"She was kind to you."

"You call that kind?"

"The first time she saw Achike who had just moved in with his brother before he inherited the room she made him cry."

"Haa!"

"She questioned his ambition in life for coming to squat with his brother in a place like this. Later she was heard telling Mr Cosmas that Achike was too short and ugly to succeed in life."

"Wow."

"She's a witch."

"I believe."

"I pity all those that did not come to greet her."

"No wonder Akunna wanted to die."

CHAPTER TEN

MAMA AKUNNA

Mama Akunna stayed in the room all through that evening till the following morning. Irikefe assured me she did that so that all those that refused to go and greet her will have no excuse.

"She does not want to hear 'mama I came but you were not in the room,' so that she might say 'where I go? Even to shit I never comot go shit since I come.' She is sure to go looking for them when day breaks."

Akunna's children stayed in mama Cowbell's shop till late in the evening before they returned to their room. We all knew his wife was not coming back. He himself could be found lurking around the corridor looking confused. No one knew how that first night went for them. We were not surprised when at 5am the children were already dressed in their school uniform and had disappeared before daybreak even though schools were on midterm break. Akunna was also out on the street the moment his mother stepped out of the room for the first time since her arrival.

The compound was as busy as it always was. People queued to use the bathroom and toilets and others hurried in and out of the building. As she responded to greetings she also searched faces for recognition and could be heard saying "good morning my pikin. How body? So you no know say I don come? Ehm, who you be?"

She found Maya's mother whom we call Mama Tobi after her only son at the backyard where she was making the fufu she sold in the neighborhood. Mama Akunna stood and watched as the other woman

vigorously stirred cassava paste in a cauldron, stopping intermittently to stoke the flames that cooked it. Mama Tobi sighed in frustration as the heat from the rampant fire scorched her face, and looked up when she heard someone chuckling.

"So na wetin you dey do now be dis?"

"Good morning mama. Welcome" Mama Tobi said and continued her stirring.

"How you take better pass me wey dey village now? See as you dey suffer. After you go say you dey live for city."

I saw a flash of anger cross Mama Tobi's face. For a moment I thought she might attack the older woman with the big ladle she held, but instead she burst into the song "satan don fall for gutter march am march am!" stamping her feet rapidly with the refrain with her wide waist jiggling in tandem.

Mama Akunna spun round and walked to the front of the compound and stood chewing her stick and spitting into the gutter.

"Una mama no dey cook?" she said to three children of the same mother heading to Mama Cowbell's shop with plates and hundred naira notes each to buy rice. The children took to their heels just as sister Esther stepped out rubbing her eyes. She hissed when she noticed Mama Akunna.

"So you no fit greet again Esther?"

"Mama abeg, I take God name beg you. Carry your wahala go meet your pikin wey bring you come Lagos. Na beg I dey beg you."

"Kingsley don marry you? Abi you think say I no know wetin una dey do?"

"Wetin concern you. Old witch!"

Mama Akunna laughed out loud as Sister Esther rushed back into her room.

I did not know that Mama had seen the exchange between me and Maya that morning. I had not seen Maya for two days as she had just started going out to learn how to make cakes and confectionery while she pursued her admission into the University. I had stopped her as she hurried out to ask about her well being. We smiled warmly at each other and she squeezed my hand in return before we parted.

"New Calabar boy" mama Akunna later called out to me as I finished brushing my teeth.

"Good morning mama."

"Wetin you dey do with dat gal?"

"Nothing mama. We are just friends"

"hian!" she said and shuddered.

"What is it mama?"

"You no know say na hin papa open the road of dat place wey you wan go enter so?"

Of all the things I thought she could say this was the one I did not expect. Everybody knew about Maya's sad experience for which her father was still in prison for but no one talked about it so brazenly. I knew I had to stand up for her.

"Mama she was molested."

"Mole-gini?"

"Na force den force am. No be her fault."

"Taa! No man fit force woman do dat kind tin. I go kick hin blokos hin eye go comot for hin ear. Na she let am do am. Na bad pikin."

"Mama she was only a child when it happened."

"My pikin. Weda na force abi no be force, shild abi wetin you call am, dat place don spoil. Dem suppose carry am go home go baff am inside thick bush before anoda man enter dia."

I was now convinced that I too needed to avoid Akunna's mother. No one knew how long she was going to be staying this time. To think that we had to endure this every day until whenever it was she started missing her goats and farm before returning to her village!

"We are going to deal with her" Irikefe later told me when I told him what had happened. "We were going to do it the last time but they took Wasiu away before we could."

"What were you going to do?"

"We were going to put igbo in her soup."

"How?"

"When she is cooking na! Is it not in the same kitchen we all use? I will just wait until she goes out to do amebo then I will throw it into the pot."

"That is extreme irikefe. It could kill her."

"It will not kill her. She will finish eating and go to sleep for three days. By the time she wakes up she will find herself in the village."

"Who will take her?"

"That is what Akunna will have to do. You think he will think twice? We will encourage him to and tell him that it is better to take her now that she is still breathing when he will pay only three thousand naira bus fare, okay six thousand if you add himself because she would need support. If she dies it will cost him one hundred thousand to convey her body. Not to talk of money for coffin. That should do the trick."

"Will you tell him what happened to her?"

"Of course not. But I bet he will find the idea of taking her back to where she came from appealing. She will not know the road back to Lagos when she comes to."

"You don't know how it will turn out for sure. Besides, Wasiu no longer deals drugs."

"Bros, Wasiu does not know any other life. I already told you to give him two weeks. He is already restless. Two weeks may even be too much."

"What if something goes wrong?"

"So be it. Nobody will miss her I can assure you."

I did not know if I wanted to be part of this. But I nodded all the same. "So how far with your yahoo business" I said, changing the topic.

Irikefe's eyes lit up. "My laptop is finally arriving tomorrow. And tomorrow I will also show Sister Esther the tape. I need capital to start," he said and grinned.

Out in front of their shops Talabi and Josiah were discussing the rats in Aso Rock. I did not want to be part of it. I had some job hunting to go and do. So I took my bucket and went to the backyard and joined the bathroom queue. I found that I felt a lot better having spoken to Irikefe. It would not be a bad idea to send Mama Akunna back to where she came from if we could manage it.

I knew then that I was in on the plan.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

WEED

The President has been back for more than a week and has been doing his best to prove that he is not as feeble as some wanted us to believe that he was. He even posed for a photograph with members of the national female basketball team. Julius Berger also came out to dispute the rat story in Aso Rock; after all, it was they, a reputed company that maintained the facility. What needs to be done I think is to cure the diarrhea of the mouth suffered by the presidential spokespersons. To think that those guys in another life were reputed journalists and even statesmen! Maybe it is the demons in Aso Rock that Reuben Abati spoke about that possess them and make them unrecognizable as soon as they make the transition into Government. Anyway, just as Josiah pointed out, nothing has changed in our lives in the midst of all this. I am still yet to find a job, some that went all the way to Mecca to pray have died there and mama Akunna remains a torn in our flesh.

I knew from the moment Irikefe spoke to me that we would not have to wait long before he carried out his plans against Mama Akunna. If Wasiu was restless, then there were soldier ants permanently domiciled in Irikefe's pants.

We have not had light for four days now and it has also not rained in that time. As much as we hate the rains for all the flood and whatnot, we sleep better because of the general coolness in the air, and families are able to stay in their rooms in the evenings and play card or ludo games or gossip or just find comfort in each other's company. But this night, the heat was back with a venom, and as we do in the dry season, adults will leave their children in the rooms and bring out mats to the

frontage and spread them and lie till about midnight before returning to their rooms.

Mama Akunna we all knew cooked her food by herself and prefers to do so only at night.

"That is because she is a witch" Irikefe reiterated.

"She does not want anyone to see the ingredients she puts in the food, which I know contains human blood."

"Ah ahn Irikefe. Where will she get human blood from? At least we have not heard of any ritual murders or anything."

"She brings it from the village."

"I don't believe that joor."

"Then why does she cook only at night?"

"Maybe because then there are fewer people entering the kitchen. You know how our compound is."

"Well, whatever." Lowering his voice he said "It is tonight bros."

"What is happening tonight?"

We were seated on the soakaway slab as we preferred to do while the older men took up the remaining space in the frontage for their mats. No one paid any attention to us as they were busy fanning themselves and cursing the APC Government. But Irikefe still took the precaution to look around to be sure no one was watching before producing the handful of weed he wrapped in a newspaper from his hip pocket.

"We are taking care of the witch tonight. Just when the soup is about to done I will sneak in and put it inside."

"Haa! All this? It is too much na!"

"We need to be sure bros."

"Has she started cooking yet?"

"Can't you hear the pounding?"

In the midst of all the noise from the generators in the neighborhood, the Kpoi kpoi kpoi from mama Akunna's mortar was still well amplified as her dinner took shape. Then after five minutes the sound was dead and it was just the familiar angry rattle from the converted diesel engine from number 227 that could be heard.

"It is time" Irikefe said and grabbed my hand and we both stood. Rather than use the corridor we stole round the building to access the kitchen through the backyard. Normally when cooking we step out to the backyard or corridor and sit on stools and banter when the heat gets too much or when we need to give the food time to simmer. We were sure mama would be in the corridor rather than at the backyard. At the corridor she would be able to monitor every nocturnal movement. Something she lived for.

As planned, I walked past the kitchen to where I knew she would be to distract her while Irikefe entered the kitchen.

She was telling me "New Calabar boy. You never sleep? Abi you wan hide carry that gal enter ya house?"

"No mama. I go check whether my brother don remove all our cloth for outside."

"Hmmm I hear" she said and stood and went back into the kitchen. I hurried back to the frontage and hoped that Irikefe had been successful. He was already waiting for me.

"Done, bros. That's the end of the witch. In 48 hours she will be on a bus back to where she came from."

"That will not be so bad," I said and we said our good nights.

Early the following morning I stirred awake when I heard sister Esther say "Repent" into her megaphone and another familiar shrill voice intoned "You dey lie!"

I flew out of bed and dashed through the corridor to the front of the compound and found Irikefe and Wasiu together in one corner, aghast at the drama that was unfolding. Sister Esther spoke again into the megaphone "You will go to hell if you do not change your ways" and Mama Akunna, eyes glistening like a cats, standing by the road but closer to the compound shouted back "Na you go first reach dia!"

"Every soul that sinneth shall die"

"Esther who sin pass you for this Katakata road?"

"For the wages of sin is death my brother my sister."

"You for don die since Esther if na so."

"Brethren do not be deceived by this new trick of the devil to deprive you from hearing the word."

"My people make una hia me now say de pesin wey dey disturb una for this place na proper devil pikin."

"Do not be ignorant of the devices of the devil, second Corinthians chapter two verse eleven."

"My people this Esther wey dey talk so dey sleep for Kingsley house every night."

I rushed to where Irikefe and Wasiu stood and said "guys, what have we done?"

"De woman don craze o!" Wasiu said.

Sister Esther had had enough and quietly jumped the gutter and rushed back into the compound and into her room. It was 5:45 in the morning and far in the horizon I could see a slit the sky suggesting

that daylight was imminent. We hid by the side of the building and watched what was going to happen next. We expected to see mama Akunna tearing her hair and screaming in her new state of lunacy. Instead, she occupied the space in front of Talabi's shop where the men usually gathered and began greeting the early passers-by. We heard her saying to different people "God e go bless you." "You go sell plenty market today". "Bad people eye no go see you today". "Good morning better pikin" "Na only you dey comot this early morning?" After a while we saw her move quietly back into her room.

Then at about 6:30 I noticed some of the more vocal men heading in the direction of Mr. Zubi's self-contained. I learnt later that he had sent text messages to them inviting them to his living room for a meeting. Though I was not invited, I still went and stood by the window and listened. When everyone was seated Mr Zubi spoke first.

"Gentlemen, I am sure you all know why we are gathered here. We are not going to sit here and watch as Akunna's life gets destroyed because of his lunatic mother. We have always endured her and respected her but since she came back this time, you have all seen how notorious she has become. The poor man now lives on the main road and his wife has run away and his children are scattered like chicks that their mother has just been crushed by a speeding vehicle. We cannot continue to say it is not our business. More-so when she does not mind her business and pokes her old nose in our lives and insults us all as she likes. How can we help Akunna?"

"Let him send her back home" Achike said. "That cannot be difficult?"

"It is not as simple as that. Akunna can never chase his mother away. He will be ostracized back home. This is Africa. Our parents are our parents. We take them the way we see them."

"There is a problem with that line of reasoning" Mr Cosmas began. "Family members should not have that kind of hold on one another. This

hinders the free swinging of the human spirit. Children do not belong to their parents. Having children is offering a soul a chance to be born and gain experience. A child is a gift. When one comes to the world through you, all you must do is nurture that child through its years of helplessness, provide for it, give him/her as good an education as you can and then leave them alone to go and experience. Man is the only creature in nature that sticks together far longer than is necessary. This unnatural state of things is the fastest route to destruction for all involved because it is against the laws of nature. You mentioned hens and chicks Mr Zubi. That is a good example. Have you not noticed that when the eggs hatch the hen cares for the chicks and guides them till a certain stage when the mother hen itself chases them away to go and become independent? It is fascinating to see. The hen literally attacks its own offspring until they get the messages and go their own way. It is like that for all creatures in nature except man who erroneously chooses to stick together. We all know how uncomfortable it feels as an adult when you still have to defer to your parents on certain things. That discomfort you feel is your spirit telling you that you are off course. Mama should not be here intruding in her son's life."

"Em Cosmas, we have heard you. Shebi the woman is your friend. Perhaps you can find a way to tell her she is better off in the village" Josiah said.

"I will try." Mr Cosmas said.

"Mr Kingsley what do you think?"

"Bitch" he said.

"Mr Kingsley!"

"When angry, count four; when very angry, swear - Mark Twain."

"You have every right to be angry. She used your name in the sermon this morning." It was Achike, and they all roared in laughter.

"It's my duty as a human being to be pissed off —Eric Brogosian."

"We don't hear."

"Okay gentlemen" Mr Zubi resumed. Mr Cosmas will try to persuade the woman to go back home. In the meantime let us all ensure that his children do not starve. Mama Cowbell is doing her best in that regard. Thank you for that mini lecture by the way. You did not disappoint."

"You are welcome Mr Zubi."

"So you mean that after all the money I am spending on my children when they grow I will just leave them alone? What if they forget about me?"

"Then so be it. You did not have to have them."

"Hmmm"

I left Mr Zubi's window and went to Wasiu's room and met Irikefe there.

"What do you think happened guys?"

"The tin no do the woman anything! Old ogbanje!"

"Kai!" Irikefe exclaimed. "So what do we do now?"

"The men have just had a meeting. They will persuade her to go back home."

The door to Wasiu's room then burst open and Mama Akunna stepped inside the room. Wasiu bolted upright and Irikefe stood on the bed and yelped like a frightened puppy. I tried to remain calm. Mama Akunna adjusted the wrapper on her waist and grinned at us.

"Abeg, give me dat tin if una still get" She said.

CHAPTER TWELVE

FOUND OUT

Mama Akunna let out a guffaw and I saw Irikefe wet his pants. Her eyes were bulging and bright. Her opened mouth was set at a definite circumference, neither widening nor narrowing as the levels of her amusement varied, much like a cartoon character's. No other part of her body moved. We became so unnerved that Irikefe sank in his knees and said "Mama please. Abeg mama". Wasiu, sensing where this was headed quickly gathered his wits and said "Mama wetin happen?" I saw that at the same time that he put a knee in Irikefe's back and Irikefe jumped up and looked around like an awakened somnambulist. I jumped on Wasiu's side and said "Err mama, wetin you want?"

She stopped laughing and took two steps forward and we retreated and huddled in a corner of the room. She sat on the bed that still did not have a mattress and watched us. Then she laughed again in that strange way. Wasiu then took charge. He was not a jailbird for nothing. "Mama, we dey do meeting for here. You no fit just enter like that. You no even knock de door."

She continued to watch us.

"Wetin you say make we give you mama?" I said.

She looked us in the eyes from person to person and then fixed her gaze on Irikefe who could not hold the old woman's eyes and was watching the floor.

"Mama wetin happen?" I ventured again.

"Even as person don dey plant banana, na monkey dey first know wen e ripe" she said and stood up. Our backs were touching the wall in an

instant, as the force of her rising threw us there. We watched as she walked back out of the room and disappeared down the corridor.

Without a word or even a glance at us Irikefe flew out of the room.

"Guy, we go see later" I said to Wasiu and also left.

For the rest of the day we did not see Mama Akunna or Irikefe outside.

Over at the shops Josiah, Talabi and Mr Cosmas were talking about the recent flooding in Benue.

"It is only in Nigeria that this type of thing will happen. We are useless, we do not plan, everything about us is just bad."

"At the same time this was happening there was flooding in Texas as well Josiah."

"Ehn...yes but we know that those areas are prone to that and it is expected. Is it not hurricane that they experienced? Here, ordinary small rain, people are dying. If we have hurricane nko? We build houses everywhere. Government officials take bribe and let people build houses where there should not."

"Well, the same thing happens in Houston my friend. As millions flocked to the metropolitan areas in recent decades, local officials there largely snubbed stricter building regulations. As a result, routine weather events have become catastrophes. Nature did not intend for hurricanes or floods to kill or displace people. It is all our making. Did you hear that President Trump as a gift to developers revoked an order by the Obama administration that flooding be taken into consideration when building new infrastructure projects? Where it is not ignorance or corruption it is human beings playing politics with their very existence. As they say there in america, we aint seen nothing yet."

"And our President went there to commiserate with them."

'Fake news. Where will baba get the strength to embark on such a long trip when he can't leave his house for the Federal Exco meeting?'

"Anyway, God will help us. So Cosmas, when are you talking to the old woman? The small peace we are enjoying now you know will not last. She won't stay indoors all day."

"I will go to her room now and see her."

I waited until Mr Cosmas had entered the room before I went to the door to listen.

"My pikin. Welcome o. Sorry say I no get anything to give you. The soup wey I cook yesterday you no go fit chop am."

"No worry mama, I'm fine. I just say make I come gist with you small. E don tey."

"Tank you my pikin. Na only you be better pikin for this compound. You see Akunna? You see as hin dey suffer now because of that ashawo wey hin put for house?"

"Mama that is why I have come."

"Oh ho! Tank you. I never see dis kind tin before. Person marry woman come give other people. She born basitad full everywhere. I no go close eye see my pikin dey suffer like dis. I go put fire burn all Awero tins so dat hin no go come back to dis house."

"Mama. To do like dat no good. Akunna na man. Hin know the correct tin weh hin suppose do. E no good say now wey you for dey rest, you come here come dey worry yourself. Mama, go back home. Akunna go solve hin problem."

"Which Akunna? That one wey dat winch don give medicine? E no go fit do anything. I must helep my pikin."

"Mama leave Akunna alone. Na man. You don born am finish, come help am grow, you don try."

"My pikin wetin you dey talk?"

"Mama I say make you go home go rest. Akunna go take care of himself."

"Na him send you?"

"No mama. I dey live here and I dey see wetin dey happen. You know say I no dey lie."

"My own pikin dey pursue me comot for hin house. Akunna wey suck my breast till e reach eleven years!"

"No mama, no be like dat."

"I no dey go anywia! Akunna no know anything. I want my pikin to bury me. If I keep quiet, na me go bury Akunna. You don see d pikin dem wey Awero born? All of dem get dada like dat tailor and dem black like devil. My Akunna yellow. Woman wey do dat kind tin no go put otapiapia for hin food?"

"Mama..."

"My pikin oya dey go. Tell Akunna say I dey wait here for am."

I quickly strode towards the backyard as Mr Cosmas stood to leave. As I expected, he made his way to his room. He was not one to spoil people's mood by delivering unfavourable news. He will not say anything to anyone but will try again.

Later that evening Irikefe came out of hiding and met me seated on the soakaway slab.

"I am going to meet Sister Esther now" he said.

"Hmmm you! You better go back to your carpentry work. You are useless."

"Bros it is not like that. Did you see the woman's eyes? Did you see the way she was laughing? Don't forget that I was the one that put the thing in her pot. I am the one she will kill first. I don't want to die before I hammer."

"Who told you doing evil was without risk. You think the 419 you want to start is without risk?"

"That is different bros. I will be dealing with normal people, not witches. How did she know we put anything in her food? How did she know it was us? How did she find us at the same time? You see why I must make it and leave this compound?"

"That does not excuse your behavior. What will you do when you get arrested? Start crying and begging?"

"Who will arrest me?"

"Every 419er will have a brush or two with the law. Better be ready."

"Bros at least I will be dealing with normal people, and I will have money to settle."

"I pray it works out that way for you."

"Do you want to come and see Sister Esther's reaction when I tell her I have evidence of her being possessed with the spirit of fornication?"

"I don't trust you anymore Irikefe. I only roll with brave men. You gave us out man!"

"Bros I did not give us out anything. She already knew. You think she was swayed by that drama you and Wasiu pulled there?"

"O boy you piss for body."

"Bros leave that thing. I no wan die before my time. I will not allow that old witch stand in my way again. If she likes, let her use Akunna and his children to do pepper soup. I no get hand there again. I dey start my own career. Let's go and see Sister Esther."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

BLACKMAIL

We found Sister Esther ensconced in a tight corner under the staircase she and Mr Kingsley had converted to their kitchen. She was seated on a stool cross-legged and was humming a traditional hymn of praise and had a finger between the pages of a tiny New Testament Bible. From the aroma of it, she also had yam porridge simmering. I walked past and called out to Irikefe that I was going to my room, but I sped round the building and stood by the hollow bricks at the side from where I could hear what was being said without being seen.

"Good afternoon Sister Esther."

"Yes, what is it?"

"The Lord had sent me to you" Irikefe said and chuckled smugly.

"Eh ehn!" Sister Esther began and rose, bending her head so as not to hit it against the staircase. She wriggled her index finger and continued, "I am not in the mood for any nonsense this evening. Please just continue on your way."

Irikefe chuckled and said, "Come on Sister..."

"I said go away!"

"If you knew what I was here for you won't be shouting like that."

Sister Esther kept quiet. I could only see her back from where I followed proceedings so I could not tell her demeanor. But I imagined Irikefe made a movement that stopped her in her tracks. I heard Irikefe say "Every morning you will not let us sleep on this street. Repent. You are going to hell. Be righteous bla bla bla. Yet at night you are another person."

"Sweet Jesus. I know this is the devil. Please give me the strength to overcome."

"Sister cool down joor. You will not fool me. I see The Undertaker entering here every night since your quarrel ended. The street people may think Mama does not know what she is saying, but I have proof, and I am taking it to your pastor."

There was a pause then I heard Sister Esther say "Holy Spirit. Rataatahiha."

"What is that one?"

"Oya leave" Sister Esther said.

"I say I have proof. It is all on my phone. I videoed the two of you one night. Is this not you twisting under The Undertaker?"

I could not see what was happening. I did not know what he was showing her because I knew there was no video. But I listened on.

"And listen...you are even speaking in tongues."

"Eh hen? Ok so what do you want now?"

"You will give me fifty thousand naira, and I will sleep in your room once every week otherwise your pastor will see this."

"Chinekeme!"

"What is that? You think I can't handle you?"

"Ah Esther...see what your life has now become?" she lamented to herself. Then she said "Okay. Irikefe. I am sorry ehn, forgive me. Oya let's go inside."

I wanted to scream from where I was. I heard shuffling feet and knew they were leaving the makeshift kitchen. Five minutes later I heard howls of agony from Sister Esther's room.

I rushed back through the corridor and tried to open Sister Esther's door but it was locked from inside. The beating continued and Irikefe continued to shout for help. The door then burst open and sister Esther pushed Irikefe out and he landed on his buttocks on the corridor.

"Your father will hear of this. Idiot. Don't concentrate on the trade you are learning. Prison is waiting for you. Anuofia!"

I pulled irikefe up and led him outside. Neighbors quickly gathered and were asking questions. I decided to take him to my room. He kept checking his head for blood.

"Irikefe!"

"Bros. The woman nearly break my head," He said.

"Not least what you deserve."

"She used garri turner. I thank God the pestle was not handy."

"What were you doing in her room?"

"Bros plans changed."

"What nonsense plans changed?"

"It's a long story."

"There's no stupid long story. I heard everything. What do you want to be sleeping in her room once a week for?"

"Bros, Sister Esther is a fine woman. I just saw the way she crossed her legs and decided to modify my demand."

"Oh Lord."

"Bros I thought I had her. I was carrying a tape."

"Irikefe there is no stupid tape. And she is at least twice your age."

"Bros abeg leave that tin."

"I thought it was money you wanted."

"I still want money."

"How will you get it now?"

"She doesn't know for sure if I have a tape or not."

"Does she look like she cares?"

"But she has to care. This is my chance."

"Irikefe. Twice in one day you have messed up beyond reason. To think that you are lusting after Sister Esther of all people!"

"Of all people means what? Is she not already giving it to The Undertaker?"

"You are only a child Irikefe."

"Bros I will be twenty in November. Besides, I am seven inches down there."

"Get lost!"

Irikefe chuckled and said "I will try again. Okay maybe we will forget about sleeping in her room but I need the cash bros."

"What do you mean by we?"

"You know what I mean na. I tell you everything."

"Count me out. From this moment, I don't want to know anymore."

We heard loud cheers from outside and went out to see what it was all about.

On the other side of the road, Akunna stood with his wife beside him. She had a new born baby wrapped in a shawl in her arms. The whole

compound stood and cheered. As was the custom at number 225, neighbors brought out wrappers and spread them on the floor for the new mum to walk on. The cheering stopped when Akunna would not move after about ten minutes of hearty encouragement.

Mr Zubi, the most respected tenant walked up to him and said "Akunna, congratulations. But you must enter the compound the way you know how to so that we can congratulate you properly."

"I want my mother to come out here," Akunna said.

We all looked around but Mama Akunna was not with us.

On a hunch I walked back through the corridor towards the backyard. I got there in time to see Wasiu handing a handful of substance to Mama Akunna. She collected it and slotted it under her wrapper as Wasiu cheered "Mama de Mama" and they gave each other a high five. I stood rooted to the spot and was sure my opened mouth touched the floor.

"I hear say them dey find me" she said and hobbled to the front of the house. I gave Wasiu a quizzical look and I saw his shoulders jerk mirthfully as he patted his head with both hands like Papa Ajasco. I hurried after Mama Akunna. There would be time for Wasiu later.

Number 225 Katakata street was quiet for the first time since I moved in as Mama Akunna approached her son and daughter-in-law. She kept her focus on the tiny bundle the other woman carried, paying no attention to anything else. She got to where they stood, made a point of burning her eyes into the other woman for an uncomfortable minute, then she parted the shawl and peeked at its content. The baby was pinkish and had two dark spots on the nose. Akunna was light skinned and heavily freckled around the nose.

Mama Akunna grabbed the baby and started an Igbo song and began to prance about, swinging the baby in her arms. The whole compound erupted in another round of cheers.

"This one na my pikin own" she screeched and cut her waist fully this way and that. When the cheers died down she said "Awero, tank you. Tank you ehn. Na now you don do beta tin."

Akunna heaved a sigh of relief and his wife found the strength to smile too. Mama got to the corridor embankment and then turned and said "Awero, oya come pack ya tins carry all de oda basitad dem dey go. I go take kia of dis one."

She disappeared down the corridor, and once again silence descended upon number 225.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THIS HOUSE IS NOT FOR SALE

We were gathered in front of the house wondering what to do now. Akunna slumped again and they began to fan him and pour water on him. He even began to foam in the mouth. Someone suggested that he be taken to the hospital. Another said he should be left alone. Mama Cowbell approached and wrapped a hand around Awero and guided her to her shop.

"When will Akunna stop fainting for every small thing?" Irikefe whispered in my ear. And how does this type of fainting bring about foam in the mouth?"

"You are not to analyze this, mister man. Worry about how dead you will be when your dad returns to hear what sister Esther has to say to him about you."

"My dad is not coming back. He wants to be made a chief in the village. The planting season ended two months ago remember?"

"She will phone him. You better make yourself scarce where she is."

"Leave that thing bros."

"I saw Wasiu giving Mama igbo and they were slapping backs and bottoms like old pals. What is this world turning into?"

Irikefe chuckled and said "Now that mama is fully on substance, Katakata Street is in trouble. As for Wasiu, he will sell to anybody. I told you what he did to Castro."

"Yes you did. You think Mama is buying from him?"

"Of course. Wasiu does not do charity."

"I wish they catch him again."

"It's only a matter of time."

Neighbors that had gathered round Akunna began to discuss the situation with his mother. Achike said "You see why when we read some things in the newspapers and some people will start saying 'God forbid, it can't happen, abomination! bla, bla, bla,' I just shake my head. Is this not the type of mother that they behead?"

"I swear!" Josiah said. "If not beheading, Akunna should just remove the remaining teeth in her throat with a few good blows."

"The teeth is not in the throat Josiah."

"Abeg leave me jare! This woman dey make person vex. What does she want the poor man to do? Since she came he has been living in the corridor. His children have been scattered all over the place, his wife I heard has been living in a prayer house. She manages to deliver safely and the mad woman would not let her enter her house; even confiscates the baby. What type of thing is this?"

"How does she want to nurse the baby now? Is it that smelling soup she cooks every night that she wants to feed it with?" Achike said.

"She will give him breast," Mkpokanna intoned.

"Which breast!" It was Akunna. He had suddenly recovered and sprang up! His eyeballs became larger and whiter. His chest suddenly puffed out. He was breathing as hard as Samuel Peter after the first round against Wladimir Klitchko. His eyes were bearing down the corridor.

"Mama Akunna don die today" Willy willy said. The other children, recognizing what was about to happen began to cheer. "Bro Akunna, attack! attack!"

Akunna continued to breathe hard. He clenched and unclenched his fists and began to look around.

"He won't do it" Irikefe said to me. "He is now hoping someone will stop him. No one can challenge that witch. Least of all her spineless son."

Mr Kingsley, who surprisingly appeared more troubled than most with the whole thing walked up to him and said "I object to violence because when it appears to do good, the good is only temporary; the evil it does is permanent, Mahatma Ghandi."

"Kingsley! Wetin concern Maitama Ghandi for this matter now. We say make Akunna wake up from hin sleep take charge of hin family, you come start with that your nonsense," Talabi said.

"The Undertaker never stops" Irikefe chuckled. "He's bailed out Akunna. And did you here Talabi? Mai-t-ama Ghandi!"

"This is not a laughing matter Irikefe" I said.

"So you want Akunna to go and beat up his mother?"

I did not respond to that.

Akunna looked relieved at those great words of wisdom from Mr Kingsley. He looked around and said "where is my wife?"

"Mama Cowbell took her to her shop," someone said. Akunna turned and walked towards the shops.

"I thought Cosmas was supposed to persuade this woman to leave," Achike said.

"I tried." Mr Cosmas said. "I did not say it was going to be easy. We have to keep prodding until she sees reason. But I must be honest that there is a different kind of resolve in her this time that does not bode well."

"It's the weed," Irikefe whispered. "Now that she has tasted it and likes it, she is not going anywhere. Imagine nursing a baby under the influence of igbo."

"Sweet Lord."

"While I do not subscribe to violence" Mr Cosmas continued, "It may be that the only option open to us at the moment is for Akunna to forcefully eject his mother. They cannot live together. That baby may be in mortal danger."

"God forbid" Mrs Zubi said. We the women of this compound will get together and support sister Awero. She will live here, and she will have her baby back."

As they continued to find solutions for Akunna, Alhaji Sirika's red four wheel drive pulled up in front of the compound with a lurch. Suraju, his driver jumped down and hurried to the back passenger side and opened the door and the Alhaji's lace agbada overflowed onto the unpaved road. He gathered it as he alighted with both feet touching the ground at the same time. Another man simultaneously climbed down the front passenger seat and spun to the booth where he gathered what looked like a painter's implements. Alhaji threw his robes over his shoulders the traditional way and jumped the gutter and entered the compound. Lukman, Talabi and some of the other men threw themselves on the floor in prostration. Alhaji Sirika seemed surprised by the crowd, but then he shrugged and gave instructions to the man that accompanied him. It was when the man had disappeared down the corridor that Alhaji asked what was happening.

"A new born baby just arrived, Alhaji" Lukman said.

"Oh I see. Congrats o. Be sure to invite me for the naming." Then he looked from face to face and spotted Achike.

"Omo Ibo" he said and grinned. We could see he was fond of Achike, or maybe he could afford to smile now that Achike had finally paid his rent. The man we were now sure was a painter appeared on the top floor and proceeded to inscribe the words "THIS HOUSE IS NOT FOR SALE" with white paint on the fascia board.

"Alhaji, instead of you to come and repair the roof or do something about the house that is sinking or join the other landlords to appeal to NEPA to give us light, you are coming to write this. Who in his right senses will buy this yeye house?"

"Who said that?" Alhaji Sirika said, with eyes darting about but failing to settle on a face. Just then, we saw a sweaty Akunna burst through with a machete. This time he showed no dithering. He looked one way and the other and then sprinted down the corridor.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

DISAPPEARED

We all ran after him. Alhaji Sirika ran after us too and was shouting "What is going on? Can somebody tell me what is happening?"

Akunna got to his room and flung the door open. He took in the whole room in two seconds and was out again in the corridor before the first of his pursuers reached him. "She is not there" he said, his face suddenly a mask of horror. Three people entered the room and checked and came out all saying there was no one in the room. "She disappeared. She has disappeared with my son" Akunna lamented. He sank to the floor and the machete fell from his hand. His face became flushed and his speech began to slur.

"You better not faint again," Josiah said. You have to get up and lead a search. She could not have gone very far."

"She don disappear. Na winch," Someone said.

"Shut up there. Oya, let's check the backyard, and the kitchen too. There are not too many places to hide in this compound," Mr Zubi said.

Then Akunna sprang up and shouted "The well! She had thrown my son inside the well!" He made for the backyard and again we ran after him.

The backyard was serene. You could tell no one had come this way for a few hours. But Akunna still opened the cover of the well and looked inside.

"Let's go. Nothing happened here" Mr Zubi said.

"I saw a big bird flying away and holding something in its mouth" Castro, Mr Zubi's eldest son said.

"Get out from here! Ewu Gambia" his dad said with a murderous glare at him.

"Stop pretending all of you. You all know Mama is a witch. Okay, tell me, where is she now? Do we have a bush or a garage or a tunnel in this compound? They occupy only one room and the room is empty. The woman has done what witches do. Vanish!" He said and turned and walked away.

Alhaji Sirika witnessing all this was uncomfortable. He called Mr Zubi to one side and said "Zubi. Can someone tell me what is happening here?"

Mr Zubi looked around and said "Actually, there is a big misunderstanding somewhere Alhaji. It is a compound issue. We will sort ourselves out." Alhaji Sirika shrugged and made for the frontage.

"Meanwhile Alhaji, what informed the sign you have just out up there? Who is interested in buying your house?"

"I got tipped off that somebody brought people to come and inspect the house. I am only protecting the public from 419." Alhaji Sirika sought reassurance from Mr Zubi that whatever the problem was with Akunna would be resolved. They then began to discuss other issues. I noticed that Irikefe had stayed back when we ran after Akunna. I saw him seated on the soak away slab and contemplating the new sign the Alhaji had just put up, so and went over to him.

"That old fool just ruined my plans bros" He said as soon as he looked up and saw me.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I was going to sell the house."

"What?"

"That was my escape route bros."

"Wait wait wait irikefe. You mean this happened because of you?"

"He doesn't know who is involved"

"How could you...?"

"My father is the caretaker here, remember? I know things."

"You know things does not mean you do whatever you like. You could go to prison if caught."

"Stop preaching bros. I have to make money somehow."

"You really have a criminal mind now."

"Make I hear word bros. Right under our noses, 25 billion dollars disappeared from NNPC. The court is saying they should release ill-gotten billions to a former first lady who did nothing but help children fail English in WAEC. I am trying to grab my own."

"Alhaji Sirika is not the government!"

"He is a government contractor. He never executed any of the contracts as far as we know. He built this house and many others from ill gotten government money. I want my share bros."

"First it was yahoo. Later you tried blackmail. Now you want to sell somebody's house. Irikefe!"

He stood up and walked away.

Then Mkpoikanna came by, worry etched on his face.

"What happened now?"

"Man U tear my ticket."

"You are still gambling?"

"No be gambling joor. Na betting."

"I see."

"That useless Mourinho. He is supposed to start with Rashford and Miki-Miki."

Just then I saw Wasiu trying to sneak out with a knapsack across his back; no doubt going out to replenish his merchandise.

"Wasiu come."

"He hopped over with a broad smile on his face."

"Where is mama?"

He tried to avert his eyes but I bent my face in every direction he tried to look, making sure he did not escape my scrutiny. "You know where she is."

"Guy, this thing no concern me. I dey comot."

"You know the police were here yesterday?"

At the mention of the word police he stood at an attention.

"Good. So where is mama?"

He hesitated a beat and then looked around. People were now in smaller groups. Alhaji Sirika could be seen still talking with Mr Zubi.

"Wait first" Wasiu said and went into the compound. After five minutes he returned and said "Follow me. Original Calabar boy, you stay. No come use your mumu put me for trouble."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

CORNERED

Wasiu took a few large strides and disappeared down the corridor. I hurried after him but by the time I got to the backyard he was not there. I knew he did not vanish. He simply ran the fastest he could and would have rounded the compound before I reached the backyard and was already on his way to his intended destination by now. Neighbors had started filling the backyard again to do their washing or fetch water or just idle about fishing for gossip. I went back into the corridor and as I passed Akunna's room I saw that his door was wide open and he had his head in both palms. I ignored him and continued on my way. Then on a hunch I stopped by the staircase and decided to climb to the top floor. More than once in the past I had seen Mama Akunna go upstairs but did not pay attention to it. It was not unusual for her to go about looking for trouble. I only hoped that it was not Maya's room that she visited when she went upstairs.

At the thought of Maya my heart sank. Last night she delivered the worst news possible to me. "Someone has come to ask for my hand in marriage" she said to me.

"What?"

"Yes Ndi. He is from my mother's place. He sells spare parts at Ladipo."

"I mean, do people still ask for people's hand in marriage in 2017?"

"What do you mean by that Ndi?"

"I mean, people meet, fall in love, and then the man proposes, something like that."

"You want me to fall in love with him first?"

"Not that Maya. I mean it sounds very backward that someone just shows up from somewhere to ask for your hand in marriage."

"He spoke with my mum."

"And..."

"And she agreed."

"My God! So what is going to happen now?"

"Mum says he is coming tomorrow evening."

"To do what?"

"To meet with the family. And then..."

"And then what?"

"And then they will hear from me."

"What does that mean?"

"That means I will have to say tomorrow if I will marry him or not."

"Of course you are not marrying him."

"I cannot refuse my mother anything."

"Meaning..."

"I will have to marry him if that is what my mother wants. She is the way she is now because of me."

"No you won't. You cannot mortgage your life for your mother."

"My father is in prison because of me. My mother has suffered to train us all by herself since. If I get married, it would mean less financial stress for her. And the man I hear has money. He will help us."

"What sort of nonsense are you saying, Maya?"

"But you heard me."

"So what will happen to me? To us?"

"There is no us, Ndi. At least not anymore."

I was quiet for a whole minute. She had met me where I sat alone on the soakaway slab thinking about my life. My cousin Mkpoikanna had not yet returned from the wharf, and Irikefe my regular companion was on another of his frequent disappearing acts. I did not know then that his absence was in connection with selling Alhaji Sirika's number 225. There was no light as was always the case. In the darkness, I could see a tear bead on her cheek and her eyes had taken the hue of the setting sun.

"Come" I said and stood up.

"No. You go first. I will meet you there."

Five minutes later the door of my room opened and Maya stepped in. I immediately turned down the wick of the lantern and set it in the corner of the room, and then I locked the door and stood and faced Maya.

"I don't want to marry him" she said softly.

"I know," I said and took her hands in mine.

"I will tell him I am pregnant," she said. "It is the one thing I know my mother or the men from her place cannot take."

"But you are not pregnant Maya."

"Then make me pregnant, Ndifreke."

For months I had dreamt of this moment but I did not know it would come like this. I desired Maya because she was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. But I did not know if this was the best way to go about it. If she went against her mother's wish of marrying to lessen the burden on the family, what would become of her? I could barely put food on my own table let alone feed another mouth. And I was squatting in a room with a cousin whom I could not hand any more responsibilities. All those thoughts dimmed like the light of my lantern when Maya came closer to me and her breasts touched my chest. I let out an involuntary moan and pulled her body into mine and she wrapped her hand around my neck and said: "what took you so long Ndifreke?"

"We are not dogs Maya. Calabar people are not dogs."

"Make love to me" she whispered. Don't let me marry that man."

I proceeded to do the first thing as she asked of me. I did not know how I would do the second. Now as I went up the stairs to where I thought Mama Akunna could be hiding it all came back to me.

The last room on the top floor had been unoccupied for months as the original occupant; having not paid rent for two years had locked the room and disappeared. The new tenement laws of the State meant that Alhaji Sirika threaded with caution, and the caretaker, Irikefe's dad I learned had a special affection for this occupant and so he made it possible for the Alhaji to forget about the room. Irikefe had told me that Wasiu had broken into the room and was hiding his drugs there so that if he was to be arrested again and his room searched, there would be nothing incriminating found, which could help him stay out of jail. I reasoned that his recent closeness with mama Akunna could see him give her access to the room at a time like this.

I got to the room and turned the door handle and it opened. Sat on the bed was Mama Akunna. She had a shriveled nipple in the mouth of Akunna's new born baby.

"New Calabar boy. I know say you go come na why I open the door."

"What is this Mama?"

"Shut up ya mouth dia."

"You can't..."

"If you no shut up, I go go tell mama Tobi say you dey nack him pikin wey dem wan come marry."

"Haa" I gasped.

"You know say if she no cut dat ya tin comot she go use her fufu stick break ya coconut head."

"Mama..."

"Wetin you go do for me be say you go go tell everybody say dem kidi-
nap me with Akunna pikin."

"But Mama."

"But mama wetin? Before I close my eye open am I want make you disappear for hia. When you don do am, make you come tell me so we go plan wetin we go do. Make nobody see you as you dey enter hia. Awero must to go."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

CASTRO

I went looking for Irikefe straight from mama's hide out. It was early afternoon and mama Akunna had been missing for up to eighteen hours. The men had decided to go to the police. It was better than doing nothing.

I found Irikefe at the backyard cleaning an old pair of boots.

"Irikefe, abeg come." I said

"Bros, you see ghost?"

"Yes" I said.

He grinned and set the boots on a discarded locker facing the sun, took two paces back and whistled in admiration of his exotic footwear. It was a brown iron ranger six inches boot. It was Friday and only meant that Irikefe was going to the club at Apapa tonight.

As soon as I was sure we were out of earshot I said: "I have seen Mama".

Irikefe started like he had seen a ghost himself.

"For where?"

"She is hiding in the room you told me Wasiu hides his drugs."

"And the baby?"

"She has it with her."

"But people should hear it crying na. What is she feeding it?"

"Believe it or not, I saw her breastfeeding the baby." Irikefe held his stomach and covered his mouth like he was holding back vomit.

"I was as shocked."

"What are you waiting for? Tell Akunna or Mr Zubi so they can go in there and shoot her and take that baby."

"She is blackmailing me."

"How?"

"She said I should go and start a story that she has been kidnapped and then return to her discreetly."

"You are doing no such thing. What does she have on you?"

I took a deep breath and looked him squarely in the eye. "It's Maya."

Irikefe seemed confused at first, and then slowly realization hit him. His grin widened and he said "you mean..." and made a hole with his left thumb and index finger and inserted his right index finger into it obscenely.

I looked away and irikefe jumped up and exclaimed "Bros Freke!" and gave me a hug. Looking at him you would think I won the lottery. "So how was it? That fine girl bros. see her front and back and sweet face. Choi."

"Shut up Irikefe."

"Okay okay" he said but he could not wipe off the sly smile on his face.

"So mama knows you could have robbed mama Tobi of her daughter's bride price and wants you to help her for her silence?"

I nodded.

"I know what you can do" We heard another voice say and looked around and saw Mr Zubi's oldest son Castro.

"Who be dis one?" Irikefe said shooin him away, but Castro stood still and refused to budge.

"I heard everything," He said.

I did not doubt that he did. We were by the corner of the building facing the fence, where a person could crop up from the backyard without being seen, protected by a 90 degree wall.

"Did you see your mate here?" Irikefe said.

"I want to join your group," Castro said.

"What do you mean by that Castro?" I said.

"I want to be hanging out with the two of you."

"Which kind nonsense be this? Irikefe said irritably but Castro ignored him and spoke directly to me.

"I see you guys all the time observing and talking about things and I want to be a part of it. I know things too."

"See, Castro. We are not a group and you can talk to us at any time" I said.

"I am eighteen" he said.

"I know"

"Last week I disvirgined mama Kike's last daughter."

"What?" Irikefe gasped.

"Wait Castro. Firstly it is not disvirgin but deflower. And if you did that it is nothing to be proud of. We are talking about a ten or eleven year old."

"Twelve."

"That doesn't make it any better. And that is not a criterion to join us as you put it. If anything, I can hate you for that."

"But irikefe here disflowered all the girls in this compound and he is your friend. I beat him to this one!"

Irikefe made to speak but kept quiet and scowled at Castro.

"I have also touched sister Esther's breast. She allowed me, but beat up Irikefe with a stick like a donkey when he went to try her."

Irikefe charged at Castro but I came between them.

"She was drying her clothes and I went and did like I wanted to dry clothes too. The place was full and covered with wrappers. She was not wearing anything under her tshirt. I just stretched my hand and touched it. She was not angry. She said she knew I was curious as a teenager but that I should not do it again. She has given me food twice since then."

I and Irikefe exchanged bemused looks.

"Alright Castro. I agree you have done these things. But very soon your mother will come and call you to go and wash plates, then what happens? I and Irikefe here more or less live independently. Tonight we are even going to the club. Can you come?"

"Yes. I m now independent"

"I see."

"Bros I am tired of being treated like a child. All my father does is to call me Ewu Gambia, just because he is feeding me. Meanwhile he is Ewu Morocco."

Irikefe and I burst out laughing."

"His own is to make mouth about his acting days. We all know he never featured in any meaningful film. He may be ugly, but Segun Arinze is still acting na. The man has no talent!"

Irikefe and I laughed even harder. Castro was beginning to feel comfortable. He adjusted the belt that held his jeans and brought his voice a tone lower and said "see, bros. This mama thing is simple. Just ignore her. She can't tell anyone anything while she is in hiding. And your babe's in-laws are coming this evening. Let's stop Wasiu from

taking her food and you will see that she will give herself up. She won't do it before dark. And by that time Maya will already be in her husband's house."

"You mean she will go with them today?" I said before I realized myself.

"Bros, these men always come and carry our poor girls like that. I'm sure Mama Tobi is glad this one is even showing his face. Her first daughter just went and started bearing children for one man."

I shook my head.

"But if you don't want them to get married, we can also stop it. I see you love Maya. We all do, just that no one can near her. You are a great man bros."

"Oya Castro, your mother is calling you."

"Leave him alone Irikefe" I said.

Castro's eyes lit up. He was accepted. I looked up in time to see him sticking his tongue out to Irikefe.

"You are a good guy bros. Even though you have been to the university you still interact with us freely and we all like you. I will speak with Lukman and Wasiu and we will stop that marriage. I will be happy to know that it is you that is chopping that angel, instead of that illiterate."

"Do you know him?"

"No bros. but I know his type."

"See guys, the most pressing matter now is Mama. How did she even know I was with Maya from where she was hiding? I don't dey fear. How about I just tell the police? They have already gone to report."

"She will then know you betrayed her," Irikefe said. I don't want to cross that woman's path again I swear. Think about it...you were on top of Maya in your room and she knew. She has a newborn baby in her custody in a public compound and the baby has not cried once. Bros I no dey. Maybe this goat Castro is right. Do nothing and let her get tired and show herself."

"And what will I tell her then?"

"Hope that Akunna puts his machete to use. If you must do something, offer to help him sharpen it."

We all kept quiet and looked at each other.

"Bros, I have something to do outside. Mama Tobi wants me to help and arrange seats for her visitors. But I have my own plans."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

ARREST

We left the backyard and went straight to Wasiu's room. He was on the floor doing pushups and stood wide-eyed when Irikefe and I entered the room without knocking. He could not hold my gaze so he began to explain: "Guy, you no say na mama Akunna we dey talk about. How do you think I will lead you to where she is?"

"And why won't you?"

"I gave you the clue. I also knew you were smart enough to decode. Me I know say I no betray am."

"Wasiu. You give this woman drugs. You provided a hiding place for her. She has in her custody a starving newborn. How does that make you feel?"

"Ehen...how does that make me feel? Okay, you that now know where she is, oya go and do Voltron the defender of the universe."

I kept quiet and sat down on the bed. Irikefe sat too. Castro also came in to join us. I knew he had abandoned arranging the chairs. He would not want to miss his first official outing as a member of the gang. I sighed and looked away.

"Guy, no worry yourself. Why you come dey cry pass person wey get dead body? Make Akunna solve hin problem."

"You must stop helping her Wasiu" Castro said.

"Come, small boy, your papa know say you dey here? I no want wahala abeg. Come dey go."

Irikefe grinned and scowled at Castro again and said "you see your mate here?"

"I did not come to buy igbo. I will not smoke again. Not because I am afraid or anything. The thing is not for me. I smoke cigarette and that is bad enough for me."

"You just wan bad by force" Irikefe yawned.

"Enough" I snapped.

"Wasiu, don't carry food to mama or do anything you are doing for her. She will get tired and come out. Then let things unfold. We don't want to tell Akunna or anyone what we know because of Bros Freke. She will think it is him. To her, only Bros Freke and Wasiu know where she is."

"I bet she knows we are having this conversation now." Irikefe said with a sneer. "I have said I don't want to have anything to do with mama. That is how you people made me put igbo in her soup and when she caught us you two began forming strong men, meanwhile it was my life that was at stake. I don say I no dey do again."

"Coward" Castro said.

"Your papa!" Irikefe fired back.

"You can curse him as you like. Wetin concern me?"

"See Wasiu" I began. "It's true you can help. I don't know how you feel about this whole thing, but what mama is doing is bad. That baby may not live if she does not release it to its parents."

"Make una relax joor. How long do you think she can hide there?" Wasiu said.

"Don't take things to her so she can come out quickly."

Wasiu looked away.

"You give her drugs. You both exchange high fives. I don't get it Wasiu."

"What don't you get? Abi you wan say I dey sleep with am?"

"No one is saying that. But she is old and troublesome and you are now her right-hand man. Come on Wasiu."

"Una no know mama Akunna na im make."

"Meaning..."

"Mama na correct woman I swear. You guys will not understand."

"Has she thought you how to stay out of jail?" Irikefe said.

"As a matter of fact, yes."

"She don give you winch be dat" Castro said.

"Shut up."

"See, none of this is my business. Mama is now my person. I will do what I want to do and it is not any of your business."

"Then we will tell the police you have started selling drugs again," Castro said.

Wasiu scowled at him and then quickly averted his eyes. We could see that Castro had struck the right note.

"Yes Wasiu. We will report you. It is not blackmail. We want you to do the right thing. A baby's life and the happiness of a struggling family are at stake."

Wasiu shrugged and said "I hear say dem dey come marry your babe."

"We will not let it happen" Castro said.

"Are you going to marry her?" Wasiu said to me.

"No but..."

"No but what?"

"All these small children. When yansh don dey sweet una una go come stupid. Na you be d first person wey dem dey marry d woman hin like? Make d man come carry am dey feed am, you go dey go for back go dey shine d congo."

"God forbid. I won't touch a married woman."

"Abeg! He won't pay the full bride price and he will not take her to church. In the eyes of God sef dem be fornicators. You won't be doing anything worse."

"No Wasiu. I will let her go. I am not ready to marry her. If she was meant for me, things would have turned out good for us."

"Sorry o. And you no even touch am once" Wasiu said.

Irikefe and Castro both wore sheepish grins and then Wasiu said "Oh, na so? wetin you come want again? Find another one joor."

"He is in love Wasiu. You will not understand. Dem don beat you for prison sotey you no know anything again."

"Sharaap"

"Anyway, it is mama I am worried about" I said.

"Don't worry about mama. Worry about yourself" Wasiu said. Mama has her ways. I may not go to her as you wish, but they won't get her. There is none like mama Akunna"

"Wasiu you don loss. I sorry for your mama."

We heard singing in the corridor and all jumped to our feet. Only one person sang like that. Wasiu's room was the first when entering the building so from his door you could see the frontage. We stepped out and saw Akunna jumping the gutter and entering the compound in the company of Josiah, Akunna and two plain-clothed policemen. We knew they were policemen because they were always in the area looking for miscreants. It was Mama Akunna that was singing. She was swinging the baby in her arms and walking towards the newcomers. She was white with the traditional cooling [i]nzu[/i] all over her body and the baby was equally so adorned. She was bare-chested with only a wrapper around her waist and a rosary on her neck. The baby too was unclad.

Akunna stopped short when he saw her. He pointed and shouted "officer, there she is!"

Mama continued singing and dancing like she did the first time she held the baby in our presence. Then she suddenly stopped and looked at her son and the others with bemusement on her face. Nwam, wetin happen? Why you dey shout like say you see tiff?"

"Yes thief! That is what you are!"

"Ah ahn!" mama Akunna gasped. She looked down at the baby in her arms, and looked up again at Akunna. My pikin. You well so?"

The policemen looked at each other and then at the men that came to complain. One of them spoke up and said "Mr Akunna, what did you say happened?"

"This woman here disappeared with my new born baby since yesterday."

"Ewooooooo!" Mama Akunna wailed and collapsed on the floor. Mama Cowbell was quick to take the baby from her as she began to roll on the floor.

"Ewooooooo!" She screeched again and threw both arms out.

"What is this Mr Akunna?"

Akunna was struck dumb. The sight of a half-naked old woman with white chalk all over her body rolling on the floor and wailing was so shocking that I thought Akunna considered fainting but knew he could not match his mother at drama.

"Wetin I do? Akunna wetin I do? Person no fit carry hin own granpikin again? Ewoooooooooo!"

She kept rolling and one of the policemen unable to bear it produces a baton and scooped the back of Akunna's head with it and said "Why you dey tanda dia? You no fit help this poor woman?"

"And she is your mother?" the other one said.

"Na me born am oooooooooooooooooo!" Mama Akunna wailed and continued to roll.

"Officer ask them. Ask my neighbors. They all know who this woman is." Akunna said

"Na me don turn to this woman now Akunna. Ewoooooooooo!"

"Josia, Achike, please tell the officers" Akunna said.

We all then looked and saw that both Josiah and Achike were not there anymore. Akunna turned around confused.

"Akunna, if I swear for you. If I nack this breast wey you suck call god for you, you go sleep dis night you no go wake up. Police ooooooo!"

"Mama calm down" one of the officers said and bent to pick her up from the floor. Mama Akunna stood and fell into his arms and continued to wail.

"Go carry your mama" the officer with the baton said and prodded Akunna's buttocks with the weapon.

Akunna reluctantly went to the second officer and took his mother. Mama Akunna fell into her son's arms and wailed even louder "my pikin, pikin wey I born, na me you call police to come catch because I carry ya pikin? You marry wife come trowey ya mama. Sotey you call police for ya mama. Akunna, Akunna, Nwam!" Ewooooooo! Awero see wetin you don do me ooooo!"

"Look here," One of the officers said. Go and take care of this woman. I don't know what has come over you. You have a mother who cares for you like this and all you want to do is arrest her. Is she too much for you to feed?"

"Officer na my own food I dey chop since I come here. Akunna no wan take eye see me."

"This is bad." The first officer said.

"Oya, take her inside!" The other one ordered. Useless man." He looked at his companion and they both hissed and turned away. Mama Akunna let out another big ewooooooo as she was led into the corridor. This time, with the backs of the officers turned, she grinned widely at all of us onlookers.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE INTRODUCTION

Wasiu turned and looked at me and Castro and Irikefe by his side and let out a guffaw. No one else in the compound was amused. We were embarrassed by what we had just witnessed.

"Na mama una dey take play abi?" His laughter did not subside. He just left the three of us standing there and entered his room.

"Whick kind wahala be this one now?" irikefe said.

"Oga Akunna is in trouble" Castro acceded.

"Well, on the brighter side, Akunna has his baby back. They can at least give it proper care now" I said.

"I will never go near that baby," Castro said.

"Why?"

"Mama would have already thought it how to fly."

"Castro!"

"The little devil cooperated with her!"

"It is only a baby."

"But that is the point. It is supposed to yell and cry like normal babies. It just kept quiet and let the woman do whatever she wanted with it."

"She is an old woman, experienced at nursing babies. She knew what to do for the baby not to cry."

"I have never heard of such a thing. Babies cry, full stop. Whenever a baby doesn't cry there is a problem. Is that not why when they just give birth and the baby doesn't cry they whack its little ass so that it cries? Fear a baby that does not cry."

"Alright guys. Whatever." I said. "You guys spare a thought for Akunna."

"I have no pity for him."

"What did you expect him to do?"

"He should have killed her a long time ago."

"Haa Castro!"

"Suffer not a witch to live."

"Well that doesn't mean he should take the laws into his hands. Besides, no one can prove witchcraft."

"But this one is obvious na. Again, how did she know they had gone to the police? How did she know they were here so that she could start her drama at just the right time?" Castro said.

"Abeg abeg abeg abeg" Irikefe said and began to walk away from us. I noticed he had become sulky. I knew it was because Castro was now with us. I grabbed him by the elbow and halted him. "I don't tell una say

I no wan know anything about this mama. I get show to attend this night. Make I go prepare."

"Can I come?" Castro said.

"Go ask your mama."

"Irikefe wait. They are coming for Maya's introduction a little later. Surely we are not letting it happen?"

At that irikefe stopped. I also straightened and looked at Castro.

"I want to cause the kind of commotion that will make the people believe that the Holy Spirit is warning them not to marry the girl."

"What do you want to do?" Irikefe said.

"I am arranging the seats. I will pour super glue on all of them."

"Is that how you want to stop the marriage? Irikefe said with a sneer."

"Guy, calm down na."

"Okay. They sit on super glue and they change their seats. What next?"

"Didn't you hear me? All the seats! When they get up to try to change seats, the glue will stick to their yansh. Instead of talking about the ripe flower they saw in this compound that they want to come and pluck, they will be busy thinking about their [i]akwa oche[/i] that would be ruined. They will then conclude that it is a sign that their asses will know no peace once they marry Maya.

"So that is what you want to do?"

"Ehen" Castro said with emphatic nods. "What can you do?"

Irikefe placed an elbow over an arm crossed over his midsection and began to stroke his beard. He had been grooming the beard for three months and now liked the result. He should go to Lukman and have it carved into something really bad. In the meantime, he said to Castro "make the groom disappear. This is Katakata Street."

Castro started and said "that would be a crime na."

Irikefe shook his head and said "small boy."

"I am not a criminal."

"Well I am. So go play with children."

"But bros Freke" Castro said and looked at me.

"No one is committing any crime. I have told you guys I'm letting go. It was not meant to be."

"Yes but this type of thing must stop. How can strangers continue to come and take away our girls?"

"The girls are not yours Castro."

"But we saw them grow. Very soon the ones Irikefe helped to discover their destinies will start going one after the other."

"Your Fada."

Castro collapsed in a fit of laughter while I watched, consumed in my own thoughts.

"Now listen both of you. I don't want any drama here in the name of helping me. I did not come to Lagos because of a woman. I came to look for work, and so far I have been unsuccessful like you both know. That means that the last thing I need is the burden of a woman. Fine I love Maya, but love is never enough, and her family needs her to be married. And because I love her I will have to accept what is in her best interest. So let's support Mama Tobi and let this thing be a success. I will also help and arrange the chairs"

"Chai bros. I have never seen a guy like you." Castro said.

"What can I really do Castro? Check am."

"Bros, when you love someone, you'll do anything - Bryan Adams"

"Irikefe don turn to Undertaker o!"

At that, we all laughed and felt lighter.

"Alright, you guys go arrange the chairs, I wan go prepare for tonight. None of una even remember say today na my birthday. I'm twenty. So I dey go dance this night."

At that, we took turns and hugged Irikefe and wished him a happy birthday.

"After they have finished marrying my woman I will follow you to the club. There is no better time to go and get drunk" I said.

"I'm coming" Castro reaffirmed.

"Castro, do whatever you want. But let it be clear that we did not invite you; you came on your own. I no want your papa wahala."

"Yes, I went on my own. I told you I am now independent."

"Independent na for mouth? Wait until hunger comes" Irikefe said.

"Alright guys" I said. "So to the club tonight. For now, there is the small matter of Maya's Introduction. Oya fine boy" I said to Irikefe, "go prep yourself. Today na your day also so make we no stress you. Castro, let's go and help Mama Tobi."

*

Later that evening, we stood by the soakaway and watched as Mama Tobi's guests filed in one after the other. Like Castro predicted, they were dressed mostly in [i] akwa oche [/i] tunics over trousers with red feathered hats. We counted twelve men and two women - the exact number of people that filled the fourteen-seater bus that brought them. The chairs were strangely arranged in a circle and there was a plastic table placed at the centre. Mama Tobi had found an old man from her husband's village who was in the company of a younger man dressed in jeans and Tshirt. Mr Zubi also featured as part of the bride's family at the fervent request of Mama Tobi. No sooner were they seated did the eldest man in the visiting group stand and began to speak.

"My inlaws. I will call you that because in the face of God and man it is already a concluded matter." There were nodding heads and hums of approval from his entourage, just what he needed to continue. "We saw a beautiful flower in this compound. The flower has beautiful leaves, it has beautiful stems, it has wonderful handles, it is fresh like palm wine,

colourful like butterfly, white like the new moon, so for this reason, my young man here, our son, came back home and told us he must to come and pluck this flower."

"What did he smoke?" Irikefe whispered to me.

"Ask Wasiu" I said and managed a wry smile.

The second oldest man in the entourage then stood up. This time there were proper cheers from the visiting contingent. I looked at Irikefe and he looked at me in return.

"It better not be what I'm thinking," he said.

He was a gap-toothed man in his fifties. Dark as Mr Zubi with scruffy grey beards and a bad right leg. He supported himself with a cane which he planted firmly to his right. He looked like a half chopped tree that was leaning to the side it would inevitably fall to.

"My people, I am the one that saw this flower."

"Impossible!" Someone wailed from the crowd of the compound's onlookers. The visitors turned to see the speaker but found straight faces. Mr Zubi, in the thick of the event as a member of the bride's family I could tell recognized his son Castro's voice because he now sat very straight and the veins on his neck became more pronounced.

"This baba! But this is not fair na" Irikefe whispered to me.

"Keep quiet," I said, as I tried to maintain my composure.

"I just returned from Libya where three of the gals that I was training to become hairdressers ran away to go to Europe and died on the high

sea. You all heard the story. I was there pursuing them. But they defied my wisdom and continued on the journey. We just buried them in Italy."

"My God!" Irikefe gasped.

"Well, with this kind of tragedy in my family, I decided that I do not have to waste any time to bring good news to my people. So, for this reason, I have decided to come and pluck this beautiful flower, which I believe will erase all the bad memories of those senseless gals, and restore joy to my family. Err my inlaws, this is why I have come."

"You see why I said we should have kidnapped the goat?" Irikefe said.

Castro was at our side in a flash. "Bros, you still think you want the woman you love to end up with this crippled wanker?"

"There's nothing anyone can do now," I said. "My poor Maya" I breathed, unable to stop myself.

They had brought kola and were making more speeches and beer bottles were already being passed around. Then there was sudden hush. The bride to be had been summoned.

We held our breaths as Maya emerged from the corridor. She was clad in a simple fitted ankara gown with a draping shawl covering her hair. Her figure was unreal in the attire, and somehow she managed to first pick out my eyes in the crowd. She wore light makeup, and her sadness made her look ethereal.

"She's finer than anyone has ever seen her. God punish poverty" Irikefe said and walked away.

I looked on as she walked to the centre of the gathering. Every step tentative, all eyes measuring her gracefulness.

"Mama Tobi stood up and began ululating tapping her lips, joined immediately by the other women of the compound. They ushered Maya to a seat prepared for her beside the grinning groom. But Maya stood steadfast at the centre of the gathering and would not budge any further. As the women continued singing Maya suddenly screamed: "I am pregnant!"

The singing stopped.

The women all looked at Maya. She repeated herself, quietly this time as if trying to convince herself first. "I am pregnant."

Mama Tobi collapsed in her seat. The other women snuck away one after the other. It was now only Maya standing, with a hundred pair of eyes burning into her.

The man that first spoke from the visiting group stood up and looked at his entourage who were also looking at each other, and then as if on cue they all cheered and began to exchange high-fives. The groom stood and received a warm hug from the elderly spokesman.

I saw a flash of anger cross Maya's face. Then she blurted "I am not pregnant by him!"

Instantly there was quiet. Mama Tobi buried her face in her palm and began to sob. I saw the groom whisper something to the older man who turned to the person beside him and said something. We watched as the entourage spoke among themselves in whispers, before the spokesman stood and said: "If she is pregnant even when our son did

not touch her, then it is the Lord's doing and it is marvelous in our sight."

His entourage on cue began cheering again. Mama Tobi looked up at the speaker in disbelief.

Mr Zubi stood up and walked away.

The two women in the group broke into a song and approached Maya. As they made to touch her, she flung her hand and something landed with a thud in the large silver tray that had kola and garden eggs. We all looked as a red-headed reptile slithered about in the tray and then lifted its head and produced a long flickering tongue in the direction of the man that just spoke. It was a monitor Lizard!

The crippled groom somehow managed to jump the gutter and hobble down the street faster than anyone else in his entourage. The others scrambled after him and two people fell into the gutter. Maya was rooted to the spot. On a hunch I looked up at the top floor balcony from where some others were gathered watching proceedings. They too were quick to disperse in the confusion, but Mama Akunna was still there.

I looked at her quizzically and she exposed what at that moment was the most beautiful irregular dentition I had ever seen and winked at me.

I dashed after Maya.

CHAPTER TWENTY

THE CELEBRATION

Achike and Josiah pursued and killed the dangerous reptile. Mama Tobi was still seated sobbing. Maya was still confused. I reached her side and took her hand and guided her to a seat. Other neighbors came closer.

"Where did it come from Ndi?" Maya said.

"Your armpit," someone said. "You just raised your hand and it flew out!" We checked and saw that it was Willy-Willy, Castro's precocious little brother.

"Shut up Willy-Willy. You don't know what you are saying" I said.

"But brother we all saw it. Why do you think those people ran so fast?"

A bride to be that was able to produce a monitor lizard from her body when she clearly was not interested in the marriage was not a wife anyone wanted. But I did not say this out.

Maya suddenly stood and went and knelt before her mother, who was already being consoled by the women of the compound.

"I am sorry mama," Maya said, her gaze fastened to the ground. "I thought I could, but when I saw him and heard the things that came out of his mouth, I knew I couldn't.

Mama Tobi put her hand on her head and tore off her head tie and threw it in the air. She shook her head vigorously as if to wake herself

from a bad dream. Then she stretched her hand and took her daughter in an embrace. "You don't need to apologize, my daughter," she said. "It is alright."

Maya wriggled free of her and held her hands and looked her in the eyes. "It is not alright mama. I know you wanted this for me."

"I said it is alright," she said and started crying again.

"Then why are you crying?"

"It is tears of joy my daughter."

Maya's eyes widened. And the rest of us showed our surprise in equal measure.

"See how I would have used my own hand to send my daughter to purgatory," she said and began to squeal again.

Maya started laughing and crying at the same time. It took a few moments for what was happening to register. As soon as we understood; a bedlam of laughter ensued.

Willy-willy took centre stage and began to imitate the groom. He bent to one side and hobbled about and then deepened his voice and bleated "I just came back from Libya to bury my gals."

We all became hysterical.

"Please, where did that creature come from?" Mama Tobi said.

"Aunty Maya's armpit" Willy-willy said.

"It looked like that but I know it is not so." Mama Tobi said.

"Well, it doesn't matter Mama Tobi. The Lord works in mysterious ways" I said.

Mama Tobi was now calm but she continued to hold Maya in her arms. I looked around and saw that almost all the seats had now been taken by compound members. Even Mr. Kingsley and Sister Esther were there.

"I think we dodged a bullet," the returning Mr. Zubi said.

"Oga. No be God?" Mama Tobi said and covered her face with her hands.

"Where did he come from?"

"Hmmm, my brother. It is the one that was talking that I know. He came to me and told me their son wanted a wife. Well, you know the rest."

"Their son indeed," Castro said, "and you decided to sell your daughter like a cow."

Mr Zubi removed his shoe and threw it at his son. Castro docked and ran round the gathering and returned to where he first stood.

"Em... let us not forget" Achike said. "Maya said she was pregnant."

Now there was silence. Then I realized that I had remained at Maya's side all the while. All eyes were now us. Mama Tobi opened her mouth and closed it again.

"The new Calabar boy has done it!" Lukman said.

Lukman's love advances towards Maya was well known in the compound. He pestered her always but her interest in him was summed up in the fact that she called him One Eyed Sunday. That he did not stand any chance against me was also universally acknowledged. So he could not ignore this chance to put me on the spot.

Maya spoke up. "I am not pregnant joor. What did you guys expect me to do in the face of that?"

"You are not yet pregnant you mean, or that you don't know yet" Lukman sneered.

"Mind your business! One Eyed Sunday."

"I wish you had ended up with that baba. All your shakara would have ended tomorrow morning after he would have finished with you this night with that his bend-bend leg."

"Have some respect Lukman. Maya's mum is still here" I said.

"I think what Lukman is trying to say is that the new Calabar boy has been busy lately. So it may be that Maya was prophesying into her own life." Josiah said.

"I am not pregnant. And everyone please leave Ndifreke alone."

I did not quite know how to behave now. Standing by Maya was not where I would have wished to be at that moment.

"Why don't we just marry them," Josiah said. "Let's not pretend we can't see they are in love. And all was already set for a marriage today."

"Stop it Josiah" I said.

"Yes, yes, yes, yes compound members began chanting."

"Shut up all of you!" Mr Zubi said. "You think that is how they marry?"

There was a collective roar of laughter and I was able to gather my wits.

"Erm, but this was supposed to be a celebration, that means there was food prepared," Achike said, rubbing his tummy.

"Ah, it is true. We made some rice and bought some drinks. Tobi! Clementina! Please bring the food and the drinks."

Soon, Mama Tobi's children began handing out packs of jollof rice and cans of malt to all gathered.

As the eating and drinking began, we formed groups and began talking about other things. I was in the company of Messrs Kingsley and Cosmas and Zubi. Irikefe and Castro stayed not too far behind. They knew that when I was in that company they were not welcomed. It had been a while since we spoke about important things as a group, and with Mr Cosmas especially, this was an opportunity for some of his unique illumination.

"Ah Mr Cosmas, you are still in this compound?" I teased. "Good evening sir. Mr. Kingsley, you too. You even came to join our celebration."

"Good evening Ndifreke" Mr Cosmas said. "How could I miss this? The drama itself was worth it. What will we not see in this Lagos?"

Mr. Kingsley was quietly stroking his beards. I knew he was trying to draw the correct quote so I waited, then he said: "it is not healthy to stay with people that don't even bother to ask how you are - Vikki Ziegler."

"Haa Mr. Kingsley. You know it is not so. If I ask you now, you will not even answer me in English" I said and we all laughed.

"The biggest communication problem is we do not listen to understand. We listen to reply - Jess Todtfeld"

"Oh my" I breathed, as the others continued to laugh. Only Mr. Kingsley knew what he was now talking about. So I turned to Mr. Cosmas. "I have been meaning to ask, what is your take on this tithing controversy between Daddy Freeze and the pastors?"

Mr. Cosmas shrugged and said, "they are all right and they are all wrong."

"Meaning..."

"They all draw their arguments from a Holy book they all supposedly believe in. If they accept that their Holy book is flawless, then there should be no more argument. Now even if as Freeze says that the scriptures are wrongly interpreted in favour of paying tithes today, we all know that you cannot argue with a man that has a conviction. And no one has the right to tell another how to spend his money. People have paid tithes and have seen wonders in their lives. You will never be able to convince such that they should stop paying. For all his sound argument, go to facebook and see the renewed testimonies of the tithing warriors. I am not even talking from the pastors' point of view. In the same vein, there are a few others who had always felt the weight of the world on their shoulders when they had to part with

these moneys as tithes. The good news for such is that thanks to Freeze, they now have scriptural backing to comfortably pocket their cash without any feeling of guilt. In all, we all have freewill to do as we please. If the pastors are fleecing people, surely they will meet their reward. But if it works for me, then sir, wetin concern you?

He is not the first to carry out this campaign. Femi Aribisala has been writing about it for decades. Check today's Vanguard. Maybe because he is a celebrity and hangs out with Hushpuppy that is why Freeze's campaign has this kind of momentum.

So this is what I say: It is a good thing Freeze happened, because anyone paying tithes now cannot say he has not heard that it may be a scam. There is Biblical argument to back this up. But the truth is this: Sowing and reaping is a law of creation. Truly it is in giving that you will receive; whether it is ten percent to the church, or giving to the poor on the streets, or donating to a cause, or helping a person in need. When you give, whether you are a Christian or whatever, you sow a seed. The rain will fall. The sun will shine. The seed will germinate. And one day the harvest will come. There is no discrimination in it. Pastors recognize this and have built a cult around it and people play it like the lottery and see results. Others do not see results because their own jungles are yet to mature, but it will come.

Now the question is, is this the will of God? What happened to the mansions Christ went to heaven to prepare for us? How about the streets that are paved with gold we are supposed to aspire to? How dare we turn around and build our treasures here on earth? Well, that is an argument for another day.

So my brother Ndifreke, if you want to pay tithe, pay. If you want to spend all your earnings the way you want, by all means, do so. Never forget Christ in Mt 23:23. There are weightier matters of the Law. Many who pay tithe and ignore the other things will perish. And many who do not pay will definitely have space in the bosom of Abraham. It is all a matter of choice."

By now Mr Cosmas audience had grown. He had captured all of our attention. At the end of his position, there was silence again. Then Mr. Kingsley said, "Religion indeed is the opium of the people."

"Karl Max!" Castro screeched. I know that one.

"This is my simple religion. There is no need for temples; no need for complicated philosophy. Our own brain, our own heart is our temple; the philosophy is Kindness" Mr. Kingsley said and looked at Castro. Neither Castro nor anyone else knew who said that. Then he added "Dalai Lama" and stood up. He had in his hands his own share of the rice and malt.

Mr Cosmas also stood and patted my shoulder.

Then I noticed Mama Akunna seated demurely in the back row and then went over to her.

"Mama, thank you God bless you. You don't save person life. That man for kill Maya. Dem no give you food?"

"I no want their food. Rice na for fowl. I go cook soup after."

"Thank you mama," I said again.

"My pikin make I give you small sense."

"Yes mama..."

"Give am belle."

"Haa mama."

"I say make you give am belle."

"But mama I have no job."

"She shook her head and said, "you see that woman?"

"Mama Tobi?"

"Yes."

"When she comot here she dey go find another man for hin pikin. Una think say hin dey happy? Na shame make am dey laugh so. Hin go find another man for am quick quick. Me I see say you like de gal. Whether you get work or you no get work, una no go die."

Mama Akunna smiled again and I thought her smile was beautiful.

"But mama even if I give am belle, you no see say dat man been wan marry am with de belle?"

"Na because hin no get preek."

"Haa mama. How you take know?"

Then she looked at me. She looked at me in a way that convinced me that truly, Mama Akunna knew everything.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

BUSINESS PLAN

I sat there with Mama Akunna and watched as neighbors enjoyed their free food and continued to banter. The mysterious monitor lizard and Maya's clownish suitor were not going to be forgotten in a hurry. But mama was not yet done advising me.

"I don tell you wetin to do for this matter. Make you no waste time" she said.

"Well mama. The good tin now be say her mama don know say me with the girl like each other. We go just dey carry on small small."

Mama Akunna shrugged and said "wetin Cosmas dey talk?"

"Na de tin wey dey happen for our country with church people hin dey talk."

"De boy no dey lie. Anytin hin talk make you gree with am, you hear me so?"

"But mama, all of us get head. We sef fit tink. Na wetin hin believe hin dey talk. Everybody suppose do as him mind tell am."

"You no know say person pass person? And mind pass mind?"

I paused and looked at mama Akunna. Having said this, there wasn't a better time to ask the question.

"Mama. Abeg where dat tin come from?"

Mama Akunna looked away.

"Mama. You know say dat tin no fit live for dis kind our area, and na very dangerous animal. If na snake sef we see, we no for fear reach as we fear to see dat tin."

"My pikin" Mama Akunna said. "No be everytin person dey know. If you know everytin, life no go sweet you again."

"So mama you mean say life no dey sweet you?"

"I know no everytin. I no know book."

"But wetin you know pass book mama."

I could see that Mama Akunna was not comfortable with this line of conversation as she began to shift in her seat, so I decided to change the topic.

"Mama how your new born baby?"

"I no know."

"Mama how you no go know?"

"Dem don take dem thing. I don leave dem."

I chuckled and hailed her "mama de mama!"

She managed a thin smile and then said "my pikin. I wan start business."

"Wetin you talk mama?"

"I say I wan start business. As I dey siddon like this no dey do anytin, e dey worry me."

"Ah mama. I think say na visit you come visit?"

She suddenly wore a sad expression and said "you sef dey pursue me?"

"No na. No talk like dis mama."

She looked away and I was hit with a pang of guilt.

"Oya sorry mama. You be my person you know. For the thing wey you do for me, I go support you for anything you wan do.

"Hmmm."

"So which kind business you wan do?"

"I wan sell ogogoro."

"Jesus."

"Wetin happen?"

"Mama!"

"Eh hen?"

"Ogogoro?"

"Wetin ogogoro do?"

"But mama ogogoro no good na!"

"How ogogoro no take good?"

"E dey turn person head, e dey dry person body."

"Abeg make I hear word!"

"You for sell bread or tomato and pepper."

"Wetin dat one dey do for person?"

"Na food. We need food every day."

"Ogogoro sef good for we body. I go put root medicine inside. If you get headache, I get de one I go give you. If ya belle dey pain you, I get de one I go give you, if you no fit sleep, I get de one I go give you. If ya preek weak, I go give you de one wey you go take nack sotey..." at that she grinned and patted my thigh and I flew out of my seat.

Mama chuckled and said "why you dey jump?"

"Nothing ma," I said and lowered my posterior back on the edge of the seat.

"Oya follow me go Josiah place. I want make hin do table for me. Wasiu go bring all the bottle wey I go use."

"But where you go dey go buy the ogogoro? Dis kind tin no too hard for elderly woman like you? And which money you wan take start?"

Mama Akunna chuckled and said "Na me you dey call elder woman? You know de kind cassava wey I dey plant every year? You know the road

wey I dey waka go bring firewood every day? All of una dey hia dey p*ss, dey sh*t, dey chop, and dey sleep for the same place una tink say una strong pass me."

"Mama!"

She hissed and said "Somebody go dey bring de drink from Sapele for me. My broda go dey bring de root from we village."

"Oh I see. De money nko? I mean the money to take start the business."

"Since I come here you see me beg anybody money?"

"No mama. But money to start business na another matter."

"My pikin, no worry yasef for dat one. Oya make we go see Josiah."

I shrugged and stood up and walked behind her to Josiah's shop. He was seated outside enjoying his share of the rice and malt drink. He started when he saw me walk up with mama Akunna.

"Na you follow go bring police to catch me abi?" Mama Akunna said.

Josiah's eyes widened and I saw him swallow a piece of meat without chewing. He choked instantly. His eyes bulged out of their sockets. He opened his mouth to cry for help but nothing came out. He held his throat. Someone rushed down with a cup of water and as he grabbed it Mama Akunna knocked it out of his hand, pulled him up on his feet, stood slightly behind him and cupped her palm and administered five sharp blows on his back between his shoulder blades. The meat flew out of his mouth and landed in the gutter. His breathing immediately became normal again and tears streamed down his cheeks.

"I for don die" He said and wiped his face with a piece of serviette.
"Thank you mama."

"I wan make you do table for me" Mama Akunna said dismissively.

"Okay mama. Which kind table?"

She looked around and pointed at Mama Cowbell's table and said "make e small pass that one. And two bench with one stool."

"Wetin you wan use them do?"

"I wan put my market ontop de table. My customer go siddon for the bench. Me I go siddon for de stool.

"Which kind market you wan sell?"

"Na medicine I wan sell."

Josiah looked at me and lifted an eyebrow and I simply nodded.

"How much you go take?"

From the corner of my eye, I saw Irikefe trying to get my attention. As Mama Akunna and Josiah began to haggle I stole away and went into the compound with Irikefe.

"What do you think you are doing bros?"

"I went to say thank you to her. You know she was the one that disrupted the marriage don't you?"

"You went to thank her for saving your love life with witchcraft?"

"Irikefe!"

"She produced a monitor lizard from nowhere bros. If you were never afraid of her, this is the time to be."

"On the contrary Irikefe, for some reason, I am not. I know the whole thing is somehow but her intention was good."

"Bros, monitor lizard. Good?"

"I don't know Irikefe. But I have seen a soft side to Mama Akunna I cannot ignore. There will always be things that are inexplicable. So long as we don't get hurt, I'd rather not worry about such."

Irikefe shook his head and said "Well, as for me, I will have nothing to do with her. If you have joined Wasiu to befriend her, know now that I will never be a part of it."

"I am not befriending her."

"Well, whatever. I am preparing to go out tonight. Little Castro is coming. He has gone to borrow shoes to wear."

"Let me also prepare. I'm coming too."

I heard a rap on my door and Maya let herself in. Irikefe stood bolt upright and scratched his head. "Em, I think I have to go now. Bros we leave in one hour" he said and left the room.

"Where are you leaving to in one hour?" Maya said.

"We are going to the club."

"Oh really?"

Maya was still in the attire she wore for the Introduction. Every time I see her I continue to marvel at her pristine beauty. I had never seen a dress look as good on a woman as this looked on Maya. She came and sat beside me on the bed and to my surprise twisted to one side, showing me her back.

"What is it Maya?"

"Don't go."

"What?"

"I don't want you to go to the club."

"But I can't disappoint my friends."

"But you can disappoint me?"

"Come on Maya."

"I did what I did today because of you."

"I know."

"No, you don't."

"You told me already that you did not want to marry him."

"Yes, it is true. But I want you to know that I did not marry him because of you. Not because he is old or ugly or talks nonsense. I can bear anything."

"I understand Maya."

"No, you don't."

"But of course I do."

"How then is it that the first thing you want to do is to go to the club and leave me here."

"It's Irikefe's birthday. And besides, you have to be home with your mum and siblings."

"You want to go and meet prostitutes."

"Maya!"

"Don't go."

I had both my hands on her shoulder so I turned her to face me. Her eyes were soft and misty. Her lips glistened from the gloss she had put on it. She even smelled of fresh perfume.

"Don't go" she whispered.

I began to caress her shoulder and let my hands run down her arm till we locked hands. Sitting like that was not so comfortable so I stood and she stood with me too. We were facing each other fully now, not daring to break the gaze.

"Are you going?"

"I dare not."

Then she stood on her toes and kissed me. Softly at first and then harder and harder as I held her waist and ran my hands over her.

I stopped and held her face in my hands and watched as she struggled to open her eyes.

"You could have been with him tonight," I said.

"God forbid," She said.

"After the other day, I knew I wanted to be with you again and again."

"I want to be with you always my Prince."

"Thanks for choosing me Maya."

"I'll choose you again and again Ndifreke."

"Stay with me tonight."

She was not surprised or shocked at my request. She held me tighter and placed her ear on my chest as if to hear my heartbeat. Then she said, "What about your cousin?"

"He wouldn't mind," I said.

We had an understanding that if either of us needed to spend the night with a girl, the one with a companion would use the bed and the other would use a mat on the floor. This has happened a number of

times but it was always me on the floor. I knew my cousin would be happy that I have finally decided to enjoy my life, as he put it.

"I thought you would protest because of your mum and siblings," I said to her.

"Why then did you ask," She said and looked at me and smiled.

"Somehow I know they won't mind."

"No, they won't. One less body for the little space we all share. Only that mum would now intensify her search for a worthy suitor."

"Oh no."

"She is my mother. I know how her mind works."

I thought about it and then said: "if tonight happens to be our only night together, then we have to make it memorable."

She turned her back and said, "Unzip my dress."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

BIG BOY

We lay spent. I listened for Mkpoikanna's breathing but it was nonexistent. He snored worse than a toad, and so if I could not hear any sound from where he lay, it meant that he was awake. Maybe listening the whole time while I made love to Maya.

"I know what you're thinking" Maya whispered.

"You don't."

"Just know that I don't mind. I understand."

The room was pitch-dark. I made sure. Luckily it was the day they gave us light, meaning that the window blind did not have to be rolled up as the ceiling fan would be working. I had also fortified the blind with my wrapper to make sure. I knew what Irikefe could do. Also any light coming through would mean that my cousin would not only be listening but also straining his eyes to see. No need to make it possible for him to punish himself so.

He could have slept if he wanted to. Face-me-I-face-you made it easy to recognize that all the moaning in porn was fake. In this environment where whole families stayed in single rooms and still continued to procreate, if all those people, men, and women, some of whom due to their intense suffering looked in the daytime like Eunuchs and frigid midwives had to moan while having sex, I'm sure the government would have had no choice but to ban the act by now. Imagine the toothless street gateman husband of Mama Cowbell's howling while having sex. Or the rotund Mama Tobi, whom I could only picture with her fufu ladle,

yelping under her incarcerated husband. God forbid. At any rate, when you live in a compound of two hundred odd people and have to share a room with one or more persons and you still need to have sex, enjoying it with your mouth shut has to be a way of life. I turned to Maya and began to fondle her breasts. I felt by the beating of her heart that her breathing had quickened too. She also put her hand on my chest and began to knead. Then she brought her hand lower and found my full readiness which drew a gasp out of her. I lowered my face onto hers and began to kiss her. As her breathing quickened I adjusted myself over her and parted her legs with my knees. "Calabar boy" she teased in a whisper as I let her guide me into her. As I steadied myself to begin the in and out movement I heard a rap on my window.

"Bros. Help me. Castro is dead."

I pulled out of Maya and stood confused for a moment and then I heard the voice again. "Bros dem don kill Catsro."

I reached for where I kept my clothes and Maya's and quickly wore a pair of shorts and Tshirt, and then handed Maya hers. She put her gown over her head and I helped her to a standing position where she was able to pull the length of it down and also wore her panties. Then I reached for the light switch and turned it on, just as Mkpoikanna tried to hide his huge arousal. I looked at the wall clock and it reported 12:15am.

"Please come with me," I said to him.

He stood and did his best to avoid looking at me or Maya. He was in his boxers and only needed to put a singlet over his shoulder. "You stay here" I said to Maya and she nodded and sat back on the bed. I and Mkpoikanna then hurried out of the room and rushed to the side of the building where Irikefe's voice came from.

Lying on the ground and bleeding from the head was Castro. Irikefe had his hands on his head and was crying.

"He was still talking until a minute ago."

"What happened to him?" Mkpoikanna said.

"That is not what is important now," I said and bent to check his pulse. Sure enough, it was still there, though weak.

"We must get him to the hospital at once." I said.

"Which hospital? With which money." Chai I don die o!" Irikefe wailed.

"We don't have time guys."

"See, my brother. This one no be matter of we don't have time. Carry am go give him mama and papa."

"They will kill me," Irikefe said. "Do you know what Mr Zubi did to Wasiu because of this same Castro?"

"Mkpoikanna is right. This is bigger than us. We must involve his parents."

"Okay I have an idea. We take him to their door and knock hard and then run away."

"Are you stupid?" I said.

"Bros you just came to this compound. You don't know Mr Zubi and his wife. I warned the foolish boy."

"We are wasting time!"

"My broad na true de boy talk. Make we do like dat. Make dem save am first."

As I thought about it Irikefe scooped Castro and paced him on his shoulder and made for Mr Zubi's door. Mkpoihanna and I followed at a distance.

Irikefe dropped his burden and picked a stone and hit the door so hard I knew the whole compound would wake up. He then tossed the stone away and ran out into the night. Mkpoihanna and I also took to our heels, but we ran into our room and bolted the door. We heard doors and iron protectors being unbolted. Presently we heard a woman scream. Then a man's heavy steps and then there were more footfalls and a lot of commotion and then quiet again after about twenty minutes.

"We should have gone out," I said to Mkpoihanna.

"And say what? We no for fit lie. E better say we stay."

"If everyone else was there and I wasn't they will be suspicious."

"Suspicious of wetin?"

"Well, if everyone was there we should have gone out too."

"Everyone was not there," Maya said and we both looked at her.

"I prevented you from going. And your brother did not want to stand up so he wouldn't disturb us."

I sat on the bed and stared at the clock on the wall. It was now a quarter past one.

"Na true your babe talk," Mkpoikanna said.

"I will not lie if I am asked," I said.

"You don't have to. But it is not in your place to say anything. It is Irikefe they must first hear from."

I knew where to find him. So at the first crack of Sister Esther's megaphone in the morning, I went out and headed to number 35. That was where Irikefe spent his time when he was not with me - a compound known as the home of Yahoo boys on the street.

I found Irikefe seated in one of the stalls in front of the compound.

"They did not open the door for me," he said.

He was disheveled and had blood stains on his face and on his shirt. He looked like an escapee armed robber.

"You must not be seen like this Irikefe," I said.

"What will I do?"

"Let's go back home."

"Is he dead?"

"I don't know."

"What happened after I left?"

"I don't know. It is you who should be telling me what happened. But first, we must leave here. The compound is quiet now. Only sister Esther is outside preaching."

We both walked back towards our compound.

"We got there and paid the gate fees. I paid for that goat. As soon as we entered he started misbehaving. Did you see what he wore?"

"I did."

"I don't know where he got those things from. He was in full gangsta regalia. His jeans sagged to his thighs and he had those chains on."

"I saw all those. How did he end up with a broken head?"

"As soon as he entered he starting saying 'I am a big boy' 'I am a big boy' and bouncing all over the place. He went from one corner to the other emptying other people's drinks down his throat and snatching their cigarettes; all the while chanting 'I am a big boy. Shi-shi he did not have in his pocket. When the girls started arriving Castro went mad."

He would touch a breast here, tap a yansh there. It was when he put his hand between one girls' thigh that a coke bottle landed on his head. Bros shey you no say coke bottle wicked?"

"I know."

"The girls gathered him and beat him up. He was stabbed at least three times."

"Jesus."

"One of the bouncers saved us. He fended off the angry girls and hailed a keke for us. Bros what will I tell his father?"

"Tell him the truth."

"You don't understand."

"So what do you want to tell him?"

We got close to the compound just as Sister Esther was finishing her sermon. We hid behind a kerosene tank at number 223 until she entered the building.

"Just hurry and go and wash up. Pray that you are the first at the bathroom. I will come to your room later."

Thirty minutes later I was in Irikefe's room.

"I will not say anything," He said.

"That will not be wise."

"If they ask me I will say I don't know what happened."

"Did anyone see you two leave together?"

"I dey craze?"

"I told him to meet me at Tin-Can. E be like say I know say this boy go f*ck up. I didn't want to be seen leaving the compound with him."

"But when he recovers he will tell them what happened."

"He better not. This is the time for him to prove his big boy credentials. Big boys don't cry to their mamas."

"Mkpoikanna told me he was taken to the hospital. His parents are still there."

"God abeg make that foolish boy no die," Irikefe said.

"He will not die."

Then a gleam entered his eye and he said: "But bros, you abandon your guy because of woman."

"And I am glad I did. By now I would have been thinking of the grammar to speak to Mr Zubi."

"Na true. Sometimes woman no be bad thing o."

"Woman is never a bad thing Irikefe"

"Bros marry dat girl. Dis na good sign, See as she save you from trouble."

"Na so dem dey marry?"

"But em..he said conspiratorially. How was it?"

"Gerrout"

"Chai bros" He said and put his hands in his shorts and squeezed himself."

"You better think of where to run to if anything happened to Castro," I said and stood up."

At that, he became deflated again.

We heard heavy footfalls coming through the corridor and Irikefe said "Him papa don come. Castro don die."

"Relax. We don't know for sure."

Then there was heavy banging on the door, just like the one Irikefe performed to wake the whole compound at midnight.

"Open it at once" I said.

Irikefe threw the door open and I watched as his jaw dropped.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

PAPA EFE

Three strong knuckles from the corridor landed on irikefe's head, drawing a desperate howl from him as he bundled back and fell on the floor.

I had only seen Irikefe's dad once. It was a few days after I arrived, shortly after which he left for the village where he has been all these months. The story was that he was not returning to Lagos as he had become a chief. Irikefe believed that there was enough ogogoro and bush meat there to keep him till he was called by his creator. Irikefe survived by the stipend Alhaji Sirika was still kind enough to hand him, as his father was the caretaker of the property and lifelong associate of the Alhaji's.

Papa Efe lived at Number 225 with his son, a product of a liaison with a wondering woman who did chores for individuals and cleaned many of the compounds on Katakata Street in the mid 90's for a fee. No one knew where she came from, she was always available in the day time to run errands and then one day people began noticing her going in and out of Number 225 care taker's room. The woman was middle aged already. The Caretaker was an old bachelor - a status that was curious given that men from his part of the country were not only mostly married, but were also polygamous as way of life. Papa Efe was an exception to the rule. He only lived to play pool and drink ogogoro and be Alhaji Sirika's Man Friday.

One day his girlfriend disappeared, and months later, early one morning in November 1997, a new born baby boy was found wrapped in a blanket in front of Papa Efe's door, its mother nowhere to be found. Residents easily worked out that the elderly couple had produced the miracle.

Neighbors came together and raised Irikefe for his dad. He grew up extremely bright and mischievous. He consistently outperformed all the kids at school and also taught all the kids at home all forms of mischief. His father did not have the wherewithal to send him to the University when he finished secondary school; neither could he do much about all of his son's delinquencies. What Papa Efe did was to enroll him as an apprentice in Josiah's carpentry shop. That should secure his future and keep him away from trouble Papa Efe thought.

"I had this baaaad feeling that something baaaad go happen. So I enter bus and start coming. Only for me to reach here and meet this oga for road and the first thing I hear na say you carry his son go do bad tin! Irikefe!"

Papa Efe was inside the room now. Mr Zubi entered with him. He reached down and picked his son up and dug his knuckles into his head one more time. He was a towering lanky man with hands that looked like they were made of iron. His eyes were bloodshot when he threw me a wicked look but was not yet finished with his son.

"What you do with dat pikin?"

"Papa I did nothing with anybody. Ah ahn!"

"I say shut up your mouth," Papa Efe said and gave Irikefe's another knock on the head.

"Calm down Papa Efe. This will not help us," Mr Zubi said. "Now, tell us Efe, what happened to my son?"

"You should ask your son sir."

His father wanted to hit him again but Mr Zubi prevented him.

"My son is in no position to answer any questions."

"How is he Mr Zubi?" I asked automatically.

"He is responding to treatment but is not allowed to talk."

"Thank God," I said.

"You should concentrate on his recovery and not come here to harass me. Did you see me with your son?"

Papa Efe knocked his son's head harder this time. Even I could see stars' circling his head like it was in cartoons.

His eyes seemed to have rolled over in his skull and I was sure he did not know what day of the week it was again. Papa Efe then looked at me and my eyes went to his ready knuckles. I quickly said "I'm sorry sir" without even knowing why I said it. The thought of those knuckles on my head was so frightening I could have confessed to padding the 2018 budget if I was asked at that moment.

"Zubi, no vex. I have return back. I will bend am. Efe, because you don get small bear-bear you tink say you don grow. I go show you say no matter how okra tall, him owner go still bend am to pluck am."

"It's okay Papa Efe. We will know what happened when my son recovers. Be grateful we did not lose him."

Irikefe clearly was in no position to quip back. I looked at his father's hand one more time and knew that just this once; there was no greater wisdom than in silence.

"Em, welcome back sir. Where are your bags? It must have been a hard journey" I said after Mr Zubi left.

"Who you are?"

"I live here sir."

"In which room?"

"I live with Mkpoikanna-abasi."

"The Calabar boy?"

"Yes sir."

"So you dey follow and spoil my son?"

"No sir o. I actually came to find out what happened. Apparently, they were not together last night." I did not know when I said that. One thing was clear to me. Irikefe was one knock away from serious brain damage if he did not have one already. There was nothing wrong with sticking up for a friend in the face of such danger.

"Oya go now. I no want to see you near my son again."

Without a second invitation, I was out in the corridor and thanking my stars.

Later that morning I walked over to the shops and saw Irikefe holding a plank and a saw and looking like he was about to be executed.

Mama Akunna was there too with Wasiu. I could already see the disaster this alliance was going to bring to the neighborhood. Wasiu

with his hard drugs and Mama Akunna with her ogogoro. May God help us.

"My friend bend down and work" Josiah was saying as I approached. "If Mama's table is not ready by tomorrow it will be your fault. I no tell you say one day go be one day?"

"But Josiah, why you carry my work give this yeye pikin? Abi you want make hin put nail where e go dey chook my customer yansh?"

"Mama na simple table and bench. Na d first day I start carpenter work I do table. I don dey teach dis one since two years now."

"How many times hin don come here since two years? No be dat calabar boy hin dey follow up and down since?"

"Mama he has not been following me up and down for two years. I only came here in June" I said.

"Ah, my pikin you dey here?"

"So you dey talk bad tin for my back Mama?"

"No be so na. I no know say you go don wake by now" She said and gave me a wily look and grinned. There was no guessing she knew I was with Maya all night, well, till 12:15am because after Irikefe and Castro's drama we stayed up talking about the matter and praying for Castro's recovery.

"Mama no just talk anything" I said.

"Okay" she said, happy to have gotten off lightly.

"So Wasiu you don turn to mama bodyguard?" I said.

"No o. I dey invite mama to church this Sunday."

"You dey go church?"

"Dem dey invite my papa Majek Fashek this Sunday. Him play for COZA last week."

"Is that not what Daddy Freeze was frowning against? That it cannot happen in a mosque or in a Hindu Temple or any other place of worship that a secular musician will perform on an alter of God?"

"Make dat one go rest joor. No be for people like us Jesus come? See me now dey go church, I go even carry Mama go."

"Me? Tufiakwa! I no dey go church."

As we spoke Papa Efe came around to check on his son.

"Josiah!"

"Yes sir!"

"So you are in this compound and let my son spoil finish?"

"But hin don already spoil before you bring am na."

"Wetin you talk Josiah?"

"Nothing sir!"

"I leave this boy in your hand. Teach him work. Make him good again. You hear me Josiah?"

"Papa Efe I go try. Make you talk to am if hin go put hin eye for ground."

"He will put it down. He will put it" Papa Efe said and turned to Mama Akunna.

"Akunna Mama, you don come back?"

"Papa Efe. Yes sah. As my pikin wife born I say make I come help dem. If to say I no come I no know wetin dem for do."

"Okay e good like dat. I hope say no problem this time?"

"No problem at all. Dem happy say I come."

"Okay."

"So how home people, Papa Efe?"

"They are fine." He then turned to Josiah and said "Josiah! Make Efe go keep water for me to baff hin go come back."

"Okay sir."

Then he turned and walked back towards the compound. I noticed that Mama Akunna's eyes followed every movement of Papa Efe's as he retreated. I could not resist giving Mama a light nudge in the rib. She turned and looked at me and covered her smile with her two hands.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

EWU GAMBIA

I looked at Irikefe and felt sorry for him. Josiah now had the carte blanche to do as he liked with Irikefe and Josiah was not going to cut him any slack. It was painful to watch, so I turned my back and engaged Wasiu in small talk while Irikefe labored to be a Carpenter. Then I heard him say "but oga Josiah, my dad wanted me to go and keep water for his bath."

"That's true" Josiah said.

Irikefe then shot out of the shop like a missile and I had to jog to catch up with him. When I did I said what I had been longing to say to him: "O boy your head still correct so? After all that konk wey your papa konk you. Is that what you have been dealing with all your life?"

"I don't know where that came from bros. I swear the man never used to touch me. That's why they accused him of spoiling me."

"Maybe that's what they do in your village."

"Who knows?" Irikefe shrugged.

"Get used to it man. There is something about the way he curled his knuckles that told me this was now a way of life."

"Well, that confirms my days here are numbered. It was always so the moment he insisted I went back to Josiah's shop."

"It doesn't look to me like you have too much of a choice in the matter."

"Well, I do. I'm leaving home."

"No, you won't."

"Watch me. At this rate, I'm here maximum one week."

"Where will you go?"

"The streets. There's enough space out there for anyone who dares to live."

"That will be foolish of you Irikefe."

"Oh really? You know what's foolish? It's an old man thinking he can dictate to a 90s kid how to live his life. I have survived these many months without him. I will survive the rest of my life without him."

"Guy. Think well o. I need you here."

"No you don't. You have Castro now."

"What's that?"

"Bros. I blame you partly for this Castro mess. You should have let him remain where he was. Now see what he's caused?"

"He has learnt his lessons Irikefe."

"What if he died? What if he dies still? It's not unheard of that people with accidents appear to recover and then die afterward. It's the sort of thing the stupid Castro could do."

"No one dies as a habit, Irikefe."

"He has the posters of Tupac and Biggie on the wall of their home. He admires them."

"That doesn't mean he wants to die like them."

"Well, I'll make sure of that."

"How will you do that?"

"Wait for me outside. We're going to that hospital."

"What?"

"I'm going to make sure he doesn't cause any more trouble. Let me put the water down for the old man."

"But Irikefe..."

"Wait for me at a distance. Make sure those demons out there don't see you."

Ten minutes later Irikefe and I were marching towards "God Dey Hospital". It was the only hospital in our neighborhood. Privately owned and famed as a specialist hospital and maternity home, they are known to pass nurses off as doctors. When you are sick or injured and go there, be prepared to go out to buy everything you need even down to plasters, and it is wisdom also to bring your own mattress from home if

you are to be admitted as you will be lucky if you returned home without a new infection.

"What did you say we are going to the hospital to do?"

"Bros, just follow me."

"And what about your work? Your dad will go and check."

"We won't be long. We will be back before he finishes having his bath. Or haven't you heard of my father's baths?"

"What about it?"

"He doesn't stay there for any less than an hour."

"What?"

"It has been so since he contracted gonorrhoea."

"Irikefe!"

"That's what the old tenants say. It happened even before I was born. It is why he never married."

"I imagine in saying that that you are alluding to his sex life. If it happened before you were born, you are a testimony that he has overcome that."

Irikefe shrugged and said, "I don't think I'm his."

My eyes widened as he said that.

"The old woman that brought the baby was only being nice because she believed my father deserved to have his name propagated."

"Oh my God!"

"She may not have been its biological mother too. She found an abandoned child and decided to do with it what she felt was best for everyone."

"Do you realize you are the baby in question?"

Irikefe shrugged and said "I don't care. I only know who I am now. All of those are stories that touch the heart"

"Where did you get all that from?"

"A prophet."

"Lord!"

"Bros you won't understand."

"What won't I understand? A prophet?"

"A friend's aunt from school took me to him."

"This is getting interesting."

"The revelation worried me to the point of depression until I spoke with Mr Cosmas. Now I truly don't care who fucked who for me to be born."

"What did Mr Cosmas tell you?"

"He explained that it was no use worrying about it. That what was important was that I had the opportunity to be born. He said that parents are mere vehicles to bring souls into the world to experience life. That ultimately, we are what we make of our own lives and we alone will be accountable for ourselves in the end. He gave many examples of children of vagabonds and delinquents who have become successful, and also that of so-called successful and loving parents who have become useless. He also said a lot of spiritual things but those ones pass me. In all, I knew to be grateful for the opportunity to be on earth regardless of the mystery surrounding my appearance. Whatever I will become will depend on me and not on Papa Efe or any other person. It made perfect sense to me and I have felt better ever since."

"So after hearing all that you decide it is a yahoo boy you want to become?"

He scratched his head and looked away as we turned to the street where the hospital was.

"It's where I found myself bros. I applied for a State scholarship after school but I was told that I am not an indigene so I do not qualify. I was born here, raised here, never left this town for one day, know no other place, yet because my name is Efe I do not qualify."

"Hmmm."

"So I will become whatever I can be."

"Like a furniture maker."

"Bros you mean carpenter. And that, over my dead body."

We were at the hospital reception now and there was a woman in blue overall seated there, disinterest etched on her unsmiling face. Irikefe said "Come", and we walked past her post down a small lobby and then turned right through an open double door into a wide room with six creaky iron beds that were once white but now closer to brown, blending perfectly with the rustiness that had now become their lot.

We found Castro in a bed in the far left corner. His head was heavily bandaged just above his eyebrow and his lips were double their original size and reddened.

"Now what?" I said to Irikefe as we approached him.

"Just some encouragement, that's all."

"His people may come in at any time."

"We are his people too," Irikefe said and winked at me.

We got to his bedside and Irikefe said "Big boy! I am a big boy! You see your life?"

"How are you doing Castro?" I said and gave Irikefe a heavy nudge. "So sorry about this my man."

Castro only batted his eyelids and that was all Irikefe needed to go off. "I am a big boy; I am a big boy, see where you land? Na small gehs do you this one o! Christmas with bandage for your head and pomo lips."

"Irikefe!"

"So Castro, na breast and yansh dey hungry you to touch all this while ehn?"

"The boy is in pains Irikefe. This is not right" I said."

"Now listen. If you make mistake die, or you open your mouth talk any nonsense to your people, or my name fall out of your mouth even by mistake, I will make sure I finish the job they started on you. Ewu Gambia."

Irikefe turned his back and stamped away. I was torn between following him out at once as I understood the hurry, and cheering up Castro whom I really felt sorry for. I bent and gave him a hug and squeezed his hand and hurried outside after Irikefe.

"What do you think you have just done?" I said as I caught up with Irikefe.

"Stayed out of trouble."

"You think that will work?"

"Of course it will."

"Why are you so sure?"

"Because you were there."

"Me?"

"The gang was complete. Saying anything will amount to betraying the brotherhood. These little boys take gangs more seriously than you know."

I let that sink in as we walked back then I said: "I have something I need to tell you."

"What is that bro? Is Maya pregnant? No, it can't be that, it's too soon -"

"Will you shut up and listen?"

"Okay tell me."

"It's about Mama Akunna."

"Ooooo bro. I've told you I don't want to know."

"She likes your father."

"Bro abeg stop am if na joke."

"I'm not joking."

"She is not his type."

"What do you know about your father's type?"

"Bro, she a witch. So she can't be his type."

"Look, I know what I saw ok? I was only amused and thought you should know."

"Thanks for the info, but it will never happen."

"Well, she has her eyes on him. That is a concern."

"Bros abeg say something else."

"I will say something my father always said. I have not been around long enough to know if it is true but I believe him."

"What is it he says?"

"Let a woman not pursue a man, because if a woman is after a man, she will get him."

"Mama Akunna is not a woman."

"Then what is she?"

"She is a something."

"What does that mean?"

"One day, we will find out."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

THE FIRST TIME

She lay still and listened. They were all asleep. It was that time when they never stirred. It was time. She straightened out and murmured a few words and in a second she was standing next to her corporeal body. She contemplated her next move and only by thinking about it she was already over the little body. She spoke a few words and a full grown man came out of the sleeping infant. She held his hand and thought about the roof and in that instant, they were there.

"How do you feel?" she said in perfect English.

"There's always a first time isn't there?"

She chuckled and said "Don't worry. You will like this life."

"Why did you choose me?"

"I want to catch them young. The next person will even be younger."

"I am barely a month old!"

"The next person I will get from the womb."

"Hmmm. I'm not asking how because I know you know what you are doing. But may I ask who it will be?"

"Ndifreke and Maya's baby."

"Is she pregnant?"

"No. I already checked. They had sex when she was not ovulating."

"He does not want a baby yet."

"Of course he will have a baby."

"But he is afraid of his joblessness."

"If he does not want a baby, he should not have sex. If you play, you will pay."

"Yeah. But he plans to buy condoms for the next time."

"I know. He won't use them don't worry."

"You can control that too?"

"Less than ten percent of condoms bought get used. Properly. And consistently. When people claim to be in love, they throw away inhibitions. The condom is the first inhibition they discard. You won't find many people who have had sex together ten times who have used the condom ten times."

"So we wait until he throws away the inhibition?"

"We can do that, or Maya will not let him use it."

"Oh I see."

"Come," she said to him and held his hand again and thought about Maya and in that instant, they were in the room Maya shared with her mother and siblings. Maya's mother lay alone in the bed. Her three

children shared the space on the floor. The center table demarcated where her sixteen years old brother Tobi lay from where Maya and her sister lay.

"Mama Tobi misses her husband. That is why she would not share the bed even with her grown daughter. She still wants him back even though she will not admit it. Now Listen."

She bent and touched her forehead and immediately they could hear Mama Tobi's voice.

"My husband, come back to me. Come back to me, my love. It is blood that I have flowing in my veins. I have stayed long enough without a man. I cannot come to the prison because I must make them believe I am still unhappy with you. But I miss you, my husband. I want your strong thing inside me again."

She then turned to him and said: "touch the boy".

He touched the boy's forehead and they heard his voice: "Maya. Oh Maya. Why are you my sister? How can the person I love so much be my sister? I want you, Maya, please make it easy for me. I want it by mutual consent."

He looked at her and she chuckled and said "He is incestuous. It runs in the family. He will rape her too. She is suspicious that is why she put the table between them. But he will attack her sooner rather than later."

"Should I touch Maya now?"

"No. We want to make sure she doesn't let him use a condom. Now watch and learn. Come."

She made him lie on top of her and fondle her. When she began to twist in her sleep she put her hand over her face and made different kinds of hand gestures and then went to her ears and said "you don't love me that is why you want to use it. Am I a prostitute? I told you I am in my safe period." They then stood aside and watched as Maya twisted and turned and then lay still after a while.

"Let's go" she said to him and took his hand and imagined they were on the roof and immediately they found themselves there.

"So she had a dream?"

"Precisely."

"I understand."

"Good."

"I want to see the others," he said.

"Who do you want to see?"

"Sister Esther."

"I don't think it is a good idea."

"Why?"

"She may have prayed." Then she closed her eyes and said "No she didn't. But he is with her."

"Who?"

"Kingsley."

"The Undertaker?"

"No need for jokes now."

"Okay."

"She does not pray when he goes to meet her. She thinks it is a sin to have sex and feels guilty. But as a matter of fact; their coming together usually produces incredible power so much so that I can't go anywhere near. I have to wait for them to finish if I must enter. And then I will hope the guilt comes and she doesn't pray. But she always feels my presence and begins to shout that name. Please don't say the name."

"I understand."

"Good."

"But there are times when she is afraid. It is on days she is afraid that I am able to enter. Fear paralyzes. That is why the first thing you must learn to do is how to use fear."

"How do I do that?"

"Make sounds like they don't know. Shake something. Blow cool or hot air. It really doesn't take much for them to start to fear. When they are afraid, even if they say the name, they say it without conviction. You can still strike."

"All right."

"What about Irikefe?"

"He has seen me like this before. I managed to confuse him. But he has remained suspicious of me."

"How did he see you?"

"Every human being has the ability to see in spirit. The inner eyes open every now and again. His opened when I did not expect it to. I have worked on him not to remember exactly what he saw. But I cannot erase it totally. But he is useless. There is nothing to gain with him."

"So why did he see you?"

"I am out every night. At certain times the blood radiation is such that people can easily transcend planes. Everyone is spiritual. Some are more aware than others. But we are aware in a way many others are not" She closed her eyes and opened it and said "So it was one of those moments. I entered the room and he opened his eyes and recognized that I was there."

"Sorry about that."

"No worries. Occupational hazard."

"What of Ndifreke?"

"I have already finished with him. His people handed him over to me. He will never get a job. Unless..."

"Unless what?"

"Never mind. It is important at the start you know that you can achieve whatever you want to achieve."

"If you say so."

"I say so."

"I want to show you something. Come."

She took his hand and thought about it and they found themselves in Cosmas' room.

"What is that light surrounding him?"

"It is protection. They say he blasphemes, they say he is not of God because sometimes the things he says go against the grain. But he stands well.

"Let me tell you this: It doesn't matter what anyone worships or believes. If you have no fear, nothing can harm you. People do not know the kind of power or protection they have. Fear not, the Christian book says three hundred and sixty-five times. But flap a curtain now and they will sh*t in their pants. They make it easy for us to toy with them. But Cosmas is different. He knows the law. So he is untouchable. He knows who I am but he is not bothered. He even sits and chats with me in the daytime. He is the only one I will say you should not bother troubling."

"Okay."

"I think that is enough for one day. It has been a good first time."

"Thank you."

"Next time, I will let you have a little fun."

"I can't wait."

"Now when we get back, I want you to cry till daybreak. Cry till Akunna runs mad."

He chuckled and said "no problem."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

THE BABY

We got back to the compound and sure enough, papa Efe was still in the bathroom. Mama Akunna was also still standing on Josiah's head for her table and benches to be made, and others had gathered in front of the shops talking about fuel scarcity and its consequence on the Christmas celebrations. Achike was saying "They do it all the time during Christmas. It is because they don't want Christians to enjoy their celebration that is why they do it. Lukman said "Oga Achike you lie. It has nothing to do with Christmas. After all, the New Year celebration follows almost immediately and we are all involved. And besides, who told you the Christmas celebration has anything to do with Christianity sef? See all the drinking, all the partying, and all the fucking that go on everywhere all in the name of Christmas. Me I am a Muslim but I can't wait for Christmas every year. Go the beaches on the Island every night on the Christmas week and see. No wonder your Christ has no choice but to die for you shortly after at Easter."

"You shut up there. Because a few sinners have decided to let themselves loose at this time does not mean that the majority of us do not know what it is about. They should give us fuel so that those of us that want to go to church to give thanks to the Almighty can do so."

"The marketers had warned the federal government since January that by December they would not be able to import again to sell for 145 naira. They did nothing about it. If the authorities say they are surprised by this scarcity they lie," Mr Zubi said.

"Oga, you see your APC?" Lukman said. "Change change change. You see the change? I no tell una?"

"That is not what we should be talking about now. It is clear for all to see that the last administration was right that total deregulation of the downstream sector is the solution to the problem. They should take the bull by the horn and do it. After all, the people that protested against it the last time are all on their side now and keeping quiet. No one will go to Ojota to mount speakers again. We will adapt. What many don't know is that fuel is cheapest in Nigeria compared to other parts of the world. With the exchange rate at about N360 to a dollar, in the US fuel is N214 per liter. In South Africa N277, in Canada N300, in Ghana N303, in Angola that overtook Nigeria as the highest exporters of crude oil when those Niger Delta boys were at the peak of their destruction petrol sells for N330.

N145 is not sustainable so let the Government stop playing politics with this thing and just do what they have to do."

"Mr Zubi. If they like let them sell petrol for one million naira in Jupiter. See how we live na. Do they buy fuel there to power their generators in those countries? Don't they have light? Do they import refined products in those places too? Don't they have refineries that also provide jobs for their people with which they can buy the fuel at whatever price it is sold for? Do their graduates dump their certificates and run barbing salons there? Is it the fufu Mama Tobi labours to prepare every day that will feed her children, pay their bills and also buy fuel for N500 per liter? In this Nigeria that we are seeing all the stealing and all the corruption and all the flamboyance of the ruling class with our korokoro eyes, we will not accept any further increment!"

"It will not be up to N500 per litre."

"Well, I don't care. One naira more and I will go to Ojota. If no one else will go, Charly Boy will go and I will join him."

"Oh well. Whatever they like let them do. We are Nigerians, we will survive. For now, let me go to the hospital and bring back Castro."

"How is he doing?"

"You will see for yourself when he gets back."

Mr Zubi then gave Irikefe the eyes before jumping the gutter and facing the road."

"I tank God say I no dey buy fuel o" Mama Akunna said.

"You don't have to buy fuel to feel the pain mama. Cost of transportation will go up. Prices of foodstuff will continue to go up. Everything will go up with increased fuel price. Everybody living in this country will feel it" I said.

"Na true you talk my pikin. Na why I say make Josiah do my table for me make me sef follow dey make money so dat anyhow e be me sef go still dey chop."

I patted Irikefe on the back and wished him luck in helping Mama Akunna's dream come true and went inside to find breakfast.

An hour later, a keke pulled up and Mr Zubi helped his son into the compound. He looked just the way I had seen him earlier that morning. They had not even changed the dressing on his head. Blood was still visible on the bandage. He walked gingerly through the corridor to their self-contained which had a small veranda where he found a stool and sat.

"Enter inside the house nau" His mother said, but Castro would not budge. While many of the adults in the compound gathered to offer their commiserations, I could see the children mimicking his painful movement, some holding their heads and others holding their waists and chortling. If this was not that it was his brother involved, Willy-Willy I knew would have been the ringleader. But I could see him squatted beside Castro with teary eyes.

"Castro. Tell us what happened. What did Irikefe do to you?"

Castro remained silent.

"Did he do this himself or he sent people to attack you?"

"Was it a trap?"

"Did they ambush you?"

"Did he drug you?"

"How did he bring you here?"

"Did you know when he carried you?"

"How did he convince you to take you away?"

Then suddenly Castro exploded.

"Leave me alone all of you! No one did anything to me! Why don't you ask me where I went? Why don't you ask me if I was forced out of the house? Why don't you ask me what my mission outside at night was?"

What makes you think I was not the one that wanted to hurt someone and then got hurt?"

Castro's outburst surprised everyone. His mother who had been asking the questions looked at his father and then at those gathered, unsure of what to do or say. Then one by one we began to disperse.

*

The crying started at about 3 am. It cried and cried and cried till we all woke up and gathered in the corridor. Akunna and his wife brought out the baby and passed it between themselves as they tried to pacify it, yet it continued to cry. Akunna's wife tried breastfeeding but the baby pushed the breast out of its face. Someone suggested they took the baby to the hospital.

"This baby never cries like this. In fact, we have even forgotten that there is a newborn baby in this compound. If it is crying like this then something is very wrong."

"What will they do for him at the hospital? Call Nurse Stella instead."

Nurse Stella lived down the street and worked at God Dey Hospital. Because the hospital did not offer much and you have to pay for consultation as well, Nurse Stella was the alternative everyone embraced. She would go to homes and administer drips and injections, dress wounds, offer all kind of care for a fraction of the fee you would pay at the hospital.

She came at daybreak with some suspensions she collected from Philemon's chemist. We watched on as she put some drops of three different medicines in the baby's mouth but it still continued to cry till

it became crimson red. Then someone suggested they seek Mama Akunna's help.

"Make una leave me o. Na so I say make I play with my pikin dat time una go call police for me."

"Mama no be so. E get as dat one been be. We been dey fear make e no be say bad tin don happen as we no see you till morning. But we know say you get experience with pikin so you fit know wetin to do."

We were out in the frontage now as Nurse Stella had advised that the baby needed fresh air and the room and corridor were stuffy. Mama Akunna came from the room and stood and watched as the baby continued to shriek. Its eyes were firmly shut and its fists tight like a determined boxer's as it continued to redden.

"Na belle dey pain am" she said.

"But mama I don give am medicine for belle" Nurse Stella said.

"Na Awero cause am."

"Mama. This is not the time to blame anybody. You know wetin we fit do?" Akunna pleaded with his mother.

"Yesterday I see Awero dey lick ice cream. E lick ice cream finish come give d pikin breast. Na wetin cause dis tin be dat."

"Ah Mama! Ice cream come be bad tin again?" Akunna's wife ventured.

"Na ice cream your mama give you to suck for breast?"

"Mama, abeg help us."

Mama Akunna reached out and collected the baby and turned her back on everyone. She began to rock the baby and sing to it. Akunna's wife lifted her eyes and hands pleadingly to the heavens as her husband sat supporting his chin in his hand. I stayed close enough to Mama Akunna to see the baby open its eyes to behold its grandmother. Then suddenly it stopped crying.

And I saw it wink at Mama Akunna. Yes, the baby winked. I have thought about that moment for a long time. I know babies make that kind of blinking eye movements all the time but this one was different. Irikefe would not listen as it had to do with Mama Akunna. I did not think I wanted to discuss it with Castro. Mkpoikanna just laughed and said that I was imagining things. But Akunna's baby opened its eyes and saw that it was its grandmother that held it and stopped crying at once and winked at Mama Akunna. What I did not mention to anyone was that it was not just that the baby winked, but it did so with eyes that looked for the moment like that of an adult.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

HUSTLE CALLING

I dwelled on Mama Akunna and her infant grandchild's exchange much longer than was necessary. For some reason, it kept tugging at my heart. I stood outside wondering, long after the baby stopped crying and everyone had dispersed. The image of the transformation of the baby's eyes would not leave my consciousness, but I pushed it away all the same because I needed to get busy. I had been considering joining my cousin Mkpoikanna to go hustle at the wharf full time since I have had no luck getting a white collar job. Being a graduate of Forestry, I knew my options were limited, even though in this country you could read Yoruba and become Minister for Science and Technology. But everywhere I went I met a brick wall. I have failed many bank aptitude tests and once got to the final stage of an interview into a top courier company only for one of the interviewers to say he felt uncomfortable about me, that there was something about me that did not go well with him. He said I had an "aura". I noticed that the others on the panel were concerned as this guy was going over the top. But he excused himself and left the interview midway. He was the most powerful person on the panel. I was never called for the job.

My cousin's body language in recent weeks suggested that he was beginning to get uncomfortable with me hanging around contributing nothing. At first, he liked it that his graduate brother was living with him. He said he would pray that I got a good job so that when I moved into my three bedroom apartment he would move in with me. He gave me transport money to interviews and the occasional pocket money; even though I made sure I used it to buy something for both of us. I made sure there was always beans porridge to drink garri with - a

favorite of ours - or I did concoction rice or boiled yam which we ate with palm oil. I should have made sure that I was not clearly a burden. But all of a sudden my cousin was no longer impressed. I have refused to connect it, but I would say that it all started after Maya slept in our room the first night. I did not think that my cousin would be jealous because he always told me I should enjoy myself in that manner. But when I thought about it well, I remembered that in the morning I insisted that Maya stayed for breakfast and I made indomie and egg and we ate together. Mkpoikanna refused to eat. Since then he had become cold.

I had been to the wharf to hustle before, about that time I began to tell this story. There were always damaged cars to push for the clearing agents, there were always people wanting to smuggle things whom you could lend a helping hand to. In fact, that was what I did most as my education and carriage always fooled officials and I could cross many boundaries for cash. It was Mkpoikanna that discouraged me and said I should concentrate on searching for a proper job. I risked going to jail and he would not forgive himself if that happened while under his care. But now I think I have to go back there for all it was worth. When I mentioned it to him in the night he did not object. So now I know I have to go and earn some money if I want to be treating my girlfriend to meals.

I went to the backyard and fetched water in a bucket and went to join the queue for the bathroom. While there Maya also came with her bucket of water. She only had a towel tied around her breasts and wore a shower cap to protect her hair. I winked at her and she smiled at me. I could not take my eyes off her. There was something about a beautiful girl in only a towel that always threatened to drive me insane. Suddenly I lost my situational awareness. I did not remember that I wanted to go and hustle for money. I could not think that she was out there so early to have her bath because she too had somewhere to go

to. I did not consider that there were other neighbors around busy at one thing or the other while aware of whose turn it was to enter the bathroom. I had become afflicted with a serious debilitation that involved the entire weight of my body shifting to my groin.

I spoke to her with my eyes and shortly after I entered my room she turned the doorknob and entered as well. There was no need to say anything. With just a finger I managed to free her from the towel and she was stark nude before me. Even now I cannot remember where I flung my boxers. I pounced on her, kissing and squeezing and sucking like it was the last stage of an interview with an oil company where I could not afford to fail.

"Haa this calabar boy" she mourned.

"Yes sweetie" I replied and continued to work on her.

I explored her readiness for a while with my fingers and then eased up and reached for the pack of condoms I kept in the drawer beside the bed.

"No. This is not happening" she said and sat up.

"Dear, it is happening live."

"I mean the condom."

"We should use it. It is for our safety. We are not ready for any additional responsibility yet."

"This is exactly as I saw it in my dream," she said.

"What dream honey?" I said, my erection getting firmer and looking angry.

"I have never had such a dream before," she said.

Now, my friends, I don't know if you understand what I was going through at that moment. There I was with the biggest arousal possible with the most beautiful woman in the world naked and ready for me and then in the middle of it she stops and starts talking about a dream.

"Darling, we can worry about the dream later," I said, as I threw the foil wrapper away and unrolled the prophylactic over me.

"I saw that you were going to use it and I did not let you."

"Honey, this is real life and I want you right now and I already have it on and it is for our own good."

"Don't use it."

"What?"

"It was a revelation, not just a dream."

"You could be pregnant Maya."

"It is my safe period."

"You don't know anything about safe periods Maya."

"I am not a prostitute."

"Holy Methuselah" I breathed and peeled off the condom.

It was the silkiest entry ever. I rammed for about a minute and exploded like I have never done before and then collapsed on top of her.

"You came quickly," she said.

"I wanted you too much," I said.

Then I remembered we were in the queue to have our bath. Then I remembered I did not know where my breakfast was coming from today.

"It will soon be my turn at the bathroom."

"You have satisfied yourself abi?"

"Come on Maya."

"No problem. I will sleep here tonight."

With that, she grabbed her covering and left the room.

Now more than ever I knew I had to go out to find money. It was not good manners to not entertain your girlfriend. With some luck, I could get chicken or fish from the smugglers. Breakfast after Maya tomorrow would be something.

Now that I have to go out to hustle, a lot will be happening in the compound I would not be able to see to tell you. Hopefully, Centino would let you see what is going on through the eyes of another person. For now, I dey go baff. Hustle calling.

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